



# Assessing positive emotional memories with peers: The Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness with Peers Scale for adolescents



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## ABSTRACT

Research on the association between early positive relational experiences and later psychosocial adjustment is growing. The quality of peer relationships may have a particularly important effect on adolescents' wellbeing and mental health. The current study aimed at examining a measure of personal emotional memories of peer relationships characterized by warmth, safeness and affection, which occurred in childhood and adolescence (EMWSS<sub>Peers-A</sub>).

Distinct samples ( $N = 584$ ) of adolescents aged between 12 and 18 were used to assess the EMWSS<sub>Peers-A</sub>' factorial structure through a Principal Component Analysis and a Confirmatory Factor Analysis, and to analyse the scale's psychometric properties.

Results indicated a one-dimensional structure with 12 items with very good internal consistency, and construct, convergent, divergent and incremental validities.

By allowing the examination of the role played by memories of positive peer relationships on adolescents' psychological adjustment, the EMWSS<sub>Peers-A</sub> may be potentially useful for future model testing and for the assessment of interventions.

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## 1. Introduction

The quality of early childhood experiences has been shown to have a significant impact on later physiological, psychological and social development and functioning (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Buss, 2003; Gerhardt, 2004; Panksepp, 2010; Schore, 1994). In particular, early adverse experiences, i.e., of neglect, abuse or rejection, have been associated with a series of indicators of psychosocial maladjustment (Bifulco & Moran, 1998; Irons, Gilbert, Baldwin, Baccus, & Palmer, 2006; Gilbert and Perris, 2000; Rohner, 2004). On the contrary, early relationships and social experiences related to feelings of safeness, warmth and nurturance are associated with increased self-esteem, happiness, quality of life, and with decreased vulnerability to psychopathology (Berscheid, 1985; Bifulco & Moran, 1998; Cacioppo et al., 2000; Gilbert & Irons,

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2008; Parker, 1983; Rohner, 2004). Extant knowledge on the effect of early experiences, which mostly relies on data from research on early rearing experiences with parents or other family members, consistently demonstrates that parental behaviour (e.g., interactions characterized by low affection, neglect, emotional or physical abuse; Parker, 1983; Perris, 1994; Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006), and also emotional memories of such child–parent interactions (e.g., personal recollections of a sense of threat, subordination or feeling undervalued as a child; Gilbert, Cheung, Grandfield, Campey, & Irons, 2003), are linked with higher vulnerability to psychopathology later in life (Xavier, Cunha, & Pinto-Gouveia, 2015). In contrast, emotional memories of feeling safe and cared for (Richter, Gilbert, & McEwan, 2009) have been associated with positive emotional regulation (Baldwin & Dandeneau, 2005; Cunha, Martinho, Xavier, & Espirito-Santo, 2013), resilience towards adverse life events (Cacioppo, Berntson, Sheridan, & McClintock, 2000; Gilbert et al., 2009; Masten, 2010; Matos, Pinto-Gouveia, & Duarte, 2015; Richter et al., 2009), and well-being (Martin, 2006; Richter et al., 2009).

There is increasing evidence on the relevance of other social agents (i.e., beyond family members) on a series of indicators of psychological adjustment (Ferreira, Matos, Duarte, & Pinto-Gouveia, 2014; Matos, Pinto-Gouveia, & Costa, 2013). In particular, peer relationships have been identified as particularly important for one's sense of well-being and social belonging (Allen & Land, 1999; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Thomson, 2010). Adolescence is a decisive life period when peers become a particularly relevant source of social support, reassurance, and approval (Allen & Land, 1999; Buhrmester, 1996; Freeman and Brown, 2001; Gilbert & Irons, 2009; Wolfe & Mash, 2006; Wolfe, Lennox, & Cutler, 1986). During this developmental stage, adolescents become more aware of how they are evaluated by peers, and particularly sensitive to the images and emotions created by them in their peers' minds (Gilbert & Irons, 2009; Wolfe & Mash, 2006; Wolfe et al., 1986). In this context, experiences of being rejected, excluded, and physically or verbally victimized by peers, have been consistently associated with indicators of poorer mental health and social functioning in adolescence (Gazelle & Ladd, 2003; Goodman, Stormshak, & Dishion, 2001; Hawker & Boulton, 2000), with enduring effects throughout adulthood (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hock & Lutz, 2001; Parker, 1983). On the contrary, the role of early positive interactions with peers remains less investigated (Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004).

Recently, Ferreira et al. (2016) developed a new self-report measure to specifically evaluate emotional memories of feeling content, cared for, and safe within peer relationships, i.e., with friends and colleagues (EMWSS<sub>Peers</sub>). This scale was based on the Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale (EMWSS; Richter et al., 2009), which was originally designed to assess personal emotional memories of feeling safe, cared for, and valued with family and close figures. Its development was based on the growing recognition of the key role that early interactions play on the physiological, psychological and social maturation and functioning of individuals. The EMWSS, in contrast to existing measures focused on parental behaviour, aimed at assessing the recall of positive emotional memories with parents or other close figures in early life. The EMWSS comprises 21 items, and proved to be a psychometrically sound global measure of early emotional memories, which showed a single factor solution with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.97. Portuguese validation studies, using both adult (Matos, Pinto-Gouveia, & Duarte, 2014) and adolescent community populations (Cunha, Xavier, Martinho, & Matos, 2014), corroborated the unidimensional structure and robust psychometric qualities of this scale.

The new and specific measure focused on peers – Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness with Peers Scale (EMWSS<sub>Peers</sub>) – also comprised 21 items and was developed and primarily tested in the Portuguese adult population. Results revealed a single factor structure and the pertinence of a shorter version of 12 items. This shorter solution of the EMWSS<sub>Peers</sub> showed a nearly perfect association with the 21-item EMWSS<sub>Peers</sub>, and was obtained taking into consideration theoretical and psychometric criteria. The 12-item EMWSS<sub>Peers</sub> showed to be an instrument with high reliability to assess peer-related positive memories, revealing significant associations with positive indicators of psychological adjustment, and with lower emotion regulation difficulties and psychopathological symptoms (Ferreira et al., 2016).

Given the potential importance of the quality of peer relationships in the development of self-identity of adolescents, adaptive emotion regulation and mental health, the creation and assessment of a measure of personal recollections of feelings and experiences of safeness, contentment, support, and warmth within peer relationships, seems particularly relevant to this developmental stage. The current study aimed therefore at developing and examining the psychometric properties and correlates of a new measure for the examination of Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness within peer relationships in adolescence – EMWSS<sub>Peers</sub>-A.

In the present study, it was hypothesized that the EMWSS<sub>Peers</sub>-A presents a psychometrically sound one-factor structure, similar to the one found in the adult population (Ferreira et al., 2016). Moreover, consistent with findings of prior research (Cunha et al., 2013; Ferreira et al., 2016; Richter et al., 2009), we expected scores on the EMWSS<sub>Peers</sub>-A to correlate positively with positive emotional memories with family and self-compassion. On the contrary, we expected negative correlations with external shame, self-judgment and depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants in this study comprised distinct convenience samples collected in public schools of the centre region of Portugal.

The factorial structure of the scale and its psychometric properties were initially examined in a total of 230 adolescents (121 females and 109 males) at a public secondary school in an urban area of the district of Coimbra, placed in the centre

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