

# Study on the Effect of Peer Attachment on Mental Health of Adolescents

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**Abstract.** Depression and internet addiction disorder afflict adolescents. Peer attachment is an indispensable part of their life and plays an important role in the mental health of adolescents. This paper combed the characteristics of adolescent peer attachment, peer attachment to depression, and the impact of Internet addiction, and put forward the strategies for establishing good peer attachment from the perspectives of building a relaxed family environment and carrying out group counseling in school. Aims to improve the quality of peer attachment relations to relieve depression and Internet addiction in adolescents.

**Keywords:** Attachment; Peer Attachment; Mental Health.

## 1. Introduction

Adolescents are the future of the country, and more and more adolescents suffer from psychological problems such as depression, internet addiction disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and anxiety disorder. The sub-health state of adolescents is an urgent problem for society to solve. The report on The Development of China's National Mental Health (2019-2020) released by the Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences mentioned that the detection rate of depression among adolescents was 24.6% in 2020, among which the detection rate of major depression was 7.4% [1]. Along with the increase in the number of adolescents, the number of adolescents suffering from depression is also increasing. Adolescent depression is manifested as unsociable, communicative, withdrawn, and has insomnia, no appetite, low mood, extreme fatigue, physiological dysfunction, self-discipline disorder, and other symptoms. Depression has become an obstacle to the growth of adolescents. Depression will cause adolescents' lack of academic or self-achievement, loss of social support, and affect the development of interpersonal relationships. In addition, with the development of the Internet, the penetration of online games into adolescents is deeper and deeper, which has an impact on their physical and mental health. Relevant departments in the judicial case statistics found that more and more cases of juvenile delinquency and there is a close relationship with an internet addiction disorder. According to *The Third China youth Network Association Internet Addiction Survey Research* shows that China's urban youth internet addiction in adolescents accounted for about 14.1%, about 24.04 million people [2]. In 1995, Goldberg proposed internet addiction disorder, a phenomenon in which excessive use of the internet leads to significant impairment of individual psychological and social functions [3]. Zhou Qian defines internet addiction disorder as a chronic or periodic state of obsession caused by repeated use of the Internet, which leads to an irresistible desire to use it again, making people's cognition, emotional feelings, behavioral activities and physiological activities deviate from real life [4]. Internet addiction disorder seriously affects young people's studies and life, and brings serious damage to their physical and mental health. Different scholars have explored the causes of adolescent depression and internet addiction from different angles. This paper explores the influence of peer attachment on depression and internet addiction disorder, and the mitigation measures.

One of the earliest forms of attachment is the strong emotional bond that people form with their caregivers in infancy. But attachment doesn't stop at infancy. Attachment partners include not only parents but also peers. Peer attachment is an intimate emotional connection formed between an individual and friends, which is a feeling of mutual support and care characterized by equality, reciprocity and keeping close [5]. During adolescence, the conflict between adolescents and their parents increases, the quality of their emotional connection with their parents decreases. However, peer relationship plays an important role in the growth and development of adolescents. Peers are an

important source for adolescents to meet their social needs, such as intimacy, security, and trust, and to obtain social support. Therefore, the degree of peer attachment in adolescence is higher than that of parental attachment, and the quality of peer attachment in girls is higher than that in boys [6]. Parental attachment, rearing pattern, gender, and age have an influence on peer attachment [7]. adolescents with better parental attachment also has better peer attachment. Because the internal working model of attachment points out that the formation of an individual's attachment to others is a lifelong process, and the attachment relationship formed in infancy and parents affects the formation of attachment relationships with others. Parents care more about adolescents and adopt a positive rearing pattern, which can make adolescents feel more warmth and promote them to establish a good peer attachment relationship. On the contrary, a negative parenting style will cause teenagers to be rude, aggressive, confrontational, and other behaviors in the process of communicating with peers. In adolescence, peer attachment increases with age, which indicates that the recognition and support of peers are important factors affecting the emotional development of adolescents. Therefore, the study of peer attachment in adolescents provides a new dimension for improving the mental health of adolescents.

## **2. The Influence of Peer Attachment on Adolescent Mental Health**

The influence of peer attachment on adolescent mental health is reflected in internalizing problems and externalizing problems. Internalizing problems are over-controlling, over inhibition, such as shyness, anxiety, and depression. Externalizing behaviors are behaviors that are directed outward toward others or the social environment, such as aggressive behaviors, addictive behaviors, and violation behaviors. According to the strange situation experiment of Mary Ainsworth (1969), attachment is divided into secure attachment, anxious-avoidance attachment, and anxious-resistance attachment [8]. This paper divides adolescent peer attachment into secure attachment and non-secure attachment. In this section, the effects of peer attachment on anxiety and internet addiction are explored.

### **2.1 The Influence of Peer Attachment on Depression and Mood**

Adolescents gain intimacy, warmth, and social support in peer attachment. In addition, secure peer attachment can compensate for insecure parental attachment, thereby alleviating the level of depression in adolescents. Therefore, establishing safe and close peer attachment can effectively alleviate depression in adolescents. Peer attachment has a significant negative correlation with depression in adolescents, and peer attachment can negatively predict depression. Some scholars discussed the relationship between dimensions of peer attachment and depression. It was found that the trust and communication dimensions of peer attachment were significantly negatively correlated with depression. Alienation was positively correlated with depression. This indicates that adolescents who are good at communicating with and trusting their peers are not prone to depression, while adolescents who are relatively distant from their peers are prone to feeling isolated, and this long-term loneliness is easy to cause depression. This is a direct effect of peer attachment on depression. In addition, peer attachment can indirectly affect depression through some mediating variables. For example, peer attachment can affect adolescents' self-evaluation (such as self-esteem and regulatory emotional self-efficacy), and social support can indirectly affect depression. Peer attachment influences depression through the mediating effect of self-esteem, and self-esteem plays a full or partial mediating role. In addition, some studies have shown that regulatory emotional self-efficacy plays a mediating role in the relationship between peer attachment and depression. The regulatory emotional self-efficacy refers to the confidence level of individuals in their emotional regulation ability, including positive emotion regulation efficacy and negative emotion regulation efficacy [9]. Positive emotion regulation self-efficacy refers to the ability oneself to express positive emotions such as happiness when encountering successful or pleasant events, while negative emotion regulation self-efficacy refers to the ability to improve one's negative emotions when encountering

