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# The Relationship Between Early Adolescent Self-Esteem and Peer **Relationship Problems**

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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EARLY ADOLESCENT SELF-ESTEEM AND PEER RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS

Nancy L. Woods, B.S., M.A.T., M.A.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School Of Lindenwood University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Art

#### ABSTRACT

Peer relationships and self-esteem among early adolescents, as well as the relationship between the two, have been studied by various researchers in the past. The purpose of this correlational study was to determine the strength of the relationship between early adolescents' peer relationship problems and selfesteem. Specifically, this research studied early adolescents in grades five through eight in one suburban, White, middle class elementary school and three suburban, White, middle class junior high schools. Students completed the Self-Esteem Index and the Index of Peer Relations. Pearson correlations that were performed to analyze the data suggested a negatively-associated, linear, and strong relationship between adolescent self-esteem and peer relationship problems. A trend analysis suggested that self-esteem decreased slightly between grades six and seven and sharply decreased in grade eight. An independent sample t-test suggested that self-esteem was lower for adolescent males than for females. The results and limitations of this study, as well as implications for future research, are discussed.

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# COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

Associate Professor, Pamela Nickels, Ed.D. Chairperson of Committee and Advisor Program Director

Associate Professor, Marilyn Patterson, Ed.D.

Assistant Professor, Anita Sankar

# DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Tim and my children, Christina and Brian, who have lovingly and patiently supported me throughout my graduate program and culminating thesis project.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	Page v
Chapter 1 Introduction	2
Statement of Purpose	5
Hypotheses	6
Chapter 2 Review of the Literature	7
Early Research and Development of Theory	7
Importance of Positive Adolescent Peer Relationships	8
Theories of Adolescent Peer Relationships	11
Components of Adolescent Peer Relationships	12
Consequences of Poor Peer Relationships	14
Theories of Self-Esteem	15
Components of Self-Esteem	16
Importance of High Self-Esteem	20
Consequences of Low Self-Esteem	21
Link Between Adolescent Peer Relationships and Self-Esteem	21
Chapter 3 Method	25
Participants	25
Instruments	26
Procedures	30
Chapter 4 Results	32
Descriptive Statistics	32
Correlations	36
T-tests	41
Chapter 5 Discussion	43
Appendices	
A. Letter to Parents	49
B. Parent Consent Form	50
C. Demographic Data Sheet	51
D. Index of Peer Relations	52
References	54

#### LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Frequencies for Participants by Grade Level and Gender	26
Table 2	Means and Standard Deviations for Research Data by Grade Level and Gender	33
Table 3	Scatterplot of Correlation Between Self-Esteem and Peer Relationship Problems	37
Table 4	Pearson Correlations of SEQ and SEI subscales with IPR by Grade Level and Gender	39

#### Chapter 1

#### Introduction

The developmental period of early adolescence involves great changes for many young people. The developmental tasks required of an adolescent include biological, psychosocial, and environmental changes (Swanson, Spencer, & Peterson, 1998). Swanson, et al. (1998) summed up the stressful changes when they wrote:

More than ever before, the sexual, social, and occupational roles expected of adolescents in contemporary America are evidenced particularly in the electronic media albeit frequently without an adult's interpretative framework. Too often, supports for adolescent role enactment appear inconsistent and, in fact, capricious when considered concomitantly with the special challenges, societal inconsistencies, and varied social conditions with which too many youth are burdened. Although a potentially exciting period, adolescence is plagued by ambiguous expectations (p. 18).

Some of these stressful adolescent changes result in negative behaviors and poor mental health for adolescents. Thirteen to twenty-seven percent of adolescents in the Netherlands experienced depression, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000). Other studies (cited in Helsen, et al., 2000) found that students in the United States increasingly experienced similar emotional problems, some of which became chronic.

Although the period of early adolescent development is a trying one for many youths (Chubb & Fertman, 1997), most adolescents are helped by their support system, especially support from their peers, when conflicts between the early adolescent and his or her family members occurs most often (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). Newman and Newman (1999) noted that during the early adolescent period from age ten to fourteen, friends become increasingly more important as a source of support to peers. Berndt (1982) also reported that adolescents said the activity they spent the most time on was talking with peers. Thus, one could reason that peer relations and friendships for early adolescents are important.

More than thirty years ago, Erik Erikson theorized that identity formation that occurs during adolescence occurs only in the context of social interaction. He also developed his theory of psychosocial development that included the central conflict of identity versus identity confusion for all adolescents ranging in age from eleven to twenty-one (Newman and Newman, 1999). During this period, adolescents receive more emotional support from their peers and try to establish an identity separate from their parents. In the process, they move toward a more equal relationship with their parents (Helsen, et al., 2000). Other researchers have divided the longer adolescent period into smaller developmental periods such as ones including pre-adolescents in grades five and six and early adolescents in grades seven and eight. Elliot and Feldman divided adolescence into three periods, including the period of early adolescence for ages ten through fourteen (Phillipsen, 1999). Other studies (cited in Phillipsen, 1999) similarly thought of

early adolescence as beginning in the fifth grade. For purposes of this study, early adolescence included students in grades five through eight.

Newman and Newman (1999) identified several important roles of peer relations in early adolescence. One was the need for peer approval. Usually, an adolescent's perceived approval comes through conforming to the crowd. On the other hand, a lack of conformity may result in loneliness. For example, in a study of 500 early adolescents by Asher, Hymel, and Renshaw, seventeen percent reported trouble in making friends, eighteen percent felt left out, and fourteen percent felt alone (Newman & Newman, 1999). A lack of positive peer relations may also lead to an adolescent's being withdrawn which may also lead to poor self-concept. For example, a 1993 study by Hymel, Bowker, and Woody (cited in Newman & Newman, 1999) found that students who are withdrawn have a negative self-concept. Brown and Alexander (1991) wrote that self-concept or self-esteem, which is a measure of how people see themselves, can be influenced by others' perceptions of and behaviors around a person.

Hence, it is not surprising that during the early adolescent period of development, a young person's sense of self is often subject to challenges.

Unkind peers, changing bodies, and peer pressure to conform to peer norms all play into a young person's feelings of self-worth or lack of worth. Self-esteem has been paired with many variables such as academics, behavior, and mental health for early adolescents (Brown & Alexander, 1991).

As a result, in the last century, educational professionals have varied the focus of education from concern about cognitive goals to those of more social and

affective goals. The latest shift has been toward non-cognitive concerns including self-concept (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). The increased focus on self-concept has made it seem that self-concept is an additional subject for the curriculum. Educational personnel have even suggested self-esteem improvement as a goal for many students in special education programs (Brown & Alexander, 1991). Self-esteem has also been tied to school problems with behavior and academics (Brown & Alexander, 1991). Shavelson, et al. (1976) even called self-concept a "critical variable in education and in educational evaluation and research" (p. 408).

Conversely, the consequences of poor peer relations and, subsequently, poor self-esteem can include depression, loneliness, low academic achievement, behavior problems, anxiety, and problems as an adult (Chubb & Fertman, 1997). Thus, research about the relationship between peer relationships and self-esteem for students in fifth through eighth grades could be useful in helping school personnel identify the extent that poor peer relationships may be impacting an individual's low self-esteem. It could also help school personnel develop plans for helping students with poor self-esteem and for helping them develop healthy peer relations.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between peer relationships and self-esteem among students in grades five through eight. Peer relations was operationally defined as the quality of a person's relationship with peers and was measured by the Index of Peer Relations. In research, the term self-esteem was used interchangeably with the terms self-concept and self-worth

(Crain & Bracken, 1994). Even though the terms were also used interchangeably for this study, self-esteem was measured by the Self-Esteem Index and was operationally defined, according to Brown and Alexander (1991), as "the way that individuals perceive and value themselves; a learned characteristic that is acquired inferentially" (p.3). In addition, the study attempted to examine gender and grade level differences in the relationship between early adolescent peer relations and self-esteem.

It was expected that high self-esteem among early adolescents would inversely correlate with peer relationship problems. It was also expected that self-esteem would decrease for adolescents between sixth and seventh grade and that self-esteem for males would be higher than that for females in the study.

