

# Empathy and Parenting as Predictors of Loneliness in Adolescent Boys and Girls

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**Abstract** Loneliness becomes a common part of adolescents' lives. In adolescence, the significant predictor of loneliness comes from social environment. Our aim was to monitor the proportion of selected predictors from the family environment – empathy, emotional relationship and parental control of mother and father – on the variability of loneliness in adolescent boys and girls. The research group consisted of 206 adolescents (84 boys and 122 girls) aged 10-18. We used an adjusted version of Basic empathy scale, Parenting style questionnaire and UCLA- Loneliness Scale (3<sup>rd</sup> Revision). We found out that selected factors of family environment explain 16.1% variability of loneliness in adolescent boys and 23.4% variability of loneliness in adolescent girls. The most significant from selected factors of loneliness seem to be emotional relationship of the parent of the opposite sex.

**Key words** empathy of parent, emotional relationship, parenting control, loneliness, adolescence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Isolation and self-focus become a normal part of a lifestyle. But the picture of lonely person is mostly associated with an older adult who is doomed to a lonely existence. However the researches show that the age distribution of loneliness is U-shaped, that means that loneliness is more prevalent not only in old but also in young people while its incidence within adolescent is still raising (Luhmann, Hawkley, 2016). Some studies have found an increased sense of loneliness in more than two thirds of young people under 18 (Berguno, Leroux, McAinsh, Shaikh, 2004; Galanaki, 2004). Being alone represents subjectively experienced unpleasant feeling of social isolation, resulting from the absence of satisfactory social relations. The paper comes from the single- factor understanding of loneliness, the rise and persistence of which can be conditioned by many factors (Cacioppo, Hawkley, n.d.).

The loneliness is influenced in different ages by different factors (Luhmann, Hawkley, 2016). In adolescence, the significant predictor of loneliness comes from social environment.

Characteristic for this period is greater emancipation from family and the focus on peer relations. Parents and peers are the key socializing factors in the period of adolescence and remain important predictors of loneliness in adolescence, independent from the effects of genetics and personal variables of adolescent or his own self presentation (Jackson, 2007; Junttila, Vauras, 2009). Previous researches have shown that adolescents' loneliness is related to perceived social support and parenting, that is related to denial by peers and feeling of loneliness (Jackson, 2007; Salimi, Bozorgpour, 2012; Zhao, Kong, Wang, 2013). In the present study we have studied variables from the family environment – empathy, emotional relationship and parenting of both parents – as possible predictors of loneliness in adolescent boys and girls.

### 1.1 Empathy of parent as predictor of loneliness in adolescence

Empathy is one of the important “interpersonal skills” that determines the quality of relations with others. It represents the basic quality of individual to understand (cognitive empathy) and share (affective empathy) the emotional state of other person (Jolliffe, Farrington, 2006). It enables to find what other thinks or feels and helps him to reduce the risk of misunderstanding among people (Mlčák, 2010). Parents who use the ability to react with empathy on teenager's needs and communicate, create an environment in which adolescent realizes how important it is to understand needs and personal experiences of other people. Empathic parents help adolescent to develop the quality of empathy and other social competencies that are necessary in building effective interpersonal relationships (Shapiro, 2004; Stoica, Roco, 2013). Adolescent educated by empathic parents are able to understand and feel for others, and are able to better deal with social problems and be more popular in the groups (McElwain, Halberstadt, Volling, 2007). They have higher self-esteem and self-confidence, more often initiate social interactions, through which they develop their social competencies and thus have lower loneliness (Repetti, Taylor, Seeman, 2005; Richaud de Minzi, 2006). On the other hand, the lack of emotional attention from parents stiffens the empathy (Buda, 1994). That's way the empathy

is an important factor that contributes to reducing the risk of loneliness (Beadle et al., 2012).