difficulties. In other words, peer attachment can indirectly affect depression by expressing positive emotions and managing negative emotions. Secure peer attachment for adolescents to learn emotional expression and emotion regulation provides a rich opportunity and promotes the development of emotion regulation ability. This ability to actively regulate mood and self-efficacy of positive emotions can make adolescents more peer support to increase the total amount of interpersonal support for adolescents. The total amount of interpersonal support is one of the factors to impact depression. In other words, higher levels of interpersonal support create positive relationships that reduce depression. The management of negative emotions plays a mediating role between peer attachment and adolescent depression. Insecure peer attachment will lead to tension between adolescents and their peers, resulting in difficulties in making friends, peer rejection, depression, negative self-evaluation, and self-doubt. Unable to cope with negative emotions effectively, adolescents will become more and more depressed, forming chronic interpersonal disorders and depression. Therefore, insecure peer attachment is a risk factor for depression.

In terms of anxiety, peer attachment is negatively correlated with adolescent anxiety, indicating that peer attachment can negatively predict the anxiety level of adolescents. Peer attachment can provide effective emotional support for the psychological development of adolescents and thus reduce their anxiety levels of adolescents.

## **2.2 The Influence of Peer Attachment on Internet Addiction Disorder**

Peer attachment is an important factor affecting adolescent internet addiction disorder. According to Li Qian's research, peer attachment is significantly related to internet addiction disorder among adolescents [10]. Secure peer attachment can provide psychological support for adolescents, make them have a more positive and optimistic state of mind, regulate negative emotions, and thus reduce the occurrence of internet addiction disorder. However, insecure peer attachment will produce negative emotions, which will affect the development of adolescents' interpersonal relationships. In other words, the lack of close friends will lead adolescents to rely on the Internet for friendship and emotional support, and replace the interpersonal interaction in real life with virtual network social interaction, to be addicted to the internet [11]. Adolescents with bad peers are more likely to develop internet dependent behavior, so insecure peer attachment is a predictor of internet addiction disorder. Some scholars have studied the influence of different dimensions of peer attachment on internet addiction disorder. The higher the degree of alienation, the more easily suffer from internet addiction. Because the internet eliminates the restrictions of real communication and is more relaxed than the communication in real life, adolescents with a high level of peer alienation escape from real communication and turn to the internet for friendship, communication, and support. They rely on the internet to obtain social support, develop social relationships, and release their life encounter a variety of pressure, resulting in internet addiction. Adolescents with a higher communication dimension are more likely to build self-confidence and be able to deal with negative emotions and difficulties through communication with real-life peers. Therefore, the communication dimension is negatively correlated with Internet addiction. Some scholars through the establishment of the mediation model explain the mechanism of action of peer attachment to the internet addiction disorder. Peer attachment through loneliness, and a sense of belonging influence internet addiction disorder, the lower the level of peer attachment of adolescents, the more difficult to obtain real social support, it is difficult to meet the needs of their sense of belonging. Therefore, adolescents with higher levels of loneliness are more dependent on the internet and form internet addiction [12].

## **3. Relevant Measures to Improve Adolescent Mental Health**

Adolescence is a transitional stage from infancy to maturity. Adolescents need to deal with various challenges such as interpersonal, academic, life adaptation, and life development, so the psychological health of adolescents should be paid more attention to. This section will discuss how to construct secure peer attachment from the perspective of parents and schools.

Secure parental attachment promotes the construction of secure peer attachment. The emotional atmosphere of the family will also have an impact on emotional regulation. Therefore, parents should create a relaxed family atmosphere, establish correct values for their children, and meet their children's normal physical and psychological needs. Secondly, parents should build a sense of security for their children. The parents remain emotionally stable and give their children affirmation, praise, and recognition, which will make them confident to face the challenges of life. Parents should pay attention to the psychological changes of their children and actively communicate with their children. Adolescence is a period when children seek psychological independence, parents should give adolescents the space for independent thinking, reduce excessive protection, encourage, and support children to normal peer exchanges, and promptly discover the children's confusion in peer interaction, puts forward related suggestions to solve the problems, make the children experience happiness. In addition, when parents feel their children's negative emotions, they should guide and help children manage their emotions through communication and companionship, to reduce the possibility of adolescents suffering from anxiety, depression, and internet addiction disorder [13].

Schools and teachers can make use of group psychological counseling to guide adolescents to learn and use emotion regulation strategies. Group psychological counseling provides opportunities for adolescents to communicate with peers, through group counseling to help adolescents understand the value of getting along with peers. Activities such as native family and me can help adolescents recall the good times they had with their parents, deepen the feelings between adolescents and families, and improve the level of parental attachment. Through activities to help adolescents understand themselves deeply, so that adolescents have good prospects for the future and positive planning, to increase the self-confidence of adolescents. For adolescents with social phobia, attachment group counseling and emotional regulation strategies are used to encourage students to identify and adjust their emotions in time. Group counseling establishes a harmonious collective atmosphere, forms a good way of group interaction, changes negative thinking patterns, reduces anxiety through relaxation training, and establishes a healthier peer attachment relationship with their peers [14].

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