#### Chapter 2

#### Review of the Literature

A review of the literature revealed studies on various aspects of adolescents' friendships, peer relationships, and self-concept, and on how gender and age affect these variables. The literature also discussed the basic need for friendship and positive self-esteem. Building on Maslow's hierarchy of need, Buhrmester (1996) reported three overall groups of personal needs: one was individual needs including achievement, acceptance, identity, and self-esteem; the second was social needs including affection, support, and companionship or friendship; and the third was other survival needs including safety, food, and shelter.

One of these needs is for friendship. Hartup defined friendship as affection toward another and a commitment with another person who is considered an equal (Cole & Cole, 1993). Bukowski, Newcomb, and Hartup (1996) defined friendship as multidimensional with positive and negative interactions, with benefits and liabilities, and with intimacy, more than time spent together.

#### Early Research and Development of Theory

Research about childhood and adolescent friendships is relatively new.

Research on these friendships started about 1900 (Berndt, 1996). Hypotheses about the research on adolescent friendships were not considered or studied, however, until the 1970's (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). Piaget's 1932 work on moral development in social relationships and Sullivan's 1953 work on neo-

Freudian theory of friendship combined to provide the framework for subsequent studies in the 1970's (Berndt, 1996). Much of the research on early adolescent friendship and peer relationships is also based in Erik Erikson's 1968 theory of psychosocial crises, most importantly the identity versus confusion crisis during adolescence (Cole & Cole, 1993). Erikson believed that identity confusion produces personality conflict and social deviance while a positive resolution of the identity crisis produces integrated beliefs, abilities, and desires that are agreeable with adult norms (Cole & Cole, 1993). When the identity is resolved and the person appears to fit in with other people around him or her, Erikson said, that person is at home in his or her body and in the world (Swanson, et al., 1998). He characterized adolescence as a time of identity formation and said that it could only occur in a social context among peers (England & Petro, 1998). Erikson also believed that gender differences significantly affect identity formation even though both sexes try out various roles and ways of life (Cole & Cole, 1993). Importance of Positive Adolescent Peer Relationships

Friendships and peer relationships, which help resolve the psychosocial crisis of identity versus confusion, are essential in the early adolescent years according to Sullivan (Berndt, 1996). He said that children entering the early adolescent years increasingly need to depend on friendships to satisfy their social needs (Buhrmester, 1996). Goodnow and Burns also said that friendship is very important to children in middle childhood and early adolescence (Phillipsen, 1999). Parker and Gottman wrote also that belonging in a friendship and being accepted by peers is essential, that children become increasingly concerned they

will be rejected by their peers as they move from middle childhood to adolescence, from ages six through twelve (Cole & Cole, 1993).

One manner in which friendships are important is in identity formation. Youniss and Smollar (cited in Roberts, Seidman, Pedersen, Chesir-Teran, Allen, Aber, Duran, & Hsueh, 2000) found that experiences with peers help adolescents with identity formulation. O'Brien and Bierman (1988) found, in a study of students in fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades, that adolescent peers provide social interaction and help establish an adolescent's identity. Pugh and Hart (1999) said that adolescent identity is formed within essential, open peer relationships. To further support their research, Pugh and Hart (1999) also quoted Piaget: "In order to discover oneself as a particular individual, what is needed is a continuous comparison, the outcome of opposition, of discussion, and of mutual control" (p. 56).

Friendships are also important because they create the needed intimacy and a necessary sense of belonging to aid identity formation. Adolescents examine and form their identities through intimate, self-disclosing talks with peers (Cole & Cole, 1993). Adolescents also share intimate knowledge of and concern for their peers that is absent in younger children's relationships (Berndt, 1982). Based on empirical research, Berndt (1982) concluded that early adolescent friendships are characterized by increasing intimacy, mutual responsiveness, and sharing. In 1985 Youniss and Smollar found that adolescent friendships are formed and continued based on loyalty, understanding, and intimacy (Cole & Cole, 1993). Berndt, Hawkins, and Jiao (1999) found that

intimacy and length of interactions with friends also increase during adolescence.

Berndt (1982) extended this thinking when he said that friendship intimacy increases dramatically in adolescence, specifically ages twelve through sixteen, and that adolescents' consciousness of themselves and their identity also develops dramatically during this time.

Friendships are, perhaps, most important because of the emotional support they contributes to a person's mental health. According to a study by Van Aken and Asendorpf (cited in Franco & Levitt, 1998), peer support contributes to a child's well-being. Berndt (1982) wrote that friendships may help early adolescents understand and cope with the biological changes that occur during puberty, may help them make the transition from parental support to more of a self-identification, and may help them logically analyze cognitive changes about others and themselves. Douvan and Adelson suggested that adolescents' friends help them deal with changes during puberty by allowing them to exchange feelings and give and receive advice and support (Berndt, 1982). O'Brien and Bierman (1988) wrote that adolescents' peers gave them needed support, friendship, and security in who they were. Berndt, et al. (1999) wrote that the supportive nature of adolescent friendships fulfills the need for companionship and peer respect. Hirsch and DuBois found peer support, especially with samegender friends, was important (Helsen, et al., 2000). Mittman and Packer (cited in Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987) found that successful junior high students attributed their good start to good friends. Hartup (1996) summed up the importance of adolescent friendships by writing, "When children have friends, they use them as

cognitive and social resources on an everyday basis. Normative transitions and the stress carried with them seem to be better negotiated when children have friends than when they do not, especially when children are at risk" (p. 10).

Adolescent friendship also is important for several other factors: academic success, development of social-cognitive skills, and later well-being. Citing several other studies, Hartup (1996) wrote that positive peer support is correlated with school achievement. Hollos concluded in her research that peer interaction promoted social skill and confidence (Cole & Cole, 1993). Douvan and Adelson (Berndt, 1982) said that friendships in early adolescence are more important than in any other period of development, noting that early adolescent friendships promoted healthy personalities, social skill, and positive social behaviors.

Newcomb and Bagwell (1996) wrote that friendships are necessary to the development of good social, cognitive, and emotional skills. Buhrmester purported that close adolescent friendships aid social skills, positive behaviors, independence, sensitivity toward others, and self-esteem (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). Hartup said that early friendships function to model intimate relationships that are important to later life relationships (Cole & Cole, 1993).

# Theories of Adolescent Peer Relationships

Much earlier, Sullivan (1953) theorized that friendships and peer relationships in the years just before and during adolescence are critical to social and personal growth. He developed his idea of developmental periods or epochs which each have a need that is satisfied by developing key relationships and interpersonal competencies. If the need is not satisfied, the person may exhibit

developmental arrest. Sullivan's need for the early adolescent years, nine through twelve years old, is intimacy with same-gender friends. Conversely, loneliness and isolation are the consequences of developmental arrest during early adolescence (Phillipsen, 1999). Consistent with Sullivan's idea that friendships are essential during early adolescence, Furman and Buhrmester (1985) reported that early adolescents rated friendships as more important than any other relationship.

Gottman also developed a theory of peer relations and friendship in connection with human growth and development. His social processes for the years of eight through twelve are support and search for common ground with the social goal of inclusion in a same-gender group. His social processes for thirteen through eighteen years of age are self-disclosure and exploration of similarities and differences with the social goal of self-exploration (Phillipsen, 1999).

# Components of Adolescent Peer Relationships

Considering Sullivan and Gottman's theories of human growth and development, researchers have studied the differences in early adolescent peer relationships. One such difference is between males and females. Cole and Cole (1993) wrote that in middle childhood, children play with other children of their own sex, but increasingly through adolescence, young people gather with members of the opposite sex. Even in early adolescence, however, gender differences such as intimacy and supportiveness are important to note.

The majority of research studies appear to indicate greater intimacy and supportiveness for female relationships. Berndt reported more intimacy among friendships between girls than between boys (Phillipsen, 1999). Douvan and Adelson found that adolescent female friendships are also more intimate than adolescent male friendships (Berndt, 1982). In a study of 208 students in grades three through six, Phillipsen (1999) found that females in grades five and six reported more intimate and supportive friendships than did males in the same grade levels. In a study of 199 fifth and sixth graders, Furman and Buhrmester (1992) found that females reported more intimacy with and enhanced worth from friends than did males. Franco and Levitt (1998) cited two studies that showed more closeness and intimacy in female adolescent friendships than in male friendships.

