

PREVALENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN ADOLESCENTS

Salman Shahzad*, Ayesha Dar
&
Areej Khan

Institute of Clinical Psychology, University of Karachi

ABSTRACT

The current descriptive study was conducted to explore the psychological problems faced by adolescents and their influence on different areas of adolescents' everyday lives. A sample of 355 adolescents (186 males and 169 females) was recruited from different sector secondary schools of Karachi, Pakistan. The age range of the sample was from 10 to 17 years (Mean= 14.4 years; SD = 1.57). Their education level was from 6th to 11th grade. A Demographic and Personal Information Form and a Semi-Structured Interview Form of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) was administered on the participants to determine the problems of adolescents. Descriptive statistics were calculated by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, V-20.0). The results revealed that 53.3 % participants reported to have difficulties in areas of emotions, concentration, and behavior and have problems in getting on with other people. Furthermore among those who are facing difficulties, 38.1% reported that they have minor problems, 10.1% reported to have definite problems and 5.1% reported to have severe problems. In addition 8.5% reported to have a lot of distress due to these difficulties. Limitations of the study and its implications are discussed.

Keywords: Adolescents, Psychological Problems, Prevalence, Distress

*Correspondence Address: Salman Shahzad, PhD., Assistant Professor, Institute of Clinical Psychology, University of Karachi, Pakistan. Email: shahzad_icp@yahoo.com

Shahzad, Dar & Khan

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents face a myriad of issues as they make the shift from childhood to the next phase of their development, whereby they undergo various physical and emotional changes, raising questions regarding the self and one's identity, answers to which are not always easily obtained. This transition brings with itself a number of problems that might go unnoticed if not addressed adequately. These problems can also be referred to psychosocial difficulties which can be defined as those everyday stressors that impact an individual's functioning; psycho social problems would then encompass overt problems such as behavioral difficulties, as well as covert problems such as emotional difficulties. Moreover, with urbanization on the rise which in some respects has led to child neglect, such problems ascend with every passing day (Ahmad, Khalique, Khan, & Amir, 2007). However, when an individual is unable to deal adequately with these stressors, they may manifest themselves as problems and effect different areas of functioning such as emotions, concentration, behavior, and relationships.

Erikson's theory of psycho social development can be regarded as a framework for identifying the vulnerabilities that the adolescent population is going through. During this stage of early to late adolescence, as outlined by Erikson in his theory, adolescents face the crisis between identity and confusion regarding their role in life. This process of adjusting with the confusion regarding one's identity can result in distress. During this time, pressure from the family and maintaining peer relationships emerges (Shiferaw, Fantahun, & Bekele, 2006). Studies have found that intimate parental relations and attachment are high predictors of psychosocial, academic and behavioral adjustment (Allen, Hauser, & Borman-Spurrell, 1996).

Adolescents experience both emotional and behavioral problems. Research reveals self-reported emotional and behavioral problems by adolescents; both internalizing and externalizing problems are a concern for adolescents (Compas, Howell, Phares, Williams, & Guinta, 1989). With internalizing problems comes emotional disturbances and with externalizing problems comes behavioral disturbances. These are both associated with poor attention and concentration during adolescence when the disturbance is at peak. Low attention regulation has been seen in adolescents with internalizing problems (Eisenberg et al., 2001). Likewise emotional and behavioral problems are associated with disturbances in relationships. Various researches reveal that

Pakistan Journal of Psychology

these problems have a strong link with disturbed relationships of adolescents (Parker & Asher, 1987; Sabatelli & Anderson, 1991).

A number of studies have been conducted to assess the prevalence of psycho social problems amongst adolescents; a study in the Indian district of Dehradun on 840 adolescents found the overall prevalence of psycho social problems to be 31.2% with males exhibiting more problems as compared to females (Muzammil, Kishore, & Semwal, 2009). Likewise, a study on Dutch adolescents found boys experiencing greater difficulties as compared to girls, with the overall prevalence of psycho social difficulties to be of 10.4% which was also inversely correlated with the quality of life of the sample (Bot, de Leeuw den Bouter, & Adriaanse, 2011).

Interestingly, a study on Dutch twin adolescents found males to report higher externalizing behaviors, whereas females to have higher self-reported internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety and depression (Bartels, van de Aa, van Beijsterveldt, Middeldorp, & Boomsma, 2011). A longitudinal research on the changing trends of emotional and behavioral problems faced by adolescents, during a ten year period, self-reported by a school based sample, revealed that boys reported a decrease in their behavioral problems (such as rule breaking, aggressive behavior, social problems) as they grew older, for girls, however, increase in emotional and behavioral problems was observed (Tick, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2008).