### 1.2 Parent – child emotional relationship as predictor of loneliness in adolescence

Shapiro (2004) argues that for the correct development of adolescent is necessary not only empathy from the parent but also something what we might call as warmth, interest or emotional relationship of parent. Emotional relationship between parent and adolescent create the whole atmosphere in the family and it is a part of parenting style that parent uses without significant changes in parenting since childhood. It moves on a continuum from sensitive and warmth approach (positive component of parenting) to a cool, uninterested approach (negative component of parenting); (Čáp, Boschek, 1994). Parenting warmth, similar as empathy, helps individual to develop assertive behaviour, ability to engage in social groups and solve interpersonal conflicts, support his empathy and prosocial behaviour (Vašáková, 2004; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, 1990). Adolescents who were brought up in a sensitive and warmth environment create a positive image of themselves and they are more confident and trust people more. They create more satisfied peer relationships and less feel lonely (Širůček, Širůčková, 2012). On the other hand, the lack of warmth and care from parents has negative effect in forming social competencies and relationships in adolescence (Buschgens et al., 2010; Macek, Štefánková, 2012).

### 1.3 Parenting control as predictor of adolescent's loneliness

The important role in parenting plays also another component of parenting – control – consisting of high demands, strict control and use of punishments (component of the requirement) and absence of control with the emphasis on adolescent's autonomy (component of freedom); (Čáp, Boschek, 1994). Positive relationship to adolescent does not mean only affinity but also care, interest and reasonable control. The low demands and excessively benevolent approach are associated with higher level of lonely feelings in adolescent (Lim, Smith, 2008). On the other hand, exaggerated pressure from parents leads to the fears from the reaction of others, aggressive behaviour to peers, introversion and low self-esteem in adolescent as well as his inability to make compromise and solve the conflicts what may be the cause not only loneliness of adolescent but also mental and behavioural problems (Buda, 1994; Mlčák, 2010; Richards et al., 1991; Richaud De Minzi, 2006). Typical for such approach in parenting is the lack of empathy. Presence of cognitive empathy leads parent in conflict situation to better understanding of others and reduces the possibility of hostile or aggressive reaction toward adolescent (Jolliffe, Farrington, 2006; Mlčák, 2010).

### 1.4 The role of mother and father in parenting

Parents have specific role in parenting that's why some studies have focused on detecting differences between parenting of mothers and fathers in the relation with loneliness of their children. Their results are ambiguous. Regarding gender – related relationships between parent and adolescents, some psychologists agree that parent of the same sex is more involved in the child rising and vice versa, child responds more to the parent of the same sex. The parent of the same sex becomes the model of the gender role. It helps adolescent to increase his own self-esteem, teaches him the basis of social intelligence, empathy and regulation of own emotions and also develops his intelligence and social competence which can protect him from experiencing the feelings of loneliness (Matoušek, 2003;

Oravcová, Ďuricová, Bindasová, 2007). Disrupted relationship with the parent of the same sex is associated with lower prosocial behaviour, problems with identity and emotional instability of adolescent. Low empathy or insufficient emotional reactions to the needs of child of the same sex lead to inadequate adolescent self-esteem, lack of empathy, excessive shyness, social anxiety and problems with adaptation (Corneau, 2012; Matoušek, 2003; Mlčák, 2010). Other authors attribute a decisive role to parent of the opposite sex in adolescent development. Parent of the opposite sex can play an important role to the emotional loneliness of adolescent, experiencing unpleasant feelings due to the lack of close, intimate and confidential relationship with the concrete person (e.g. parent, best friend, partner); (Weiss, 1973 in: Ernst, Cacioppo, 1999). Father represents for his daughter the model of male role and mother for her son the model of female role. Modelling can influence the confidence the adolescent to approach to the opposite sex, which consequently influences the formation of their future romantic relationships, the quality of which is directly related to the degree of emotional loneliness (Richaud de Minzi, 2006).

