



## Peer attachment and self-esteem: A meta-analytic review

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### ABSTRACT

Peer attachment might provide individuals with opportunities to build their sense of self-worth. The purpose of this paper was to meta-analytically review literature on peer attachment and self-esteem. A total of 22 articles reporting 24 studies documenting correlations between peer attachment and self-esteem in adolescents and emerging adults were included in this meta-analysis. Of these studies, most examined links between global peer attachment and self-esteem, while few studies reported any associations between specific dimensions of peer attachment (i.e., trust, communication, and alienation) and self-esteem. Results showed significant correlations between peer attachment and self-esteem, consistently found both in studies focused on global attachment as well as in studies including specific attachment dimensions. Furthermore, since a significant heterogeneity was found across the studies, the effects of various categorical and continuous moderators related to characteristics of the study samples and designs were tested. Implications of these findings for future research are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Individuals strive to form and maintain a positive self-image across the entire life span (James, 1890). In this process, a key role is played by interpersonal relationships. Indeed, close relationships is one of people's bases of self-esteem that impact how they think and feel about themselves. In fact, individuals derive their self-worth, or self-esteem, from feedbacks they receive from significant others (Cooley, 1902).

Feelings of self-worth are not only the result of interactions with others, but also provide a filter through which an individual views and responds to the behavior of others. The first and main important social system that impacts individuals' self-esteem is represented by the family (Arbona & Power, 2003; Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004; Mattanah, Lopez & Govern, 2011). In fact, first child-parent interactions constitute the basis for development of an early sense of self-worth.

When people grow up, people external to the family system start to play a crucial role for self-esteem. In particular, in adolescence peers become increasingly important (Harter, Stocker, & Robinson, 1996; Mota & Matos, 2013; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006; Thomaes et al., 2010). From middle childhood to adolescence, two cognitive advances allow for peer interpersonal influences on self-esteem (Harter, 1999, 2006). First, improved perspective taking skills promote adolescent better understanding

of appraisals of others. Second, the newfound ability to form higher order concepts allows adolescents to make global self-evaluations (e.g., "I am satisfied with myself as a person") rather than more concrete and domain-specific self-evaluations (e.g., "I am good at soccer") that are typical for younger children. Longitudinal research found that adolescents' global self-esteem tend to be influenced by cumulative peer experiences they have had in the past (e.g., Boivin, Hymel, & Hodges, 2001; Ladd & Tropp-Gordon, 2003). From this period, friendship is thought to serve numerous functions, including the provision of intimacy, security, and trust; instrumental aid (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Thus, forming and maintaining strong, qualitatively rich friendships becomes of central importance for the self-esteem from adolescence.

The growth in the importance of trust and reciprocal self-disclosure during adolescence makes friendships more similar to relationships with attachment characteristics. Attachment theory, as proposed by Bowlby (1969, 1988), provides a compelling framework for understanding the nature and correlates of close emotional ties with others. Specifically, Bowlby proposed that people seek attachment with others to regulate emotional distress as well as experience a sense of "felt security" (Sroufe & Waters, 1977) and the maintenance of closeness, which, in turn is related to more confidence and assertiveness in social situations (Collins & Read, 1990). Furthermore, higher confidence increases willingness to explore one's environment (Green & Campbell, 2000) and promotes self-disclosure, which facilitates the formation of mutually caring attachment relationships (Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991).

Peer attachment may provide an important relational context for development of self-esteem. Peer attachment styles (or dimensions) represent core, cognitive templates of self and others

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in relationships, and so it is possible that they will influence the extent to which people form and maintain positive beliefs about their self-worth. In other words, peer attachment styles and self-esteem could be interrelated in the sense that they both regulate the person's sense of "felt security" (Sroufe & Waters, 1977).

Therefore, in this study, we focused on the role of peer relationships, examining through meta-analytic techniques, whether peer attachment is associated with self-esteem and which factors can moderate this link. In doing so, we aimed at advancing existing literature (a) synthesizing quantitatively associations between peer attachment and self-esteem in order to find if and how strongly they are related, and (b) examining in which conditions this association is stronger or weaker (i.e., moderator analyses). Thus, this meta-analysis would offer suggestions to guide research toward a more contextually sensitive, integrative understanding of the dynamic process between close relationships with peers and global self-esteem.