Adolescents make up 19% of entire population of Pakistan and this number is expected to rise in the near future (National Institute of Population Studies, 2001). Studies on Pakistani youth regarding psycho-social difficulties have addressed its relationship with academic achievement (Gulzar, Ali, Aijaz, & Hussain, 2010) and self-efficacy and gender attitudes of urban youth to name a few, however, there is a dearth of researches when it comes to a prevalence based study of this nature. Studies focused on understanding adolescent's emotional and behavioral problems demonstrated that individuals with major psychological problems including conduct, depressive, hyperactivity, and anxiety disorders may further lead to other problems (e.g. Goodman, Ford, Simmons, Gatward, & Meltzer, 2000).

Hence, the main purpose of the present study was to explore the range and prevalence of psychological problems in school going adolescents and how these difficulties impact different areas of their everyday lives. An understanding

Shahzad, Dar & Khan

of this nature could be a valuable addition to the already growing research hub of the nation and give an inkling into the problems normal school going children face. This would help us predict future trends and suggest appropriate measures that may be taken to address the problems children sometimes endure silently and which are often overlooked in the everyday hustle and bustle of our busy lives.

METHOD

Participants

Sample of the present research comprised of 355 adolescents (186 males & 169 females) studying in various secondary schools of Karachi. The age range of the entire sample was from 10 years to 17 years (Mean Age = 14.4 years; $SD = 1.57$). The education level of the participants was between grades 6 to 11. Out of total sample 245 (69.1%) belonged to nuclear family set up and 110 (30.9%) belonged to joint family setup. All participants agreed to participate in this study.

Measures

Demographic and Personal Information Form

Information was gathered through a Demographic and Personal Information Form; this Form asked the respondents' age, gender, current educational level, number of siblings, birth order, and family structure (nuclear or joint).

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

The semi-structured interview form of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) was used to obtain information regarding the psychosocial problems of adolescents. This form has a total of 5 questions, scored on a 4 point scale, pertaining to the difficulty faced by the adolescent in areas of emotion, concentration, behavior, and getting on with people. The items ask about whether the adolescent experienced difficulty in any of the aforementioned areas i.e. *No* (scored as 0), *Yes; minor* (scored as 1), *Yes; definite* (scored as 2), and *Yes; severe* (scored as 3). If the adolescent answers affirmatively to this question, he/she is asked to continue answering the remaining four items which talk about: the *duration* of the difficulties; i.e. *less than a month* (scored as 1), *1-5 months* (scored as 2), *6-12 months* (scored as 3),

Pakistan Journal of Psychology

over a year (scored as 4). The remaining 3 items are scored on the following 4 point scale: *Not at all* (scored as 0), *Only a little* (scored as 1), *Quite a lot* (scored as 2), *A great deal* (scored as 3) and refer to the *distress* caused by the difficulties, their interference with *everyday life*, and their impact on the *people around them (friends, family, etc.)*. The scale has satisfactory reliability with good internal consistency ($\alpha=.73$).

Procedure

Sample was recruited from various secondary schools; for which first of all the institutions were identified. These institutions were selected using simple random sampling for data collection. After the identification of schools, the researcher approached the authorities of those schools to get permission for data collection. The researchers provided the permission letter along with the sample of questionnaires to concerned authorities. After getting permission from the authorities of educational institutions the examiner approached the students in their respective classes to discuss about the objective of the study and took informed consent to participate in the study. The contents of the consent form were thoroughly explained to them; including the purpose, the risks and benefits involved, issues relating to confidentiality and their voluntariness to participate. Once they understood the terms and conditions that apply and agreed to participate, they were briefed about the objective of the study and assured that the data was purely to be used for research purpose and their identifications (names) will not be revealed. Then they were asked to fill out a Personal Information Form which focused on the participant's age, gender, level of education, grade obtained in their respective classes etc. The structured interview form of the SDQ was administered to assess the psycho social difficulties among the participants. After collecting the data all participants with their school authorities were thanked for sparing their time to participate in this research.

Statistical Analysis

All statistical computations (i.e., Means, standard deviations, and percentages) were done through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, V-20.0).