### 1.5 The present study

Based on the research results that showed an increased loneliness of young people (Berguno et al., 2004; Galanaki, 2004), the aim of our study was study selected predictors from family environment on the variability of loneliness in adolescent boys and girls. Despite the fact that in adolescence there is a consistent emancipation from the family and orientation to peers, parents continue to be the most important people in adolescent's life and influence his living and behaviour (Jackson, 2007; Osecká, Macek, Řehulková, 2000). Based on these statements, we assume that loneliness of adolescent is somehow associated with factors that are in family environment. We focus on parent's empathy, because previous researches claimed that empathetic parents stimulate and support expression of emotions, teach adolescents empathy, develop their emotional intelligence and prosocial behaviour that adolescent consistently applies in the peer relations (Moreno, Klute, Robinson, 2008; Stoica, Roco, 2013; Strayer Roberts, 2004). The positive emotional relationship between parent and adolescent was measured because it can help create adolescent's positive self-esteem, increases confidence toward people, and perception of his or her own social and emotional competencies. Adolescents who grow up in a warmth family environment create adequate peers relationships and less often feel lonely (Raikes, Thompson, 2008; Širůček, Širůčková, 2012). For correct development of adolescent is necessary to have adequate control and limits (Ďuricová, 2004; Saladin-Grizivatz, 2002). Taking into account, that both parents have specific role in parenting, we monitor all three factors of family environment (empathy, emotional relationship and parenting control) particularly for mother and father. The previous research studies found that the view of the parents is often distorted, and parents have tendency to underestimate or overestimate their emotional expressions toward adolescents (Buschgens et al., 2010; Wray-Lake, Flanagan, 2011). For that all three parents' variables were monitored from the adolescent's point of view. The previous researches have also showed that girls are more sensitive on family environment influences than boys (Macek, Štefánková, 2012), that's why we monitored the portion of individual variables on the variability of loneliness in girls and boys.

In the relation to the aim of the research we are looking for an answer on the question: What is the portion of monitored variables from family environment – empathy, emotional relationship and parenting control – of mother and father on the variability of loneliness in adolescent boys and girls and which from the monitored variables significantly predict loneliness in adolescence.

## 2. METHODS

We chose the adolescent's age because loneliness in this period is more frequent than in other (Perlman, Landolt, 1999). We define selected age limit according to Macek (2003) who distinguishes early (10/11-13 years), middle (14-16 years) and late adolescence (17-20 years). The upper limit in our study was 18 years, because in this time adolescents finish high school and leave the families and parents cease play important role in their life. Data were achieved from the 138 pupils of the primary school (57 girls and 81 boys) and 68 pupils of the high school (27 boys and 41 girls) aged 10-18 ( $M_{age}=14.18$ ;  $SD_{age}=2.43$ ), who were selected casually and sequentially filled in 3 questionnaires.

We measured the loneliness of adolescent by 3<sup>rd</sup> Version of UCLA-Loneliness scale (Russell, Peplau, Cutron, 1980 in: Russell, 1996). The questionnaire contains of 9 positive (absent feelings of loneliness) and 11 negative (present feelings of loneliness) formulated statements for evaluating satisfaction with social relations which respondent expresses on 4-point scale from „never“ to „always“. This scale belongs to the most commonly used methods to measure loneliness. Russell (1996) conducted a validation study that confirmed its high validity and reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.89-0.94$ ). Good psychometric properties of questionnaire for Slovak population have been confirmed by several studies carried on the adolescents (Molčanová et al., 2007). In the present study, we confirmed adequate internal consistency of UCLA-Loneliness scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.852$ ). Factor analysis of second-ordered items has confirmed one-dimensionality of the questionnaire (Russell, 1996). Terms such as “loneliness” or “lonely” do not appear in any item to avoid distortion of answers.

We measured the adolescent's view on parent's empathy by modified version of Basic scale of empathy (BES). The original version of the questionnaire (Jolliffe, Farrington, 2006) had 20 items which respondent answered on 5-point scale from “totally agree” to “totally disagree”. In the research study we used the Slovak version of the questionnaire which was translated by Čavojová, Sirota and Belovičová (2012). They subsequently carried out two research studies that confirmed two factor model of empathy and provided support for convergent and discriminatory validity. We have modified the version of items so the respondents do not express their empathy but how they perceive the empathy from their parents (mother and father) toward themselves. The revised questionnaire examined the adolescent's view on the empathy that mother and father applied in his upbringing. We confirmed adequate internal consistency of revised BES (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.792-0.816$ ).

We measured upbringing in family from the adolescent's point of view by Parenting style questionnaire. This was created and standardized by Čáp and Boschek (1994). It consists of 10 items for the each of the four components (positive, negative, requirements and freedom). The respondents expressed “yes”, “partially” or “no” to the claims. In particular items they evaluated mother's and father's parenting separately. From the components positive and negative relationship we created a complex characteristic “emotional relationship” and from the component of the requirements and freedom were created a complex characteristic “control”. In the present study, we confirmed adequate internal consistency of questionnaire (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.798-0.849$ ).