Other studies report more basic differences in peer support. Helsen, et al. (2000) suggested that the importance of peer relationships is different for boys than for girls because of the differences in friendship supportiveness. Maccoby said that female relationships depend on interpersonal interactions and emotional support while male relationships depend on enhancing their peer status and dismissing expressions of affection (Buhrmester, 1996). Conversely, researchers in other studies (cited in Berndt, 1982) differed in their opinions about gender differences in male and female friendships.

In addition to gender differences, adolescent friendships also differ between grade levels or age levels. Youniss noted that six- and seven-year-old children consider friends the others with whom they share activities, but children as early as nine and ten years old, at the start of the early adolescent period, consider friends the others with whom they have a caring, supportive, and

committed relationship (Cole & Cole, 1993). Newcomb and Bagwell found that early adolescent friendships were more intimate, trusting, and committed than those in childhood, up to age nine (Phillipsen, 1999). Phillipsen (1999) found that early adolescent friendship for students in grades five and six involved more intimacy than did friendships for students in grades three and four. Parker and Gottman said that adolescent disclosures to friends are very different than those by middle childhood friends (Cole & Cole, 1993). In a study of 101 sixth grade students who entered a middle school type of early-adolescent school transition with changing teachers and peers for each period, the quality of student friendships did not change (Berndt, et al., 1999). However, two other studies (cited in Berndt, et al., 1999) found that student friendships were disrupted after the transition to junior high.

### Consequences of Poor Peer Relationships

Poor peer relations is linked to a variety of problems for adolescents during their teenage years. Buhrmester purported that poor adolescent peer friendship leads to depression and aggression (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996).

Parker and Asher (1993) said that children who are not well-accepted by their peers show behavioral and social skills problems. Hartup (1996) noted that adolescents who had few, if any, friends were more likely to be less sociable, uncooperative, not self-confident, and lonely. Also, children who are not accepted by peers are three to five times more likely to drop out of school (Cole & Cole, 1993). In a longitudinal study, Newcomb and Bagwell (1996) concluded that children without friends exhibited fewer social skills and competencies, were

less trusting toward peers, had more immature ideas of peer relations, and interacted in more negative peer play.

Poor peer relations also appear to cause problems for the person as an adult. Parker and Asher said there appears to be a correlation between being rejected by childhood peers and later problems with criminal, psychopathological activity (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). Although peer interactions are not the only contribution to social development during the early adolescent years, Sullivan claimed that failure to form intimate childhood and adolescent attachments can cause a social deficit that is hard to repair later (Cole & Cole, 1993).

Most importantly, poor peer relations and friendships can possibly affect self-esteem and self-worth. Hoza found that unpopular children with no friends had low self-worth and self-competence while Mannarino found that children with friends scored higher on self-concept and on cognitive, social and physical competence (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996).

#### Theories of Self-Esteem

That peer relations could affect an early adolescent's self-esteem is possible considering Buhrmester's (1996) three groups of personal needs, one group including friendship and another group including self-esteem. Several theories of self-esteem have been cited in the literature. James theorized that self-esteem is the relationships between a person's believed success in a situation and his or her belief that the success is important (Chubb & Fertman, 1997). Cooley theorized that a person's self-esteem is dependent on how others view him or her

(Chubb & Fertman, 1997). In 1975 Kaplan said in his self-enhancement theory that people have a need to enhance and protect their self-esteem (Roberts, et al., 2000). In 1979 Rosenberg said in his self-consistency theory that people need to create a conception of themselves that does not change (Roberts, et al., 2000). Even though Shavelson, et al. (1976) said that self-concept is restricted to a person's perception of himself or herself, modern definitions of self-esteem, including the one used in this study, include the ideas in these theories.

#### Components of Self-Esteem

Academic thinking about self-esteem as a multidimensional versus unidimensional construct has evolved through the years. Dusek (2000) said that "research that uses a single, global perspective of self is limited" and that a multidimensional perspective of self "leads to more rich and comprehensive view of how the self is related of other aspects of development and how those other facets of development affect self-views" (p. 233). Bracken and Mills (1994) said that the unidimensional model of self-concept, first developed by James and other writers, is outdated even though some instruments continue to use the unidimensional format. Crain and Bracken (1994) noted that a problem with studying self-esteem is that some researchers still treat self-esteem as unidimensional. They also said that people develop different, domain-specific parts of self-esteem as they get older, with the greatest increase in domainspecific differentiation occurring during adolescence. Shavelson, et al. (1976) concluded that self-concept is a multidimensional construct that includes academics, social acceptance, and physical appearance. Harter agreed, saying that adolescents see themselves according to their scholastic competence, physical appearance, social acceptance, close friendships, romantic appeal, and conduct (Cole & Cole, 1993). Most researchers (cited in Keefe & Berndt, 1996) now agree that self-esteem has different domains such as academics, social, athletic, behavior, and appearance, but that the various domains combine to form a global or general self-esteem.

Many researchers have found gender differences for the various dimensions of self-esteem. Harter in 1982, Marsh in 1987, and Marsh and Jackson in 1986 (all cited in Crain & Bracken, 1994) found that boys reported higher self-concept for physical abilities while girls reported higher self-concept for reading ability. Crain and Bracken also cited several studies that found that boys reported higher self-concept for affect and emotions domain while girls reported higher self-concept for the social domain. In a study of 2,501 students in grades five through twelve, Crain and Bracken (1994) found that boys reported a significantly higher self-concept for physical ability only. In a study of 390 sixth grade Welsh students, Hay, Ashman, & Van Kraayenoord (1998) found similarities between boys and girls' general self-concept but found that boys reported a higher self-concept for physical ability and appearance than girls.

In general, the research appears to indicate that adolescent males have higher self-esteem or that levels of self-esteem were equal between the genders.

Two studies (cited in Cole & Cole, 1993) reported that attractiveness is very important to girls yet they feel unattractive and have lower self-esteem than boys.

Franco and Levitt (1998) reported that females' self-esteem is more dependent on

others' approval than is males' self-esteem. Several studies (cited in Chubb & Fertman, 1997) reported that female adolescents had lower self-esteem scores than did males, especially during middle to late adolescence but not for the ages between eight and eleven. Mboya reported higher self-concept for adolescent boys while Wylie reported few gender differences (Hay, et al., 1998). Hay, et al. (1998) found no gender differences in general self-concept among 390 sixth grade students in Wales. In a study, used as the standardization sample for the Multidimensional Self concept Scale, of 2,501 students in grades five through twelve, Crain and Bracken (1994) found only weak evidence for gender and age differences in domain-specific and general self-esteem.

Another aspect of self-esteem is the debate about its variability over time and between grades. Researchers have found and reported differing results in regard to levels of self-esteem. Shavelson, et al. (1976) wrote that general self-concept is stable and resistant to change even though specific dimensions of self-concept vary by specific situation. Several studies (cited in Chubb & Fertman, 1997) reported no change in self-esteem over time. After evaluating many studies, Wylie concluded there was no difference in levels of self-esteem between the ages of six and fifty (Crain & Bracken, 1994). Crain and Bracken's (1994) research supported Wylie's earlier conclusion that levels of self-esteem do not change according to age.

Other studies, however, report various changes in self-esteem over time.

Several studies (cited in Cole & Cole, 1993) show a decrease in self-esteem in early adolescence followed by increasing self-esteem through the rest of

adolescence. Marsh believed that global self-esteem decreases during preadolescence, returns to the previous level in early or middle adolescence, and increases during late adolescence (Crain & Bracken, 1994). Several other studies (cited in Chubb & Fertman, 1997) reported that self-esteem goes up during adolescence and adulthood.

