



## Relationship between Emotional Abuse and Empathy among Adolescents:

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### **Abstract:**

This study is aimed at determining if there exists a correlation between emotional abuse and empathy experienced by adolescents. Emotional abuse includes belittling another person, verbal threats or other tactics that make the victim feel degraded or inferior. Empathy is the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel, see things from their point of view and imagine yourself in their place. Paying attention to other people allows us to be moved by their experiences. Participants in this study are adolescent males and females aged 15 to 20. The total sample size is 120, consisting of 60 males and 60 females. The 'snowball sampling method' was used to obtain the sample population. Both males and females completed two questionnaires measuring emotional abuse and empathy— The Emotional Abuse Questionnaire by Jacobson & Gottman and The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire by Spreng et.al. This study follows the correlational, non-experimental research design. Proper statistical treatment was applied to obtain the results. Results indicated 'very weak' negative correlations between the two variables among four categories of samples, which are: Emotional Abuse experienced by female, Empathy among females, Emotional Abuse experienced by males, Empathy among males.

**Keywords:** Adolescence, Emotional Abuse, Empathy, The Emotional Abuse Questionnaire, The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire.

**Introduction:**

The present research focuses on the relationship between emotional abuse and empathy in adolescents.

But what is adolescence?

- Adolescence: According to APA, “the period of human development that starts with puberty (10 to 12 years of age) and ends with physiological maturity (approximately 19 years of age) is called adolescence.” These are the ‘teenage years.’ Adolescents are trying to figure out who they are and establish goals for their adult life. Major changes occur at this stage at varying rates in physical characteristics, sexual characteristics and sexual interest which affects their body image, self-esteem and self-concept.

Adolescents experience rapid physical, cognitive and psychological growth. During this phase, adolescents establish patterns of behavior- for instance, related to diet, physical activity, substance use and sexual activity- that can protect their health.

To grow and develop in good health, adolescents need information, including age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education; opportunities to develop life skills; health services and safe and supportive environments. Adolescents consolidate a sense of identity, marked by autonomous functioning that will lead to independent living while maintaining secure connections to family, peers and the broader community. Variables in this study are emotional abuse and empathy.

- Emotional Abuse: Emotional abuse is ‘sustained, repetitive, inappropriate behavior which damages or substantially reduces the creative and developmental potential of crucially important mental faculties and mental processes of a child, including intelligence, memory, recognition, perception, attention, imagination and moral development.’ (K P O’Hagan, 1995). In recent years, there has been significant interest regarding the detrimental effects of an abusive family environment. Recently, the World Health Organization (2006) stated in a maltreatment prevention guide, that acts of emotional abuse are considered to have a high likelihood of adversely affecting a child’s physical and mental health or their physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development (WHO 2006). Even though growing up in a physically and emotionally abusive environment, many children grow up to be reasonably well-functioning adults.

Also, psychological maltreatment is an important predictor of emotional and behavioral problems in adolescents (Arslan, 2012, Langevin et.al., 2015, Lowell et.al., 2014, Miller-Perrin and Perrin, 2007, Şimşek and Önder, 2011). Psychological maltreatment has also been linked to more anti-social behaviors in adolescence (Bal, 2010, Kabasakal and Arslan, 2014, Lansford et.al., 2002).

- **Empathy:** Empathy is ‘a social and emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts and needs of others, such that we can offer sensitive, perceptive and appropriate communication and support.’ (Karla McLaren, 2013).

The concept of empathy was first introduced by aestheticians in the mid

19th century. They used the German word “Einfühlung” to describe the emotional “knowing” of a work of art from within , by feeling an emotional resonance with the work of art. At the end of the 19th century, the psychologist Theodore Lipps expanded this concept to mean “feeling one’s way into the experience of another” by theorizing that *inner imitation* of the actions of others played a critical role in eliciting empathy.