We processed the obtained data by SPSS.22.0. We verified the normality of the monitored variables and then through enter method of multiple linear regression analysis; we examined how empathy, emotional relationship and control of both parents contribute to the variability of the loneliness in adolescent boys and girls. We used enter method because we wanted to find out how large is the

proportion of variability of dependent variable- loneliness of adolescent – explain by all independent variables together and also which of the selected independent variables are relevant in explaining variability of loneliness in adolescents.

## 3. RESULTS

Enter method of multiple linear regression statistically evaluates the proportion of independent variables (empathy, emotional relationship and control of mother and father) on variability of dependent variable (loneliness in adolescent boys and girls). First we tested the normality of variables. The results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test showed that emotional relationship and control of both parents do not meet the criteria of normal distribution. Similarly coefficients of skewness and kurtosis do not meet the criteria for normality, but their values were less than  $\pm 2$ . It was showed that most parents have positive or negative emotional relationship to their children while the medium values occurred in fewer cases. In the control of parents was an increased representation of weak and moderate control while the strong control was less frequent.

Subsequently we focused on testing using Enter method. In Table 1 we present results of regression analysis for adolescent boys. From this results we may state that selected predictors of family environment together contribute on 16.1% variability of dependent variable ( $R^2=.161$ ), which is loneliness in adolescent boys. From the observed predictors seems to be relevant only emotional relationship of mother which proved to be moderate strong and negative statistically significant predictor of loneliness ( $\beta=-.436$ ;  $p<.05$ ). Negative emotional relationship of mother leads to higher level of perceived loneliness in adolescent boys, while the positive relationship of mother leads to reduction of these feelings.

Table 1 Evaluation of loneliness' predictors in adolescent boys

| MODEL 1   | R    | R <sup>2</sup> | B            | $\beta$     | t             | p           |
|---|------|----------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| <b>Loneliness of boys (F=2.438; p=.033; n=84)</b> |      |                |              |             |               |             |
| Empathy of father                                 |      |                | .18          | .19         | 1.335         | .186        |
| Empathy of mother                                 |      |                | .07          | .07         | .477          | .635        |
| Emotional relationship of father                  | .402 | .161           | -.37         | -.04        | -.223         | .824        |
| Emotional relationship of mother                  |      |                | <b>-3.84</b> | <b>-.44</b> | <b>-2.314</b> | <b>.023</b> |
| Control of father                                 |      |                | 1.36         | .10         | .788          | .433        |
| Control of mother                                 |      |                | -1.79        | -.14        | -1.123        | .265        |

In Table 2 are presented the results of regression analysis of adolescent girls. Based on these results we note that selected predictors of family environment contribute to 23.4% variability of loneliness in adolescent girls ( $R^2=.234$ ). From monitored independent variables was statistically significant only emotional relationship of father which was similar than in boys, negative predictor of loneliness ( $\beta=-.256$ ;  $p<.05$ ). Other monitored predictors did not prove to be relevant for explaining the variability of loneliness in adolescent girls ( $p>.05$ ).

Table 2 Evaluation of loneliness' predictors in adolescent girls

| MODEL 1  | R    | R <sup>2</sup> | B            | $\beta$     | t             | p           |
|--|------|----------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| <b>Loneliness of girls (F=5.307; p=.000.; n=122)</b> |      |                |              |             |               |             |
| Empathy of father                                    |      |                | -.11         | -.14        | -.915         | .362        |
| Empathy of mother                                    |      |                | -.14         | -.18        | -1.233        | .221        |
| Emotional relationship of father                     | .484 | .234           | <b>-2.50</b> | <b>-.26</b> | <b>-2.147</b> | <b>.034</b> |
| Emotional relationship of mother                     |      |                | -.62         | -.06        | -.575         | .566        |
| Control of father                                    |      |                | 1.08         | .10         | .780          | .437        |
| Control of mother                                    |      |                | -1.60        | -.15        | -1.170        | .245        |