The most variability in self-esteem appears to occur between the sixth and seventh grades. The transition from elementary school to junior high or middle school appears to exert the most influence over changes in an individual's selfesteem. Simmons & Blyth found that a decrease in early adolescent self-esteem was the result of changes, including higher academic expectations and lower social status, between elementary school to junior high school (Cole & Cole, 1993). Fenzel (2000) cited several research studies that showed more stress, lower self-worth, and poorer school performance for students after the transition to junior high or middle school. A study by Simmons, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg reported that self-esteem went down during early adolescence, especially at age twelve, the time most adolescents make the transition to junior high, before going up gradually thereafter (Chubb & Fertman, 1997). Several studies (cited in Berndt, et al., 1999) found that self-esteem decreases after the transition to junior high. In a study of 101 sixth graders who entered a middle school with changing teachers and peers for each period, students' self-esteem decreased over the transition (Berndt, et al., 1999). However, a 1987 study by Simmons & Blyth found that self-esteem decreased only for girls after the junior high transition (Berndt, et al., 1999). Conversely, in a study of 159 students who made the

transition between elementary school and junior high, Hirsch and Rapkin (1987) found that self-esteem did not change between sixth and seventh grades but that self-esteem rose toward the end of the seventh grade. This is consistent with a 1979 study by Simmons, Blyth, VanCleave, and Bush, a 1985 study by Berndt and Hawkins, and a 1982 study by McCarthy and Hodge (all cited in Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). Other studies (cited in Berndt, et al., 1999) found little change in self-esteem for students after the transition to junior high.

#### Importance of High Self-Esteem

Researchers have studied adolescent self-esteem because they believe high self-esteem is important to positive outcomes for adolescents. As early as 1958, Jahoda said that self-esteem is an important index of mental health (Cole & Cole, 1993). According to Harter in 1983, high self-esteem gives one "the feeling...that one has some ability to control one's own future by controlling both oneself and one's environment" (Cole & Cole, 1993). Chubb and Fertman (1997) found a correlation between high self-esteem and other variables such as academic success, internal locus of control, and positive self-attractiveness.

Shavelson, et al. (1976) wrote that there is some empirical evidence to link good self-concept to higher academic achievement. A study by DuBois and Hirsch concluded that high self-esteem can decrease the incidence of adolescent depression, eating disorders, and antisocial behavior (Franco & Levitt, 1998).

Furthermore, Crandall and Bachman found that high self-esteem is linked to happiness and satisfaction in adulthood (Cole & Cole, 1993). Another possible

outcome of good self-concept could be good peer relations. Berndt (1996) noted that high self-esteem could make it easier for adolescents to form friendships.

Consequences of Low Self-Esteem

On the other hand, low self-esteem has been connected with several consequences for adolescents. Harter said that feelings of low self-esteem can lead to psychological symptoms and academic problems (Fenzel, 2000). Damon found that low self-esteem is linked to depression, anxiety, and problems in school and social situations (Cole & Cole, 1993). Similarly, Rosenberg concluded that low self-esteem is related to lower life satisfaction, loneliness, anxiety, resentment, irritability, and depression (Chubb & Fertman, 1997). Low self-esteem has also been connected with other problems. Citing several studies, Dusek (2000) said that, among other consequences, poor self-esteem is connected to strain in parent and peer relations and to peer rejection.

# Link Between Adolescent Peer Relationships and Self-Esteem

Because positive or negative self-esteem is linked to and can possibly affect peer relations and friendships or vice versa, researchers have studied the connection between friendship and self-esteem. As early as 1953 Sullivan said that friendships can increase an adolescent's self-worth by validating his or her opinions and ideas, by contributing to social development and security, and by decreasing nervousness about adolescent changes (Berndt, 1982). A study of 153 seventh graders by Berndt and Miller showed a significant correlation between student reports of friendship and their self-esteem (Berndt, 1996). In that research students whose friendships had more positive characteristics had higher self-

esteem scores while students whose friendships had more negative characteristics had lower self-esteem scores. Keefe and Berndt (1996) also reported that adolescents whose friendships were more negative reported lower self-esteem and fewer feelings of happiness. Furthermore, Berndt and Savin-Williams in 1993, Hartup in 1993, and Newcomb and Bagwell in 1996 (all cited in Berndt, 1996) found a significant correlation between adolescent friendship quality and self-esteem.

However, whether high self-esteem contributes to better adolescent friendships or whether close friendships contribute to higher self-esteem remains unclear. Larson and Richards noted that the number of friendship interactions increase between middle childhood and adolescence which might allow more opportunities for supportive interactions between friends and possibly raise self-esteem (Keefe & Berndt, 1996). On the other hand, higher self-esteem could affect an adolescent's willingness and success in forming and maintaining friendships (Keefe & Berndt, 1996). High self-esteem could also make it easier for students to make friends instead of the other way around (Berndt, 1996).

What is clearer is the correlation between positive, close, stable, peer relations and high self-esteem. Berndt noted there is "suggestive evidence that close and stable friendships can enhance adolescents' altruism and self-esteem" (1982, p. 1458). In a study of sixth graders, Mannarino found that close, stable adolescent friendships correlated with higher self-esteem (Berndt, 1982). In a 1993 study of 305 predominantly White seventh and eighth graders, Keefe and Berndt (1996) found that the quality and consistency of adolescent friendship

correlated moderately but significantly with adolescent feelings about social acceptance, peer acceptance, and global self-esteem. In a study of 191 fifth graders, Franco and Levitt (1998) also found that friendship quality is associated with self-esteem. Citing several studies, Franco and Levitt (1998) also said that friendship contributes to self-esteem in adolescence, noting that having at least one close friend raises an adolescent's self-esteem and that quality friends contribute to an adolescent's perceived self-worth. In a study of 152 seventh and eighth graders from mostly working class, middle backgrounds, Keefe and Berndt (1996) found that the quality and stability of adolescent friendships moderately relate to the adolescent's self-esteem, including changes in various, specific parts of self-esteem. They also noted that when adolescent friendships have a higher amount and quality of intimacy, trust, loyalty, affection, and emotional support, the adolescent usually has higher self-esteem (Keefe & Berndt, 1996).

Research suggests that more emotional support through adolescent friendship increases positive feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. Franco and Levitt (1998) wrote that children who feel supported and accepted by close peers feel more valued, able, and important, and, thus have higher levels of self-worth. Also, in a longitudinal study of 116 students through the transition from elementary to junior high school, Fenzel (2000) concluded that self-worth improved with social support from and close friendships with peers. Helsen, et al. (2000) found that peer support, along with parental support, contributes to adolescent well-being. Hay, et al. (1998) found that the self-concept of early adolescents was significantly affected by their relationships with peers and

parents. In a study by Roberts, et al. (2000) six hundred thirty-five adolescents ranging in age from ten to fourteen who were in supportive peer relationships with few hassles were found to have higher self-esteem. Furthermore, citing several studies, Roberts, et al. (2000) concluded: "various aspects of relationships with peers, including perceived acceptance, support, and involvement...can provide youths with important information concerning their inherent perceived value to others and therefore influence their self-esteem" (p. 74).

A review of the literature suggested that there is a relationship between early adolescent self-esteem and peer relationships and that the level of self-esteem varies by grade level and gender. Thus, for this study, it was expected that high self-esteem would correlate with positive peer relationships and that low self-esteem would correlate with negative peer relationships. It was also expected that levels of self-esteem would gradually decrease from fifth through seventh grade and then rise in eighth grade. Finally, it was expected that males' self-esteem would be significantly higher than that for females in the study.

#### Chapter 3

#### Method

#### **Participants**

The subjects for this study were drawn from the population of grades 5-6 in one suburban elementary school with 742 students and from the population of grades 7-8 in three suburban junior high schools with 1,738 students. The makeup of students in these schools is predominantly White, middle class.

A stratified sampling was used to select subjects from the pool of volunteer subjects enrolled in grades 5-8 whose parents gave them permission to participate in this study. An attempt was made to obtain at least 30 subjects (15 males and 15 females) at each grade level with a total sample size of at least 120 subjects. Every attempt was made to ensure equal gender representation in the sample of each grade level. The sample for this study was limited because subjects were drawn only from the pool of volunteers who had parental permission to participate.

