



# Perceived social support in adolescents with and without visual impairment



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## ABSTRACT

The study assessed perceived availability of support from parents, peers, and teachers in adolescents with and without visual impairment. Adolescents with visual impairment perceived lower levels of parental support but higher levels of support from teachers than sighted adolescents, and these differences remained stable across a 2-year interval. There was considerable heterogeneity within the groups as adolescents with visual impairment were most often found in clusters with high levels as well as low levels of all assessed sources of support. High perceived support from all sources showed positive associations with life-satisfaction of adolescents with and without visual impairment. As lower levels of perceived parental support of students with visual impairment were based on students from residential schools, we conclude that measures would be welcomed for improvement of parent–child contacts during the school days.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Perceived social support in adolescents with and without visual impairment

Many studies have shown that social support is positively related to psychological health in general (e.g., Thoits, 2011) and to adaptation to disabilities in particular (e.g., Reinhardt, 2001; Schulz & Schwarzer, 2003). Different aspects of social support can be assessed. First, perceived available social support and actual received support can be distinguished (Hobfoll, 2009; Thoits, 2011). Second, different forms of support have been distinguished, such as emotional support (provision of trust, sympathy, and encouragement), instrumental support (practical assistance), and informational support (provision of advice; House, 1981), although perceptions of the availability of different forms of support are often strongly positively related (Schulz & Schwarzer, 2003). Third, different sources of support can be distinguished. For example, adolescents may receive support from parents, other family members, peers/friends, teachers, and other professionals (Kef & Deković, 2004; Kef, Hox, & Habekoth, 2000).

The present study assesses perceptions of available social support in German adolescents with visual impairment and their sighted peers. We focus on available rather than received support because of the stronger associations with psychological well-being (Thoits, 2011). As available studies on adolescents with visual impairment have only assessed one or two sources of social support, we extend our focus to the interplay of three sources, namely support from parents, peers/friends, and teachers. Because available support may change over time, we will also present longitudinal data on stability and change of social support.

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## 1.2. Visual impairment and social support

It could be assumed that supportive relations with peers, family members, and other confidants are more important for the social and emotional development of youths with impairments and disabilities than for their nondisabled peers because disabilities are associated with higher support needs (Kef & Deković, 2004). However, results are inconsistent whether the availability of support differs between young people with and without visual impairment. More concretely, Dutch 14- to 24-year-olds reported *lower* levels of received parental support than their sighted peers (Kef et al., 2000). Another study with 14- to 18-year-olds found such a difference only for social companionship but not for perceived emotional and instrumental support (Kef & Deković, 2004). However, a Finnish study found no between-group differences in levels of perceived parental support (Huurte, Komulainen, & Aro, 1999).

Adolescents with visual impairment are at increased risk of being socially isolated from their peers because visual impairment creates unique challenges with social interactions, such as reduced opportunities for developing social skills (Huurte, 2000). Huurte (2000, study 1), Huurte et al. (1999, female adolescents), as well as Kef and Deković (2004) found lower levels of perceived support from peers and/or friends in adolescents with visual impairment than in their sighted age-mates while Huurte et al. (1999, male adolescents) and Kef et al. (2000) did not find significant between-group differences in perceived/received support. These studies did not assess support from teachers.

The heterogeneity of the results of these studies may be based on the measures used, participant age, gender, amount of visual impairment, ecological factors (e.g., integrated school vs. special school for individuals with visual impairment), and other variables. For example, comparisons of the results by Kef and coworkers (Kef & Deković, 2004; Kef et al., 2000) indicate that between-group differences in parental support might be observed in late adolescence and young adulthood when children left home and their restricted mobility or other factors limit the availability of parental support. In fact, Kef (1997) showed that the oldest participants with visual impairment reported the lowest levels of practical support from parents and friends, although the levels of emotional support from parents and friends did not vary by age. Huurte et al. (1999) found lowest levels of peer support in female adolescents with visual impairment. This result may indicate that female adolescents with visual impairment have more problems with building positive and supportive peer-relations than male adolescents, for example, because of difficulties with meeting the societal standards of attractiveness and social acceptance (Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2012). With regard to the amount of visual impairment, Kef (1997) found that blind adolescents had somewhat lower scores on perceived emotional support from parents and friends than adolescents with low vision, but these differences did not reach statistical significance. Gold, Shaw, and Wolffe (2010) also found no significant differences between individuals who are blind and those who have low vision while Frame (2004) reported that individuals with more severe visual impairment were less satisfied with the emotional and instrumental support they receive. Finally, while participants of the study by Kef et al. came from special schools and rehabilitation centres (Kef & Deković, 2004; Kef et al., 2000; Kef, 1997), Huurte (2000) and Huurte et al. (1999) recruited students from mainstream schools. Reduced levels of parental support are more likely to be found when students with visual impairment attend special schools because these schools are probably a greater distance from home. Additionally, a part of these students have to live in dormitories or other alternative forms of accommodation during the school days.

When analyzing social support, it is also relevant whether some (groups of) persons provide more support than others. Kef and Deković (2004) reported that parents of adolescents with and without visual impairment were perceived as more supportive than peers. In an older combined sample of adolescents and young adults, Kef et al. (2000) observed similar levels of parental and peer support. A qualitative study by Jackson (2002) indicates that adolescents with visual impairment infrequently nominate teachers as preferred sources of support.

When analyzing different sources of social support, it is relevant whether individuals with low level of support from one source would also perceive lower support from other sources or whether low levels of one source may be accompanied by high levels of another (that might compensate for the lack of the other source). Kef and Deković (2004) found a positive correlation between perceived parental and peer help with regard to emotional and instrumental support, but the interplay of these sources with teacher support has not yet been analyzed in adolescents with visual impairment.

Social support is associated with psychological well-being, for example because supportive relations are a source of positive feelings (such as being important to others) and promote coping with stressors (Thoits, 2011). Kef reported that perceived support from peers showed stronger associations with psychological well-being of adolescents with visual impairment than in the sighted group while the reverse was true with regard to perceived parental support (Kef, 1999; Kef & Deković, 2004). The higher importance of peer support for adolescents with visual impairment was explained by the high need for independence from their parents, and their desire to be as normal as possible and to want to fit in the peer group. Huurte et al. (1999) found weak associations of perceived social support from peers and parents with self-esteem but did not test whether the size of these correlations differed between adolescents with and without visual impairment.

## 2. Research questions

The first research question addressed whether levels of perceived support from parents, peers, and teachers differ between adolescents with and without visual impairment. All participants with visual impairment came from special schools. Because few special schools exist in Germany, most students did not live at home on school nights due to large distance. Thus, we expected that – in line with the work by Kef (Kef et al., 2000; Kef & Deković, 2004) – adolescents with

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