RESULTS

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Entire Sample

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Age		
Below 12 years	4	1.12
12 years	60	16.90
13 years	60	16.90
14 years	57	16.05
15 years	74	20.84
16 years	63	17.74
17 years	37	10.42
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	14.4	1.57
Gender		
Female	169	47.6
Male	186	52.4
Birth Order		
Only Child	15	4.2
First	99	27.9
Middle	125	35.2
Last	116	32.7
Family Structure		
Nuclear	245	69.1
Joint	110	30.9

Pakistan Journal of Psychology

Table 2

Difficulties in Areas of Emotions, Concentration, Behavior and Being able to Get on with Other People as reported by Adolescents

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
No	166	46.7
Minor	135	38.1
Definite	36	10.1
Severe	18	5.1

Table 3

Duration of Difficulties that the Adolescents have been experiencing

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Less than a month	98	51.9
1–5 months	34	18.0
6–12 months	18	9.5
Over a year	39	20.6

Table 4

Perception of the Adolescents about difficulties in terms of Distress

	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Not at all	36	19.0
Only a little	98	51.9
More than a little	38	20.1
A lot	17	9.0

Table 5

Difficulties that interfere Adolescent's Different Areas of Everyday Life

	Home		Friendships		Classroom Learning		Leisure	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Not at all	75	39.7	83	43.9	72	38.1	83	43.9
Only a little	78	41.3	63	33.3	70	37.0	64	33.9
More than a little	23	12.1	26	13.8	33	17.5	29	15.3
A lot	13	6.9	17	9.0	14	7.4	13	6.9

Shahzad, Dar & Khan

Table 6

Adolescent's Perception about how much difficulties make it difficult for those around them (i.e. family, friends, teachers, etc.)

	N	%
Not at all	76	40.2
Only a little	71	37.6
More than a little	29	15.3

DISCUSSION

Results show that out of the total sample, 46.7% of the respondents did not experience any difficulties. However, the majority of them (53.3%) reported that they are facing difficulties of varying severity levels; i.e., 38.1% of the pool of participants reported that they have minor; 10.1% reported definite; 5.1% reported severe problems related to emotions, concentration, behavior, and getting along with other people. From those who reported facing problems, 51.9% of the participants said that they experienced the problems for duration of less than a month; 18% reported experiencing for duration of 1-5 months; 9.5% reported experiencing for duration of 6-12 months; whereas, in a startling finding, 20.6% of the participants reported that the difficulties lasted for over a year. As far as the perception of the participants about difficulties in terms of distress is concerned, 51.9% reported that the difficulties caused only a little distress; 20.1% experienced more than a little distress; 9% reported experiencing a lot distress; whereas 19% reported no distress due to the difficulties. Regarding the difficulties impacting different areas of their social lives, over 40% of the participants did not feel like the difficulties affected their home life, friendships, classroom learning or leisure time. However, 60% believed that it did affect their home, friendships, classroom learning, and leisure period at varying degrees. Lastly, when questioned regarding whether the difficulties make it difficult for those around them, including friends and family, almost 40% did not feel that it did, whereas, around 60 % participants did feel that the difficulties also influenced people around them.

Results of the current study support previous researches on the prevalence of psychosocial problems amongst adolescents cited earlier in the introduction section. Following from Erikson's theory, adolescence is a time of turmoil where the individual faces the psychological crisis of identity versus role

Pakistan Journal of Psychology

confusion. Emotional and behavioral problems vary at every age, adolescents especially, experience a wide variety of difficulties, such as aggression, anxiety, conduct problems, and depression to name a few. Research indicates that such problems are predictors of later social and academic difficulties (Connell, 2009). Sometimes, adolescents may overestimate their abilities to take risks and might engage in activities that prove to be harmful for themselves and others, and at times to gain approval from peers (Jaffe, 1998). Forming friendships is one of the most grueling challenges of adolescence, as peers provide a ground for developing one's sense of identity (Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995). As adolescents are extremely conscious of what others think of them, there is a high need for peer acceptance during this stage; thus an inadequate self-concept may develop out of negative interaction with peers, giving rise to emotional and behavioral difficulties. A longitudinal research supports the current findings reviewing the influence of friends on peer relationships. It revealed that friends have an influence on each other's attitudes and behavior over a long period of time (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). They not only affect friendships but they also affect each other's ability to adjust in school, hence it may create difficulties in the classroom suggesting significant concurrence with the current findings. Research also suggests that adolescents with emotional and behavioral face a disturbed family environment (Thomas & Guskin, 2001) therefore, family and familial relations may play an important role in the development of such problems.

