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ABSTRACT

The relationships that children have with significant others influences the perceptions that they hold of themselves. This study examined the relationship between closeness to significant others and self-esteem. Children (n=142) in grades 4-6 responded to statements concerning self-esteem and were asked to rate how close they felt to mother, father, two closest friends, and to their teacher. Results indicated a significant difference between closeness to mother and closeness to father in favor of the mother. While correlational analyses indicated significant relationships between closeness to significant others and self-esteem, closeness to a particular significant other was critical. Although subjects reported high rates of closeness to both mother and father, closeness to mother was the more significant predictor of children's self-esteem for both boys and girls. Closeness to teachers was found to be related to self-esteem but more so for girls than boys. Overall, the study suggested that the children's self-esteem was related to (in order of importance) closeness to mother, peers, teacher, and father. However, regression results indicated that closeness to mother and teacher were predictive of self-esteem for girls while only closeness to mother was predictive of boy's self-esteem. (Contains 11 references.) (RJM)

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The Relationship Between Closeness to Significant Others and Self-Esteem in Children

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The relationships that children have with significant others in their lives influences the perceptions that they hold of themselves. Children's reflections on the opinions or perceived opinions of significant others contribute to the formation of their self-esteem. The question often posed is who actually possesses the greatest influence on the development of self-esteem. Juhasz's (1989) found that parents were nominated as being most significant followed by peers, siblings, grandparents and other relatives and teachers. However, Juhasz did not investigate the separate influence of mothers and fathers and did not investigate the intensity of the relationships with significant others.

It is in the family that we first learn about ourselves, others and relationships. Of particular interest is the relationship between children's perceptions of their parent's behaviour and their self-esteem development. Studies have reported correlations between aspects of parental support and children's self-esteem (Felson & Zielinski, 1989; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986; Hoelter & Harper, 1987). Litovsky and Dusek (1985) also investigated the relationship between aspects of child-rearing practices and self-esteem development during the early adolescent years. Their results supported the hypothesis that a warm, caring environment suggestive of closeness to parents impacted positively on children's self-esteem.

Paulson, Hill and Holmbeck (1991) investigated the relationship between perceived closeness to parents and children's self-esteem. Closeness was conceptualised as a specific facet of parental warmth, representing mutual intimacy, positive affection and self-disclosure and was measured using a four item scale which examined the expression of affection and self-disclosure. Self-Esteem was measured using the revised Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979). The results indicated that children's perceptions of closeness to parents were significantly related to self-esteem in all four parent-child dyads- mother-son, mother-daughter, father-son, father-daughter. The results also indicated that the children perceived greater closeness with their mothers than with their fathers. Youniss and Smollar (1985) explained similar findings in terms of the time spent with children by mothers compared to the time spent by fathers.

Aim of the Study

This study aimed to examine the relationship between closeness to significant others and self-esteem. It was hypothesised that the degree of self-reported perceived closeness in relationships with significant others namely mother, father, peers and teacher will be positively related to children's self-esteem.

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Sample

One hundred and forty-three children in grades four to six at two elementary schools in a large metropolitan area in Australia participated in the study. Some 57% (n=82) of the sample were girls and the mean age for the total sample was 10.2 years with a range of 8 to 12 years.

Instrumentation

Self-Esteem. Self-esteem was defined as the global beliefs and feelings that children have about themselves as people, for example being satisfied, happy, pleased with oneself (Burnett, 1994). This description is in keeping with Rosenberg (1979, p.7) who described self-esteem as the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to him/herself as a person". An index of Self-Esteem was formed by adding together the children's numerical responses on a five point nominal scale (True to False) for each of 16 items. Marsh's (1990) eight General-Self Concept items (e.g., A lot of things about me are good, In general, I like being the way I am) from Self Description Questionnaire 1 (SDQ1) together with eight items from Burnett's (1994) Self Scale (e.g., I feel happy with myself, I feel satisfied, I feel proud of myself) were administered. Marsh's items measure global beliefs or cognitions about oneself as a person while Burnett's items tap the feeling or affective perceptions of the self. Burnett (1994) reported a close link ($r=0.78$) between belief and feeling statements about the self. Both sets of items have high reliability and sound validity (Burnett, 1994; Marsh, 1990).

Closeness to Significant Others. Lackovic-Grgin and Dekovic (1990) conceptualised significant others as a term used to refer to persons who occupy high rank on an importance continuum and whose opinions are considered meaningful. Juhasz (1989) considered significant others as those whose opinions we desire, value and respect. The Closeness Scale was developed to measure the construct of closeness as perceived by the child. Closeness was defined in a clear, concise fashion and the children were provided with a scale ranging from 'not close' to 'very close' on which to respond. Closeness was described on the response sheet as the degree to which you really like someone, enjoy spending time with someone, enjoy talking to someone and that person being important in your life. As opposed to earlier attempts to define closeness (Paulson, Hill and Holmbeck, 1991), this definition provides a clear description of elements within the construct. It could be argued that the four aspects of this definition reflect the intimacy and affection dimensions of closeness as defined by Paulson, Hill and Holmbeck (1991). The children were asked to rate how close they felt to mother, father, two closest friends and to their teacher. Consequently, the subject's perceived closeness to each significant others was represented by a numerical rating from 0 to 10, 0 representing low closeness and 10 representing very high closeness.