Empathy plays a crucial role in healthy social functioning and in maintaining positive social relationships. Empathy is a multifaceted construct encompassing both cognitive processes and emotional reactions. Empathy is a multidimensional construct and requires the ability to perceive, understand and feel the emotional states of others. According to most models, empathy consists of at least three core components:

- (1) The ability to recognize emotions in oneself and others via different communicative cues such as facial expressions, speech or behavior.
- (2) A cognitive component, also referred to as perspective taking or theory of mind, describing the competency to take over the perspective of another person, though maintaining the essential distinction between self and other.
- (3) An affective component, that is, sharing of emotional states with others or the ability to experience similar emotions as others. Empathy plays a critical interpersonal and societal role , enabling sharing of experiences, needs and desires between individuals and providing an emotional bridge that promotes prosocial behavior. This capacity requires an exquisite interplay of neural networks and enables us to perceive the emotions of others, resonate with them emotionally and cognitively, to take in the perspective of others and to distinguish between our own and others’ emotions. Our capacity to perceive and resonate with others’ suffering allows us to feel and understand their pain.

Higher empathy is related to more attention to others’ emotions, higher friendship quality, less focus on affective state and lower levels of bullying behavior. (Sandy Overgaauw, Carolien Rieffe, Evelien Broekhof, Eveline A, Crone and Berna Güroğlu, 2017).

**“I have learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”**

- **Maya Angelou**

**Statement of the Problem:**

“To study the relationship between emotional abuse and empathy in adolescents.” **Objectives of the Study:**

Objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To study the possible correlation between emotional abuse and empathy in adolescents.
2. To assess the effects of emotional abuse on adolescents' mental well being and thinking process.
3. To study adolescence: the vitality of this stage, how it affects the further development of the individual.
4. To study emotional abuse: the concept, the occurrence, the effects.
5. To study empathy: the concept, it's importance and effects.
6. To check whether adolescents who are exposed to moderate or severe emotional abuse show greater or lesser empathy.
7. To review literature on emotional abuse and empathy.

**Hypotheses:**

Hypotheses mentioned below are proposed in this study:

H0: There exists zero correlation between emotional abuse and empathy among adolescents.

H1: There exists a negative correlation between emotional abuse and empathy.

H2: Adolescent females are more prone to emotional abuse than adolescent males.

H3: Adolescent females score higher on the empathy scale than adolescent males.

H4: Adolescent females above age 17 experience greater emotional abuse than adolescent adolescent males above age 17.

H5: Adolescent males up to age 18 possess greater empathy than adolescent males above age 18.

**Sample:**

The present study is aimed at finding the correlation between emotional abuse and empathy in adolescents. The sample population for the present study is adolescents aged 15 to 20 years, both males and females irrespective of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

Sample size is 120, consisting of 60 males and 60 females.

The sample is collected through 'snowball sampling' method in both the groups.

### **Variables under Study:**

The present study examines the relationship between two variables which are 'Emotional abuse' and 'Empathy.'

### **Tools:**

2 Questionnaires were administered in this study. One questionnaire measured the emotional abuse experienced by adolescents and the other questionnaire measured the level of empathy developed.

1. The Emotional Abuse Questionnaire: (Neil Jacobson. John Gottman,1998): This questionnaire was originally used for partner abuse. It includes 28 items. It is a 4 point scale ranging from 1 to 5. Score 1 point for every "never", 2 points for "rarely", 4 points for "occasionally" and 5 points for "very often." Points will be summed up for the total score. If the score is between 73 to 94, the result is "you are being emotionally abused." If the score is higher than 95, the result is "you are being more severely abused than the average battered woman."

2. The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire: (Spreng et.al. 2009):

This is a 16 item questionnaire. Item responses are scored according to the following 5 point Likert scale for positively worded items 1,3,5,6,8,9,13 and 16.

Never=0, Rarely=1, Sometimes=2, Often=3, Always=4.

The following negatively worded items are reverse scored: 2,4,7,10,11,12,14 and 15. Scores are summed to derive total for the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire, which can range from 0 to 64. Males' general score for this measure ranges from 43.46 to 44.45, while females tend to score within the range of 44.62 to 48.93.