This study suggests how important it is for educationists to consider the psychological, physical and social functioning of students for better outcome in numerous domains of life. They should understand behavioral and emotional and physical needs of students and develop adequate programs that enhance their coping skills so they are at a better position to deal with their stressors they face in their lives. Although the study provided some eye opening results regarding the prevalence of difficulties amongst regular school going children, a larger sample size gathered from both private and government sectors would help us analyze patterns of the difficulties that adolescents face and consequently assist in predicting trends so that the results can be generalized and these problems can be addressed by creating awareness programs for schools through conduction of workshops and further studies. Similarly, richer data can be yielded if schools from various cities of Pakistan are gathered from different socioeconomic statuses to identify the commonalities of this transient period of an individual's life. Such knowledge regarding the difficulties, kids these days are facing, would help educators and health professionals develop programs that would cater to the adolescents' needs that are sometimes undermined due to a lack of identification.

Shahzad, Dar & Khan

REFERENCES

Ahmad, A., Khalique, N., Khan, Z., & Amir, A. (2007). A Prevalence of Psychosocial Problems among School Going Male Adolescents. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 32, 219-221.

Allen, J. P., Hauser, S. T., & Borman-Spurrell, E. (1996). Attachment theory as a framework for understanding sequelae of severe adolescent psychopathology: An 11-year follow-up study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 254-263.

Bartels, M., van de Aa, N., van Beijsterveldt, C. E. M., Middeldorp, C. M., & Boomsma, D. I. (2011). Adolescent self-report of emotional and behavioral problems: Interactions of genetic factors with sex and age. *Journal of Canadian Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, February, 20(1), 35-52.

Berndt, T. J., & Keefe, K. (1995). How friends influence adolescents' adjustment to school. *Child Development*, 66(5), 1312-1329.

Bishop, J. A., & Inderbitzen, H. M. (1995). Peer acceptance and friendship: An investigation of their relationship to self-esteem. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 15, 476-489.

Bot, M., de Leeuw den Bouter, B. J., & Adriaanse, M. C. (2011). Prevalence of psychosocial problems in Dutch children aged 8-12 years and its association with risk factors and quality of life. *Epidemiology Psychiatric Sciences*, 20(4), 357-365.

Compas, B. E., Howell, D. C., Phares, V., Williams, R. A., & Guinta, C. T. (1989). Risk factors for emotional/behavioral problems in young adolescents: A prospective analysis of adolescents and parental stress and symptoms. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57(6), 732-740.

Connell, A. M. (2009). Effects on emotional and behavioral problems from early childhood through adolescence. The Schubert Center for Child Studies College of Arts and Sciences Case Western Reserve University. *Policy Brief*, 13.

Pakistan Journal of Psychology

Eisenberg, N., Cumberland, A., Spinrad, T. L., Fabes, R. A., Shepard, S. A., Reiser, M., Murphy, B. C., Losoya, S. H., & Guthrie, I. K. (2001). The relations of regulation and emotionality to children's externalizing and internalizing problem behavior. *Child Behavior*, 72(4), 1112-1134.

Goodman, R. (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: A research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38, 581-586.

Goodman, R., Ford, T., Simmons, H., Gatward, R., & Meltzer, H. (2000). Using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to screen for child psychiatric disorders in a community sample. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 177(6), 534-539.

Gulzar, S., Ali, T., Aijaz, A., & Hussain, N. (2010). The influence of psychosocial factors on academic performance of adolescents: a quality assurance project. *Journal of the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan*, 20(7), 494-495.

Jaffe, M. L. (1998). *Adolescence*. New York: Wiley.

Muzammil, K., Kishore, S., & Semwal, J. (2009). Prevalence of psychosocial problems among adolescents in district Dehradun, Uttarakhand. *Indian Journal of Public Health*, 53(1), 18-21.

National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS; 2001). *Pakistan Reproductive Health and Family Planning Survey, 2000-01-Preliminary Report*. Ministry of Family Welfare (MOPW): Islamabad, Pakistan.

Parker, J. G., & Asher, S. R. (1987). Peer relations and later personal adjustment: Are low-accepted children at risk? *Psychological Bulletin*, 102(3), 357-389.

Sabatelli, R. M., & Anderson, S. A. (1991). Family system dynamics, peer relationships, and adolescents' psychological adjustment. *Family Relations*, 40(4), 363-369.

Shiferaw, S., Fantahun, M., & Bekele, A. (2006). Psychosocial problems among students in preparatory school, in Dessie town, north east Ethiopia. *Ethiopian Journal of Health* 20(1), 47-55.

Shahzad, Dar & Khan

Thomas, J., & Guskin, K. (2001). Disruptive behavior in young children: What does it mean? *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 40*, 44-51.

Tick, N. T., van der Ende, J., & Verhulst, F. C. (2008). Ten-year trends in self-reported emotional and behavioral problems of Dutch adolescents. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 43*(5), 349-355.