Results

An alpha coefficient of 0.94 was found for the Self-Esteem Scale. The mean rating for closeness to mother was found to be higher than the mean for closeness to father (9.6 vs 9.1; $F=13.8$; $df=1,141$; $p<.001$). A MANOVA was computed to test for sex differences on each of the five dependent variables. A significant multivariate difference was found (Pillais=0.08; $F=2.31$; $df=5,131$; $p=.047$) but the only univariate difference found was for Closeness to Teacher (7.1 vs 5.9; $F=7.1$; $df=1,135$; $p=.009$) indicating that the boys in the study reported feeling closer to their teacher than the girls.

Pearson correlations between Closeness and Self-Esteem were computed for the total sample and separately for boys and girls. Regression analyses were computed using the four Closeness variables to predict Self-Esteem.

Correlation Results

	Total (n=143)	Boys (n=61)	Girls (n=82)
Closeness to Mother	.41	.40	.43
Closeness to Father	.28	NS	.34
Closeness to Peers	.32	.33	.33
Closeness to Teacher	.30	.26	.36

Regression Results

Predictors	Beta	t-values	% of Variance	Regression Results
Total Sample (n=136)				
Closeness to Mother	.34	4.3	14.2	F = 17.2
Closeness to Teacher	.24	3.1	5.1	df = 2,134
TOTAL			19.3	p < .001
Boys (n=60)				
Closeness to Mother	.40	3.3	14.5	F = 11.2
				df = 1,59
				p < .001
Girls (n=75)				
Closeness to Mother	.37	3.7	14.8	F = 14.4
Closeness to Teacher	.35	3.5	11.5	df = 2,73
TOTAL			26.3	p < .001

Discussion

A significant difference between closeness to mother and closeness to father in favour of mother was found for all the subjects involved in this study. This finding supported the findings of previous research (Paulson, Hill & Holmbeck, 1991; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). A significant sex difference was found for closeness to teacher suggesting that the boys involved in this study reported higher rates of closeness to their current teacher than the girls.

The results of correlational analyses indicated significant relationships between closeness to significant others and self-esteem but it is closeness to particular significant others which is critical. It would appear that although subjects of this age reported high rates of closeness to both mother and father (9.6 and 9.1 respectively), it was closeness to mother that is the more significant predictor of children's self-esteem for both boys and girls.

The lower rate and smaller influence of closeness to father in comparison to mother has been explained in terms of the smaller amount of time that fathers spend with their children (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). It appears that despite the small amount of time fathers spend with their children the children still report a high degree of closeness to them. However, the predictive capacity of perceived closeness to father for self-esteem appeared to be considerably less than for mother and teacher. Also, in contrast to the finding of a significant relationship between closeness to father and son's self-esteem reported by Paulson, Hill, and Holmbeck (1990), this study found no such relationship. The different age of two samples may have contributed to this finding with Paulson, Hill, and Holmbeck's sample being older.

Closeness to teachers was found to be related to self-esteem but more so for girls than boys ($r=0.36$ vs 0.26). The teacher-child relationship appeared to be more important for girls than for boys with regards to self-esteem despite boys reporting higher rates of closeness to their teacher. Interestingly, for the boys in this study, closeness to teacher was of greater significance with regard to their self-esteem than closeness to father. This finding when coupled with the previous results suggest that time spent with a significant other may be more important to the development of self-esteem than an index of the closeness of the relationship. Further data relating to how much time significant others, in particular mother, father and teacher, spend with boys and girls respectively would be needed to test this hypothesis.

Overall, the univariate results for all subjects involved in the study suggested that (in order of importance) closeness to mother, peers, teacher and father are related to the children's self-esteem. However the regression results indicated that closeness to mother and teacher were predictive of self-esteem for girls while only closeness to mother was predictive of boy's self-esteem. The influence of closeness to peers and father on self-esteem for this age group was evident from the univariate results but their influence was not present when the effects of mother and teacher were accounted for in the multiple regression analyses.

The relatively small size of the sample used is a limiting factor and the study would have been strengthened by having a larger more gender balanced sample. Additionally, it is important to note that it is perceived closeness from the perspective of the child which has been measured in this study. Further research using other indices of closeness are needed. The Closeness Rating Scales were developed specifically for this study in the hope of providing a clear indication of how close the subjects felt to specific significant others. The skewed nature of some responses obtained raises questions with regard to its usefulness. Although it was apparent that the subjects had cognitively weighted their responses with regard to how close they felt to different significant others, the range was limited particularly for parents scales. Perhaps future measurement of closeness should investigate the various elements of closeness in an attempt to further differentiate subjects on the "closeness to significant others" continuum.

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