### 1.1. Security in attachment and self-esteem

Attachment theory posits that attachments to significant others and the internal working models of these relationships have a fundamental role not only in influencing information processing by guiding cognition, memory, attention, but also affecting the creation and nature of subsequent social relationships (Bowlby, 1988). These internal working models can be thought of as a psychological organization that serves to guide individual beliefs with respect to important issues such as (a) the availability of key attachment figures as a source of support and security, (b) judgments about their own self-worth and deservedness in attachment relations, and (c) how best to deal with distress within the constraints of the attachment environment in which they find themselves (Duchesne & Larose, 2007; Sroufe & Waters, 1977). When individuals develop a secure working model they adopt a positive internal representation of themselves in attachment contexts, viewing attachment figures as psychologically available and responsive, developing a positive sense of their self. On the contrary, when they hold an insecure working model they adopt a negative internal representation, fearing rejection and inconsistent responses from attachment figures, and adopt a negative sense of self in attachment contexts (Duchesne & Larose, 2007).

Attachment literature emphasizes the importance of attachment security for psychological functioning and well-being (Karrerman & Vingerhoets, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Secure individuals were found to have more trusting, happy, intimate, and friendly close relationships when compared to others with insecure ones (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer, 1998). Thus, a secure attachment relationship might lead to a positive self-view thanks to the perception of a stable and reliable external social environment. The solid sense of personal value is crucial for maintaining stable self-esteem and emotional balance in the face of failure, rejection, or other life difficulties. It also sustains autonomous emotion regulation by providing people with effective self-soothing procedures that can alleviate distress even in the absence of actual attachment figures (e.g., Zimmermann, 1999).

Mikulincer and Shaver (2005) suggest that secure attachment is an important, and perhaps the most important, determinant of stable, authentic self-esteem. They reviewed considerable evidence indicating that attachment security acts as a resource that minimizes the need for defensive maneuvering in situations that may otherwise call for it (e.g., after receiving negative interpersonal feedback). Research supports the notion that secure individuals have adaptive patterns of emotional expression and regulation across their lifespan (Zimmermann, 1999). In contrast, insecure individuals are more prone to being either over or under regulated

in their emotional expression (Zimmermann, 1999). These patterns of emotional expression are assumed to be attachment strategies that flow from an individual's internal working models (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Up to now, extensive literature has examined the role of parent attachment for individuals' self-esteem. Studies have consistently shown that secure attachments with parents are linked to positive representations of the self, which include high levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy (e.g., Arbona & Power, 2003; Laible, Carlo, & Roesch, 2004; Mattanah, Lopez, & Gover 2011; Noom, Dekovic, & Meeus, 1999). Moving from this literature, the purpose of this contribution is to examine the positive role that might also be played by peer attachment.

### 1.2. Peer attachment

Although individuals form and maintain peer ties throughout their entire life span, the relevance of peer relationships becomes particularly evident in adolescence, when young people start to develop close bonds with individuals external to their family system (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Paterson, Field, & Prior, 1994). Adolescents' search for autonomy implies a progressive psycho-emotional differentiation from parents, a reorganization of family ties, and an increase in the developmental significance of the peer group (e.g. Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, & Engels, 2005). Approaching this task, adolescents who have developed a secure attachment relationship with their parents, balancing the need for autonomy with the need for maintaining emotional closeness, are more likely to transfer secure attachment components to peers. In fact, a substantial amount of literature has shown that individuals who report secure relationships with parents tend also to exhibit secure relationships with close friends (cf. Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2012 for a meta-analysis). As such, the endpoint in the development of complementary attachments to parents serves as the starting point for reciprocal attachments to peers. Increased time spent in the company of peers fosters mutual confiding, comforting, and a reliance on peers as havens of safety, thereby paving the way for attachment formation.

Most of the research on adolescent peer attachment has been rooted in Armsden and Greenberg's (1987) work. The authors proposed to study both adolescent parent and peer attachment focusing on three dimensions: (1) Trust, linked to the adolescents' trust that parents and peers understand and respect their needs and desires; (2) Communication, concerning adolescents' perceptions that parents and peers are sensitive and responsive to their emotional states and assessing the extent and quality of involvement and verbal communication with them; and (3) Alienation, which refers to adolescents' feelings of isolation, anger, and detachment experienced in attachment relationships with parents and peers. Using a sample of 16-to-20-year-olds, Armsden and Greenberg (1987) developed the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA), a self-report scale aimed at assessing the three dimensions of the attachment relationships, as well as a global attachment score. According to their classification criteria, individuals who reported their close relationships with high trust and communication and low alienation scores could be classified as high security individuals, while those who described their peer relationships as characterized by low trust and communication and high alienation scores were classed as low security individuals. The IPPA has been questioned as a proper measure of attachment (e.g., Wilkinson, 2008) since it was not designed to differentiate among the attachment patterns delineated by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978). Nevertheless, a large amount of literature has examined peer attachment relying on Armsden and Greenberg's (1987) conceptualization and measurement and has consistently shown that

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