### **Procedure:**

Data for this study are collected from various resources. Primary data was collected from 120 adolescents aged 15 to 20. They were divided into the groups of 60 males and 60 females. They solved two questionnaires measuring emotional abuse and empathy. Therefore, 'Questionnaires' was the primary method of data collection. Secondary data was collected through various research references. As the present study desires to draw attention to the correlation between emotional abuse and empathy experienced by adolescents, 'cross-sectional research design' is preferred. This study tests whether the exposure to emotional abuse experienced by adolescents correlates to the empathy they possess. First of all, the research area, that is the focus on the 'correlation between emotional abuse and empathy among adolescents' was decided. Objectives of the study were formulated. Then both variables which are emotional abuse and empathy were examined and the possible

literature was reviewed regarding both the variables. The sample size was fixed which is 120, including 60 males and 60 females. Tools used for the present study were two questionnaires measuring emotional abuse and empathy which were circulated among adolescents through google forms. Data was collected from each group—males and females. In statistical analysis, Mean, SD, correlation coefficient were performed. Finally, the conclusion, limitations and references of the study followed.

### **Results and Discussion:**

The present study aims towards finding the correlation between emotional abuse and empathy in adolescents. This study examines the literature on emotional abuse and empathy and explains different aspects of adolescents. Adolescence needs careful guidance and parental care and proper communication.

Both empathy and emotional abuse shape adolescents' minds in many ways. Their later adjustment in life depends on it. Emotional abuse may increase or decrease adolescents' empathy; how they understand and connect with other people; what is their view towards the world. That is why studying the correlation between emotional abuse and empathy in adolescents becomes important.

One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to test the normality of the distribution, which tests whether the obtained distribution is a normal distribution. The one sample K-S test for each sample of 60 indicated that most of the scores on emotional abuse and empathy follow the normal distribution curve.

Table 1 1: Mean and SD of Emotional abuse and Empathy among Adolescent males and females:

Variables	Mean	SD
Emotional Abuse (females)	44.18	18.83
Empathy (females)	48.45	5.62
Emotional Abuse (males)	43.05	15.46
Empathy (males)	44.51	7.62

Table 2 2: Pearson's Correlation (Population: Females)

Variable 1	Variable 2	n	Pearson's r	p	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
EA (F)	Em (F)	60	-0.238*	0.032	-1.000	-0.027

Table 3 3: Pearson's Correlation (Population: Males)

Variable 1	Variable 2	n	Pearson's r	p	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI
EA (M)	Em (M)	60	-0.019*	0.441	-1.000	0.194

Mean, SD and correlation coefficient were performed as a part of descriptive statistics. The 2 sample K-S test was used to find the normality of the distribution.

As Pearson's ( r ) value indicates in both the tables above, although technically a negative correlation, the relationship between the two variables under study is “only weak” in both the sample populations. It was hypothesized that there exists a negative correlation between emotional abuse and empathy.

The mean score of empathy of adolescent females (48.45) is greater than the score of empathy of adolescent males (44.51). It was hypothesized that adolescent females score high on empathy than adolescent males.

Also, when we compare the mean scores of emotional abuse of both the sample populations which are adolescent males and females, mean score of adolescent females (44.18) is greater than that of the males (43.05). It was hypothesized that adolescent females are more prone to emotional abuse than adolescent males.

Out of the sample population of 120 adolescents, consisting of 60 males and 60 females, 37 adolescents females and 37 adolescent males above age 17 experience emotional abuse. Among these, the mean score of 37 adolescent females above age 17 is 42.08 while, the mean score of 37 adolescent males above age 17 is 42.51. It was hypothesized that adolescent females above age 17 experience greater emotional abuse than adolescent males above age 17.

Out of the sample population of 120 adolescents, consisting of 60 males and 60 females, 32 adolescent males aged up to 18 out of 60 adolescent males display a mean empathy of 45.03, while 26 adolescent males aged above 18 out of 60 adolescent males display a mean empathy of 44.34. It was hypothesized that adolescent males up to age 18 possess greater empathy than adolescent males above age 18.

**Conclusion:**

There exists a negative relationship between emotional abuse and empathy in adolescents as the results indicate. Also, adolescent females score high on the scale of emotional abuse than adolescent males and adolescent females also score high on the scale of empathy than adolescent males. Those adolescents exposed to mild emotional abuse show greater empathy which means that empathy increases if there exist low levels of emotional abuse.

**Limitations:**

1. The sample size is very small.
2. There are more factors which can affect empathy except emotional abuse.
3. The sample population for data collection is from the urban area alone.

These limitations might have affected the findings of the present study.

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