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Our aim was to determine the portion of selected variables from family environment on prediction of loneliness in adolescents and identified those who significantly contribute to the prediction of loneliness in adolescent boys and girls. We found out that significant predictor of loneliness in adolescents seemed to be the emotional relationship of parent of the opposite sex. In the case of adolescent boys, the most significant predictor was mother's emotional relationship. We confirmed that negative emotional relationship, reserved approach of mother has a significant influence on feelings of loneliness not only in family environment but also in the group of peers. Negative relationship of mother and lack of emotional attention from her causes negative attitudes of her son to other people, prevents him from creating interpersonal relationships and diminishes his feelings of empathy (Leman, 2008; Shapiro, 2004; Šatánek, 2004). Our results support the claims of several authors who highlight the loving and sensitive approach of mother as protective factor of loneliness in adolescent boys (Biddulph, 2006; Moreno, Klute, Robinson, 2008). Devout mother mainly to the boy's age of 6 years is the model of woman role, helping him to gain confidence in himself and others, better cope with interpersonal conflicts, and be popular in the group of peers (Biddulph, 2006; Oravcová, Ďuricová, Bindasová, 2007; Shapiro, 2004; Stoica, Roco, 2013; Šatánek, 2004). At the same time she helps son to create a relationship with his father which importance rises in the adolescence (Biddulph, 2006).

When examining the loneliness of adolescent girls, the most significant predictor of loneliness was emotional relationship of father. Several authors have claimed that girls pick social competencies over mother and learn how to create and work in relationships with people outside family environment (Barton, Kirtley, 2012; Firmanová, Firmanová, 2004). Our results show importance of the father in the life of adolescent girls. Father's positive relationship proved to be protective factor of loneliness in adolescent girls while the negative relationship led to increase of feelings of loneliness to their peers. Emotionally reserved fathers create in their daughters mistrust in themselves and others and may cause the inability to create full interpersonal relations, excessive shyness, social anxiety and problems with adaptation what subsequently lead to the feelings of loneliness (Corneau, 2012; Mlčák, 2010).

Control of mother and father has not proved to be a significant predictor of loneliness in adolescent boys or girls. Our results showed that in the case of loneliness in adolescents is more important reserved, insensitive relationship, lack of interest from parent of the opposite sex in the comparison to inadequate demands,

excessive freedom or excessive control and directive parent control. The possible cause of these findings is the fact, that adolescents who participated in our research evaluated their parents mostly as benevolent with positive relationship. These results support the claims that nowadays parents abstain from control and punishment and prefer more sensitive and benevolent approach (Kravárová, 2010; Ondrejkovič, 2008).

Parents who practice empathy tend to be more interested in adolescent's needs in conflict situation reducing probability of their hostile or aggressive reaction (Mlčák, 2010). Previous researches have suggested that perceived feelings of loneliness are largely related to the pathological control and lack of love and sensitivity from the parent of the same sex (Richards et al., 1991; Richaud de Minzi, 2006; Scharf, Wiseman, Farah, 2011).

#### 4.1 Limits of the research and recommendation

We consider measurement tools as limit of the research. Self-reported questionnaires are based on the subjective responses of the respondents, which may be distorted because of giving socially desirable responses. This is a risk we encounter in measuring loneliness which is more tolerated in girls who may score higher under the influence of gender stereotypes and are more willing to confess it than boys. We tried to avoid these distortions using questionnaire which did not contain the terms "loneliness" or "lonely".

The parent's view on empathy and parenting may be also distorted (Wray-Lake, Flanagan, 2011). We tried to avoid these distortions by gaining responses from adolescents, who have expressed empathy and parenting of their mother and father. The view of adolescents may be also distorted under the gender stereotypes where maternal expectations are greater in empathy and warmth, while fathers should be more strict and controlled. Adolescents participating in our research consistent with these stereotypes evaluated mothers as more empathetic but we did not mention differences in the perception of control of mother and father.

#### 4.2 Conclusion

Our aim was to examine the feelings of loneliness in adolescence and identified those factors that predict loneliness of adolescent boys and girls. From the examined factors of family environment (empathy of parents, emotional relationship and control of parents) was as significant protective factor positive emotional relationship of the parent of opposite sex. Nor control of parents neither empathy were shown as significant predictors of adolescents' loneliness. It has been shown that warmth approach of parenting and interests from mother in the case of teenage boys and father in teenage girls help adolescent to build satisfied interpersonal relationships outside the family environment that subsequently protect them from experiencing feelings of loneliness. At the same time it has been shown that monitored factors of the family environment in higher level contribute on prediction of loneliness of adolescent girls than boys, what is consistent with Macek and Štefánková (2012) according who the girls are more sensitive to the influences of family environment.

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