The overall sample consisted of 134 subjects including 62 males (46.3%) and 72 females (53.7%). Of the those subjects, 36 subjects (26.9%) were in fifth grade, 34 subjects (25.4%) were in sixth grade, 37 subjects (27.6%) were in seventh grade, and 27 subjects (20.1%) were in eighth grade. Table 1 shows the distribution of subjects by gender and grade level.

The overall sample consisted of 129 Caucasian students (96.3%), 3 Hispanic students (2.2%), 1 African American student (0.7%), and 1 Asian student (0.7%). The mean age of the overall sample was 12.29 (SD = 1.14).

Table 1: Frequencies for Participants by Grade Level and Gender

Grade Level	Male		Female	
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
5 <sup>th</sup> grade	18	29.0	18	25.0
6 <sup>th</sup> grade	17	27.4	17	23.6
7 <sup>th</sup> grade	16	25.8	21	29.2
8th grade	11	17.7	16	22.2

#### Instruments

Two instruments were utilized for this study. One instrument, the Self-Esteem Index (Brown and Alexander, 1991), measured adolescent self-esteem among students in grades 5-8. Another instrument, the Index of Peer Relations (Hudson, 1992), measured the degree of positive or negative adolescent peer relationships among the same group of subjects.

The Self-Esteem Index is a multidimensional scale that contains 80 items with a 4-point Likert scale (always true, usually true, usually false, always false). The instrument's 4 subscales (with 20 items each) assess Familial Acceptance, Academic Competence, Peer Popularity, and Personal Security; a global Self-Esteem Quotient is also available. The Familial Acceptance subscale measures self-esteem as it relates to the home. The Academic Competence subscale measures self-esteem related to academic ability. The Peer Popularity subscale measures self-esteem as it relates to social situations other than family. The Personal Security subscale measures self-esteem related to physical and

psychological well-being. The index can be administered to children and adolescents ranging in age from 7-18, and the individual or group administration takes approximately 30 minutes. Low global scores possibly indicate poor self-esteem, immature behavior, negative feelings, or poor adjustment. High global scores would be considered healthier than lower scores. Very high global scores, however, may indicate skewed self-perception, guarded response, or purposefully wanting to present a positive self-esteem (Brooke, 1996).

The index was normed on a national standardization sample of 2,455 subjects consisting of a cross-section of children in 19 states and mirroring the U.S. population in race, gender, domicile, geographic area, ethnicity, principal language, and parents' educational attainment according to the 1985 Statistical Abstract of the U.S. Although the population from which the sample was drawn did not reflect the same demographics as those in this instrument, a nationally standardized sample made this a more desirable instrument to use in this study as compared to other scales with outdated norms or with rural or non-Midwestern norm groups that are more different from the population to be studied.

Bernt found that the Self-Esteem Index can be used by professionals with "a basic understanding of psychometric principles and an understanding of the limits of such tests" (Keyser & Sweetland, 1994, p. 645), even though it should be used by professionals with training in personality assessment. The test is scored by adding items 1, 5, 9, etc. for the first subscale, items 2, 6, 10, etc. for the second subscale, items 3, 7, 11, etc. for the third subscale, and items 4, 8, 12, etc. for the fourth subscale. One-half of the items are reverse scored; the differences

are noted through the use of circles and squares in the student booklet. Tables make converting subscale raw scores to percentile ranks and standard scores simple. The Self-Esteem Quotient, which can be figured by summing the four subscales, has a mean of 100 with a standard deviation of 15.

The Self-Esteem Index's internal consistency for the total scale is .93 while the consistencies for the subscales range from .80 to .90. The test's authors did not include test-retest reliability data and cited Anastasi's 1988 theory that personality changes over a period of time (Keyser & Sweetland, 1994).

Concurrent validity data show a .77 to .83 correlation between the Self-Esteem Index and the other measures of self-esteem such as the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventories-School Form, and the Index of Personality Characteristics, although the studies included fewer than 30 students for each comparison.

According to Bernt, the SEI is "user friendly" and a "satisfactory measure of global self-esteem" (Keyser & Sweetland, 1994, p.649). He also noted that the SEI's "failure to address critical theoretical developments in the field of self-esteem and to assess discriminant validity and test-retest reliability weaken its position alongside more established instruments" (Keyser & Sweetland, 1994, p.649). Mueller and DuPuy called the SEI a "useful addition to the existing array of self-esteem measures" and a "psychometrically sound instrument" (Kramer & Conley, 1992, p.355). Mueller and DuPuy also noted that the SEI's usefulness with special populations has not been established and that more studies are needed to substantiate validity and reliability data for the SEI. Huebner said that the SEI

"shows substantial potential" but that more "work needs to be done before it can be considered reliable, valid, or theoretically sound" (Kramer & Conley, 1992, p.354). Finally, according to Brooke (1996), the "instrument can be used with confidence with younger children; yet it may not be appropriate for adolescents" (p. 238).

The Index of Peer Relations is a 25-item instrument that results in a global measure of a respondent's relationship problems with peers. Students respond to statements using a seven-point Likert scale (none of the time, very rarely, a little of the time, some of the time, a good part of the time, most of the time, or all of the time). Scores below 30 indicate the absence of a clinically significant problem with peers. Scores above 30 indicate the possibility of a clinically significant problem with peers. Scores above 70 indicate probable stress and peer relationship problems with an increased likelihood of violent behavior in dealing with peer relationship problems.

This instrument was normed on 107 clients who were engaged in counseling, about half of which were considered by therapists to have no relationship problems. Although the sample size was small, the instrument was normed on adolescents with the desired result being the measurement of peer relationship quality.

No information was available concerning administrative procedures.

About one-half of the items will be reverse scored (#1, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, and 20).

The IPR has a mean alpha of .94 that would indicate excellent internal consistency, but test-retest information was not available. According to Fischer and Corcoran (1987), the validity of this instrument was measured according to the judgment of therapists who determined whether the norm-group adolescents were having or not having problems with their peers.

As yet, no reviewer information was available for this instrument.

Procedures

A correlation research design was employed for this study which examined the relationship between adolescent peer relationships and self-esteem.

Permission to conduct this study was sought and obtained from principals at the elementary and junior high schools and from the assistant superintendents overseeing those buildings. In March of 2001, the author of this study sent permission letters home to parents of all students in grades five through eight in the four buildings referred to previously. In April after obtaining permission from parents, the author gathered the students who were given parental permission into grade level classrooms to administer the instruments. The author explained to the students that the study was voluntary, that their parents had given permission for them to complete these instruments, and that their answers would be anonymous and confidential. The author gave them directions for each instrument and asked for questions. The author then distributed the consecutively numbered instruments to all students present. The author directed the students to complete the instruments in the classroom, seal them in an envelope, and put them in a provided box.

The Pearson r correlation method and t-tests were used to analyze the data in this study.

## Chapter 4

### Results

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the self-esteem total score, the four self-esteem subscale scores, and the peer relations score for the overall sample and for the sample separated by gender and grade level. SEQ (Self-Esteem Quotient) refers to the global self-esteem score. The four subscales on the Self-Esteem Index include Familial Acceptance (FA), Academic Competence (AC), Peer Popularity (PP), and Personal Security (PS). The Index of Peer Relations score is referred to as IPR.

The study examined changes in self-esteem for males and females in grades six through eight. A trend analysis of data was conducted to look at the variations in self-esteem between grades five and eight. The data in Table 2 suggests that for the overall sample self-esteem does decrease slightly between sixth grade (M=114.42, SD=15.75) and seventh grade (M=112.64, SD=16.72) but that it also decreases sharply in eighth grade (M=105.18, SD=17.96). Self-esteem for males also appears to decrease, although more gradually, from sixth grade (M=110.88, SD=17.33) through seventh grade (M=105.81, SD=17.57) and eighth grade (M=101.63, SD=22.63). Self-esteem for females remains similar between sixth grade (M=117.94, SD=13.58) and seventh grade (M=117.85, SD=14.34) and decreases more dramatically in eighth grade (M=107.62, SD=14.21). This data for the overall sample, as well as the sample separated by gender, suggests that self-esteem generally decreases from sixth grade through eighth grade for the overall sample and for the separate gender groups.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations for Research Data by Grade Level and Gender

		Males			<u>Females</u>			Overall	
5 <sup>th</sup> grade	<u>n</u>	M	SD	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	SD	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	SD
SEQ	18	112.67	16.25	18	115.56	14.99	36	114.11	15.48
FA	18	12.56	2.77	18	12.44	2.95	36	12.50	2.82
AC	18	12.11	3.25	18	13.17	3.95	36	12.63	3.60
PP	18	11.89	3.88	18	13.11	2.11	36	12.50	2.96
PS	18	11.28	3.23	18	11.22	3.29	36	11.25	3.21
IPR	18	19.62	24.95	18	11.59	9.79	36	15.61	19.12
6th grade									
SEQ	17	110.88	17.33	17	117.94	13.58	34	114.42	15.75
FA	17	11.35	2.93	17	12.35	2.78	34	11.85	2.86
AC	17	12.11	3.90	17	15.76	2.86	34	13.94	3.84
PP	17	12.35	3.29	17	11.94	2.53	34	12.14	2.90
PS	17	10.82	2.81	17	12.00	3.14	34	11.42	2.99
IPR	17	22.31	15.90	17	17.56	15.53	34	19.94	15.66

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations for Research Data by Grade Level and Gender (continued)

		Males			<u>Females</u>			Overall	
7 <sup>th</sup> grade	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	SD	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	SD	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	SD
SEQ	16	105.81	17.57	21	117.85	14.34	37	112.64	16.72
FA	16	10.94	2.99	21	13.09	2.77	37	12.16	3.03
AC	16	11.75	3.78	21	12.85	2.98	37	12.37	3.35
PP	16	10.62	3.48	21	12.95	3.08	37	11.94	3.42
PS	16	9.81	2.71	21	11.95	2.65	37	11.02	2.85
IPR	16	27.75	22.13	21	14.57	8.44	37	20.27	16.94
8th grade									
SEQ	11	101.63	22.63	16	107.62	14.21	27	105.18	17.96
FA	11	9.72	3.74	16	10.43	2.63	27	10.14	3.08
AC	11	12.00	4.24	16	11.56	3.89	27	11.74	3.96
PP	11	12.18	2.56	16	12.68	2.91	27	12.48	2.73
PS	11	10.36	2.87	16	10.06	2.74	27	10.18	2.74
IPR	11	17.21	16.20	16	24.12	17.01	27	21.30	16.73

A comparison of the means for IPR scores in the overall sample in Table 2 suggests that peer relations problems increase from fifth grade (M=15.61, SD=19.12) through sixth grade (M=19.94, SD=15.66) and then remain approximately the same through seventh grade (M=20.27, SD=16.94), and eighth grade (M=21.30, SD=16.73). A comparison of the means for IPR scores for males suggest that peer relations problems increase from the fifth grade (M=19.62, SD=24.95) through sixth grade (M=22.31, SD=15.90) and seventh grade (M=27.75, SD=22.13), and then sharply decrease in eighth grade (M=17.21, SD=16.20). A comparison of the means for IPR scores for females suggests that peer relations problems increase between fifth grade (M=11.59, SD=9.79) and sixth grade (M=17.56, SD=15.53), decrease in seventh grade (M=14.57, SD=8.44), and dramatically increase in eighth grade (M=24.12, SD=17.01).

The means in Table 2 for SEQ and IPR suggest, in general, that through the four grade levels, self-esteem decreases with each grade level while peer relations problems increase. Thus, it appears that there is often a negative or inverse relationship between self-esteem and peer relation problems.

An examination of the subscales of the Self-Esteem Index was also conducted. The data in Table 2 also indicates that for the overall sample, the subject's perception of his or her Peer Popularity (PP) remains somewhat the same throughout the grade levels. The data also indicates that males' perception of Peer Popularity remains somewhat the same through the grade levels though it is slightly lower in the seventh grade (M=10.62, SD=3.48). On the other hand,

females' perception of Peer Popularity remains the same through the grade levels but is slightly lower in the sixth grade (M=11.94, SD=2.53).

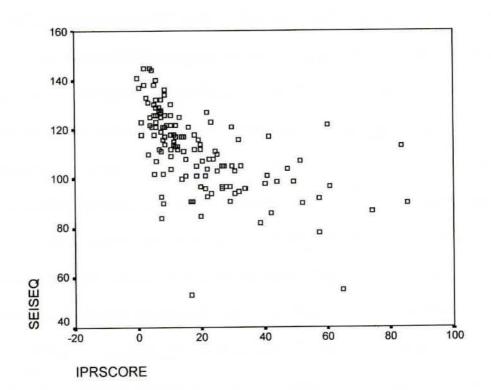
The data in Table 2 indicates that for the overall sample, the subjects' perception of their Personal Security (PS) remains somewhat the same through the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades and is slightly lower in the eighth grade. However, males' perception of their Personal Security decreases gradually from fifth grade (M=11.28, SD=3.23) through sixth grade (M=10.82, SD=2.81) and seventh grade (M=9.81, SD=2.71) and then increases slightly in eighth grade (M=10.36, SD=2.87). Females' perception of their Personal Security remains somewhat the same through the fifth grade, sixth grade, and seventh grade, but is slightly lower in the eighth grade (M=10.06, SD=2.74).

The data in Table 2 also indicates that for the overall sample, the subjects' perception of their Familial Acceptance (FA) remains somewhat similar between fifth grade, sixth grade, and seventh grade but slightly decreases in eighth grade (M=10.14, SD=3.08). Males' perception of their Familial Acceptance steadily decreases from fifth grade (M=12.56, SD=2.77) through sixth grade (M=11.35, SD=2.93), seventh grade (M=10.94, SD=2.99), and eighth grade (M=9.72, SD=3.74). Females' perception of their Familial Acceptance remains somewhat similar between fifth grade, sixth grade, and seventh grade and then is slightly lower in eighth grade (M=10.43, SD=2.63).

Concerning the fourth SEI subscale, the data in Table 2 indicates that for the overall sample, the subjects' perception of their Academic Competence (AC) remained somewhat similar in grades five through eight. While males' perception of their AC remained fairly similar in grades five through eight, females' perception of their AC rose slightly from grade five (M=13.17, SD=3.95) to six (M=15.76, SD=2.86) then decreased in grade seven (M=12.85, SD=2.98) and eight (M=11.56, SD=3.89).

The study examined the relationship between self-esteem and peer relationship problems. Pearson correlations were conducted to look at the relationship between SEQ and IPR. Table 3 shows the distribution of correlation points for self-esteem and peer relationship problems for the overall sample in this study. The scatterplot suggests that the relationship between self-esteem and peer relation problems is negatively associated, linear, and strong.

Table 3: Scatterplot of Correlation Between Self-Esteem and Peer Relations
Problems



In addition, separate correlational analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between self-esteem and poor peer relationships for each gender and grade level. Those results are seen in Table 4. An examination of the data in Table 4 suggests a significant negative correlation between SEQ and IPR for the overall sample (r=-0.578, p<0.01). The correlation between SEO and IPR also appears significant for subjects in fifth grade (r=-0.635, p<0.01), sixth grade (r=-0.587, p<0.01), seventh grade (r=-0.626, p<0.01), and eighth grade (r=-0.460, p<0.05). The SEQ-IPR correlation also appears significant for males (r=-0.566, p<0.01) and females (r=-0.571, p<0.01). However, the significant correlation between SEO and IPR for males and females varies between grade levels. The correlation appears significant for fifth grade males (r=-0.680, p<0.01) and for fifth grade females (r=-0.674, p<0.01). The correlation appears significant for sixth grade males (r=-0.748, p<0.01) but not for sixth grade females (r=-0.353, p>0.05). The correlations appear significant for seventh grade males (r=-0.547, p<0.05) and for seventh grade females (r=-0.725, p<0.01). The correlation is not significant for eighth grade males (r=-0.433, p>0.05) but appears significant for eighth grade females (r=-0.628, p<0.01). However, it should be noted that the correlation for eighth grade males is based on a sample size of eleven subjects.

Also, an examination of the data in Table 4 for the overall sample suggests significant correlations between IPR and the four Self-Esteem subscales: FA and IPR (r=-0.363, p<0.01), AC and IPR (r=-0.343, p<0.01), PP and IPR (r=-0.596, p<0.01) and PS and IPR (r=-0.634, p<0.01). The strongest correlations are between Peer Popularity and Index of Peer Relations and between Personal

Table 4: Pearson Correlations of SEQ and SEI subscales with IPR by Grade Level and Gender

	Males			<u>Females</u>	Females			
All grades	<u>n</u>	<u>r</u>	<u>n</u>	r	<u>n</u>	ŗ		
SEQ	62	-0.566 **	72	-0.571 **	134	-0.578 **		
FA	62	-0.300 *	72	-0.430 **	134	-0.363 **		
AC	62	-0.317 *	72	-0.352 **	134	-0.343 **		
PP	62	-0.697 **	72	-0.414 **	134	-0.596 **		
PS	62	-0.685 **	72	-0.590 **	134	-0.634 **		
5 <sup>th</sup> grade								
SEQ	18	-0.680 **	18	-0.674 **	36	-0.635 **		
FA	18	-0.261	18	-0.450	36	-0.275		
AC	18	-0.318	18	-0.450	36	-0.336 *		
PP	18	-0.705 **	18	-0.366	36	-0.650 **		
PS	18	-0.679 **	18	-0.745 **	36	-0.620 **		
6 <sup>th</sup> grade								
SEQ	17	-0.748 **	17	-0.353	34	-0.587 **		
FA	17	-0.569 *	17	-0.400	34	-0.502 **		
AC	17	-0.658 **	17	-0.054	34	-0.422 *		
PP	17	-0.664 **	17	-0.358	34	-0.511 **		
PS	17	-0.682 **	17	-0.353	34	-0.524 **		

Table 4: Pearson Correlations of SEQ and SEI subscales with IPR by Grade Level and Gender (continued)

		Males		Females	Overall	
7 <sup>th</sup> grade						
SEQ	16	-0.547 *	21	-0.725 **	37	-0.626 **
FA	16	-0.203	21	-0.579 **	37	-0.395 *
AC	16	-0.079	21	-0.377	37	-0.207
PP	16	-0.788 **	21	-0.682 **	37	-0.739 **
PS	16	-0.690 **	21	-0.746 **	37	-0.697 **
8 <sup>th</sup> grade						
SEQ	11	-0.433	16	-0.628 **	27	-0.460 *
FA	11	-0.390	16	-0.219	27	-0.262
AC	11	-0.332	16	-0.568 *	27	-0.471 *
PP	11	-0.505	16	-0.382	27	-0.396 *
PS	11	-0.768 **	16	-0.717 **	27	-0.731 **

<sup>\*\*</sup> Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Security and Index of Peer Relations. The data in Table 4 suggests further significant correlations between IPR and the four subscales for the sample separated by gender. The correlations are significant for male FA and IPR (r=-

<sup>\*</sup> Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

0.300, p<0.05), AC and IPR (r=-0.317, p<0.05), PP and IPR (r=-0.697, p<0.01), and PS and IPR (r=-0.685, p<0.01). The strongest of these correlations are between PP and IPR and between PS and IPR. The correlations were also significant for female FA and IPR (r=-0.430, p<0.01), AC and IPR (r=-0.352, p<0.01), PP and IPR (r=-0.414, p<0.01) and PS and IPR (r=-0.590, p<0.01). The strongest of these correlations is between PS and IPR.

However, when separated by grade level, not all correlations were significant. The correlation between FA and IPR was significant only for sixth grade males (r=-0.569, p<0.05) and seventh grade females (r=-0.579, p<0.01). The correlation between AC and IPR was significant only for sixth grade males (r=-0.658, p<0.01) and eighth grade females (r=-0.568, p<0.05). The correlation between PP and IPR was significant for males in all grade levels except the seventh grade. The PP and IPR correlation was significant for females only in the seventh grade sample. The correlation between PS and IPR was significant for all samples separated by grade level and gender except sixth grade females (r=-0.353, p>0.05).

The study also examined the difference between early adolescent male and female self-esteem. An independent sample t-test was conducted to examine the differences in means for male and female self-esteem. The data for the overall sample suggests that male SEQ (M=108.45, SD=18.15) is lower than female SEQ (M=115.03, SD=14.59). That difference appears significant with female self-esteem appearing significantly higher than male self-esteem (t=-2.324, df=132, p<0.05). The data, separated by grade level, suggests that SEQ for males is lower

than for females at all grade levels studied. SEQ for fifth grade males (M=112.67, SD=16.25) was lower than the SEQ for females (M=115.56, SD=14.99) in the same grade level. SEQ for sixth grade males (M=110.88, SD=17.33) was lower than for females (M=117.94, SD=13.58). SEQ for seventh grade males (M=105.81, SD=17.57) was lower than for females (M=117.86, SD=14.34), and SEQ for eighth grade males (M=101.63, SD=22.63) was lower than for females (M=107.62, SD=14.21). However, of the grade levels studied, only the difference in self-esteem for seventh grade males and females was statistically significant (t=-2.296, df=35, p<0.05).

## Chapter 5

#### Discussion

The first hypothesis stated that high self-esteem correlates with a low incidence of peer relationship problems. An examination of the data reveals sufficient support for the first hypothesis. There was a significant, negative correlation between global self-esteem (SEQ) and peer relationship problems (IPR) for the overall sample (r=-0.578) at the 0.01 level. The correlations between SEQ and IPR separated by grade level and gender were also significant to at least the 0.05 level and ranged from -0.460 to -0.635.

Support for this hypothesis between SEQ and IPR was found in Erikson, Sullivan, and Piaget's early work. More specifically, Piaget's 1932 work on moral development, Sullivan's 1953 work on neo-Freudian theory of friendship (Berndt, 1996), and Erikson's 1968 theory of psychosocial crises (Cole & Cole, 1993) created the framework for later research linking adolescent self-esteem and peer friendships. Studies of adolescents were more recently conducted by Berndt and Miller, Berndt and Savin-Williams, Hartup, Newcomb and Bagwell (all cited in Berndt, 1996), Mannarino (Berndt, 1982), Franco and Levitt (1998), Keefe and Berndt (1996), Fenzel (2000), Helsen, et al. (2000), Hay, et al. (1998), and Roberts, et al. (2000). These studies found that self-esteem or self-concept correlates with close friendships, positive peer relationships, peer acceptance, and friendship quality, stability, and support. Thus, a preponderance of research would indicate a strong, significant association between higher levels of self-

esteem among early adolescents and fewer reported problems with peer relationships.

There were also significant, negative correlations between IPR and two of the SEI subscales. IPR and PS had the strongest correlation in the overall sample (r=-0.634, p<0.01). IPR and PS were also strongly correlated across all grade levels and for gender except sixth grade females. Personal Security means feeling comfortable with oneself, how one looks and how one thinks. It would be difficult for a person to approach new people and feel comfortable making friends if he or she is not comfortable with himself or herself. Thus, the strength of the IPR and PS correlation seems reasonable.

Similarly, IPR and PP were also strongly correlated in the overall sample (r=-0.596, p<0.01). Peer Popularity means feeling comfortable in social situations and with other peers. It would also be difficult for a person to feel comfortable meeting new people and making friends if he or she is not comfortable in social situations. Thus, this strong correlation also seems reasonable. However, PP was strongly correlated with IPR for males across all grade levels but was only strongly correlated with IPR for females in the seventh grade. This warrants further study.

IPR did not strongly correlate with FA (r=-0.363, p<0.01) or with AC (r=-0.343, p<0.01) even though both correlations were significant for the overall sample. In this study, Familial Acceptance and Academic Competence do not appear to have a strong impact on a person's ability to make or keep friends or on friendship in general.

The second hypothesis stated that self-esteem changes between grades six, seven, and eight. An examination of the data reveals that the second hypothesis was partially supported. Although early adolescent self-esteem did decrease slightly between grades six (M=114.42, SD=15.75) and seven (M=112.64, SD=16.72), it also sharply decreased for students in grade eight (M=105.18, SD=17.96). A similar pattern of a dip in self-esteem in the eighth grade was observed for both gender groups.

Support for this hypothesis came from research on self-esteem using adolescent subjects. Simmons and Blyth (Cole & Cole, 1993), Fenzel (2000), Berndt, et al. (1999), and Simmons, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg (Chubb & Fertman, 1997) all found that self-esteem decreased after the transition from elementary school to junior high or middle school. Furthermore, studies by Simmons, Blyth, VanCleave, and Bush, by Berndt and Hawkins, by McCarthy and Hodge (all cited in Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987), by Hirsch and Rapkin (1987), and by Simmons, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg (Chubb & Fertman, 1997), found that self-esteem gradually rose in junior high after the school transition adjustment. One explanation for the difference between the literature and this study is that these eighth grade students may already have had generally lower self-esteem. Also, the eighth grade sample of only 27 subjects may have been too small. This also warrants further and more extensive study.

The third hypothesis stated that self-esteem is higher for early adolescent males than for early adolescent females in grades five through eight. An examination of the data reveals that the third hypothesis was rejected. In fact,

fifth through eighth grade females in the study were found to have significantly higher self-esteem than the fifth through eighth grade males (t=-2.324, df=132, p<0.05). In addition, when separated by grade level, mean female self-esteem scores were higher than those for males at each grade level.

Previous theoretical literature suggested that adolescent males had levels of self-esteem higher than or equal to that of females. One study by Mboya (Hay, et al., 1998), two studies cited in Cole & Cole (1993) and several studies cited in Chubb & Fertman (1997) found that female self-esteem was consistently lower than that of males, especially between ages eight and eleven. However, in separate studies, Wylie (in Hay, et al., 1998) and Hay, et al. (1998) found few to no gender differences in self-esteem. Furthermore, Crain and Bracken (1994) found only weak evidence for gender differences. No available research indicated higher levels of self-esteem for female adolescents than for males.

One possible explanation for this difference might include the limitations of the study itself. Subjects were limited to one suburban, White, middle class school district in the Midwest. It is possible that female subjects in the sample may already have had generally higher self-esteem than males in the study or than the general population. Also, subjects were drawn only from the pool of volunteers whose parents had given them permission. It is possible that female subjects were already in generally more supportive relationships than the male subjects, than subjects in previous studies, and than the general population.

The results of this study suggest several implications for counseling in the school setting. First, since PS was most important for IPR, as evidenced by the strong correlation, school counselors might work to help adolescent students on feeling good about themselves as well as on social skills. Second, since male subjects in the study had lower self-esteem than females, school counselors might concentrate on male adolescents in self-esteem building activities. Also, school administrators might consider hiring more male staff members with whom the male adolescents could interact and have a positive role model. Finally, since global self-esteem unexpectedly continued to decrease in the eighth grade, junior high and middle school counselors might, as a result, spend more time working on self-esteem building activities.

The current study had several limitations. One limitation was that the sample population was restricted to students in one Midwestern, suburban, predominantly White school district. Thus, the study has limited generalizability. Another limitation was the sample size of 134 subjects. The same study could be conducted with a larger population. The third limitation was that the study was cross-sectional instead of longitudinal. A study with more subjects over a longer period of time would possibly yield more generalizable and useful results.

A review of the resulting data suggests further research with early adolescents in grades five through eight. First, a larger, more diverse sample for the same instruments might yield different or more convincing results. Second, a study of self-esteem for students in school districts that transition between fifth and sixth grade or for students in school districts that do not transition until grade eight might also yield different results. Third, a study of self-esteem among students with diverse family makeup might also yield interesting results. Fourth,

a study of students in several junior high or middle school settings with differing social programs or self-esteem curricula might further the research on the results of this author's study.

## Appendix A

#### Letter to Parents

March 9, 2001

### Dear Parent/Guardian:

Mrs. Nancy Woods, a counselor at Rockport Heights Elementary, is asking that fifth and sixth grade students at Rockport Heights and seventh and eighth grade students at Fox Junior High School be allowed to participate in a research study. The results of this study will provide valuable information about early adolescents at these grade levels that can aid counselors in helping early adolescent students in general.

The study will take place during the last two weeks of March 2001. She will conduct the study as part of her directed thesis project, which fulfills her masters degree program in school counseling at Lindenwood University.

Please review the information on the following page in order to make a decision concerning parental consent for your child to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Mr. Joe Werner Principal Rockport Heights Elementary

## Appendix B

#### Parent Consent Form

The information on this form and the accompanying cover letter is presented to you in order to inform you of the study to be conducted by a graduate student who is pursuing a master degree in school counseling through Lindenwood University.

The professor directing this thesis project (Dr. Anita Sankar, Lindenwood University) has given approval for this study, "The Relationship Between Early Adolescent Self-Esteem and Peer Relations." The purpose of this study is to determine the extent of the relationship between self-esteem and peer friendships among early adolescent students in grades five through eight. If you have any questions, you may contact Dr. Sankar at 636-916-8254.

Your child will be involved in this study by way of the following:

- Completion of the Self-Esteem Index which measures how individuals perceive and value themselves.
- Completion of the Index of Peer Relations which measures the degree of positive or negative relationships with peers.

Both of these indices should not take more than 50 minutes per student. There are no foreseeable risks to the students involved. Participation is strictly voluntary. Specific information about individual students will be <u>anonymous and strictly confidential</u>. The results will not refer to any individual students since the study will only present group data.

The purpose of this form is to allow your child to participate in the study. The parent signature below also assumes that the child understands and agrees to participate cooperatively.

If you have any questions regarding the study, please call the principal, Mr. Joe Werner (636-464-2010), the superintendent, Mr. Jim Chellew (636-296-8000), or the researcher, Mrs. Nancy Woods (school counselor at Rockport Heights Elementary, 636-464-2010).

Student's Name	Grade in scho			
Signature of Parent/Guardian	Date			

# Appendix C

Identificatio	number	•	

# **DEMOGRAPHIC DATA SHEET**

Please put an "X" next to the word that best describes you in each category.

Gender:							
Male	Female	<u>-</u>					
Grade Level:							
Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7		_ Grade 8			
Age in Years:							
Age 10	Age 11		Age 12 _				
Age 13 _	Ag	e 14	_ A	ge 15			
Race/Ethnic (	Origin:						
Hispanic	_		Black 1	Non-Hispan	ic		
American Indian/Alaskan Native			Asian/Pacific Islander				
White Non-Hispa	anic (Caucasian)		Non-re	sident alien			

## Appendix D

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number	dentification
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This questionnaire is designed to measure the way you feel about the people you work, play, or associate with most of the time—your peer group. It is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer each item as carefully and as accurately as you can by circling the number of the best answer for each statement.

1=	None of the time 2=Very rarely 3=A	little of the t	ime		4=S	ome	of th	ne time
	5=A good part of the time 6=Most	of the time	7=	All (	of the	e tim	ie	
1.	I get along very well with my peers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2.	My peers act like they don't care about me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3.	My peers treat me badly.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4.	My peers really seem to respect me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5.	I don't feel like I am "part of the group."	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.	My peers are a bunch of snobs.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7.	My peers understand me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8.	My peers seem to like me very much.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9.	I really feel "left out" of my peer group.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10	. I hate my present peer group.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11	. My peers seem to like having me around.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1=None of the time 2=Very rarely 3=A little of	of the	time		4=S	ome	of t	he time
5=A good part of the time 6=Most of the t	ime	7=	-All	of th	e tin	1e	
12. I really like my present peer group.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. I really feel like I am disliked by my peers.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. I wish I had a different peer group.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. My peers are very nice to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. My peers seem to look up to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. My peers think I am important to them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. My peers are a real source of pleasure to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. My peers don't seem to even notice me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. I wish I were not part of this peer group.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<ol><li>My peers regard my ideas and opinions very highly.</li></ol>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22. I feel like I am an important member of my peer group.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23. 1 can't stand to be around my peer group.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24. My peers seem to look down on me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25. My peers really do not interest me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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