



Research Paper

## Family Environment, Assertiveness and Social Connectedness in Intermediate Students

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**ABSTRACT:** Family environment refers to the quality and quantity of the cognitive, emotional and social support that has been available to the child within the family and connotes the psychological environment of family as perceived by adolescents (Bhatia & Chadha, 2004). Assertiveness is the outward expression of practically all feelings other than anxiety (Wolpe, 1958). Social connectedness is defined as an enduring interpersonal closeness with the social world (Lee et al., 2001). The present study adopts a between-groups design to observe whether there are gender differences with respect to family environment, assertiveness and social connectedness among intermediate college students. A correlational design was adopted to ascertain whether there is a relationship between family environment, assertiveness and social connectedness among intermediate students. Non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select a sample of 550 intermediate students (boys = 275, girls = 275) from intermediate colleges in Hyderabad. Results showed that girls were higher in all dimensions of family environment and assertiveness. Positive correlations were found between dimensions of family environment and social connectedness in both the genders. There was a positive correlation between assertiveness and social connectedness in intermediate boys. Apart from these, the system maintenance organization dimension of family environment in boys and the relationship-expressiveness dimension of family environment in girls correlated with assertiveness. The findings suggest that special workshops and government initiatives such as parent centers, personality training and awareness programs may aid in channelizing interactions, encourage prosocial behavior in adolescents and assert their identities and communication skills.

**KEYWORDS:** family environment; assertiveness; social connectedness; intermediate students; adolescents.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The term adolescence was first coined by Hall (1904). The most commonly used definition of adolescence includes the ages of 10 - 18 (APA, 2002). The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations define an adolescent as any person between ages of 10 and 19. The UNICEF (2011) considers early adolescence to stretch between the ages of 10 and 14 and late adolescence to encompass the latter part of the teenage years, which is broadly between the ages of 15 and 19. Adolescence is affected by physiological, psychosocial, temporal and cultural factors. It is a complex and multi-framework cycle which includes movement from the adolescence into grown-up existence with the objective and desire for satisfied potential, individual organization, and social responsibility (Graber & Brookes-Gunn, 1996; Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Modell & Goodman, 1990; Steinberg, 2002). Thus, this period of critical development is traditionally understood as the years between the onset of puberty and the establishment of social independence (Steinberg, 2014; Curtis, 2015).

Family is the basic unit of a society. It is the oldest and most important of all the institutions that man has learnt to regulate his behaviour as he strives to satisfy his basic needs. Its lead position rests in its diverse functions in relation to comprehensive development of its members, their safe keeping and overall wellbeing. Therefore, it would become evident that not only the social and physical wellbeing of the individual is taken care of by the family, but the psychological wellbeing as well (Bhatia & Chadha, 1993). It is within a family that

an individual learns to bloom. It plays a very chief role in the shaping of an individual's personality (Hoffman, 1991).

A study by Chakra (2002) on adolescents aged between 13-16 years found that there is more cohesion and acceptance and caring in the family where the adolescents were more emotionally competent.

Adolescents between ages 12 and 19 were studied by Sankah (2007), who found that male adolescents were more assertive than females, and that adolescents' emotions were negatively affected as parents implemented authoritarian parenting style which resulted in depression, anxiety, and stress.

A disaccord family environment is linked with adolescents' insecurity and psychological distress, in addition to aggressive behaviour and conduct disorder (Wissink et al., 2006). Family cohesion and supportive relationships among family members are related with adolescent psychological adaptation and lower depression (Herman et al., 2007).

The findings of a study conducted by Pegah (2009) state that the family environment dimensions viz. relationship, personal growth (goal oriented), and system maintenance, are correlated with positive mental states viz. happiness, optimism, and hope among the adolescents of the two aforesaid cultures. Cultural and gender differences between the studied variables were also in view.

Wolpe (1958) defined assertiveness as the "outward expression of practically all feelings other than anxiety." Lazarus (1971) defines assertiveness as "emotional freedom". In training a person to be "emotionally free", he emphasizes the "recognition and appropriate expression of each and every affective state".

Assertiveness is the quality of being sanguine and confident without being belligerent. Dorland's Medical Dictionary (2007) defines assertiveness as a form of behaviour characterized by a confident declaration or affirmation of a statement without need of proof; this affirms the person's rights or point of view without either aggressively threatening the rights of another (assuming a position of dominance) or submissively permitting another to ignore or deny one's rights or point of view.

The changing roles during the college years and the contact with new social circles brings forth many opportunities for adolescents and young adults to hone their social skills and assert their individual identities. Assertiveness has been found to be an aid in developing character, personality, self-esteem, etc. of young people. It can also be a protective factor from succumbing to peer pressure and avoiding risky behavior such as smoking, alcohol and substance use when the individuals have intentions of refusing (Epstein et al. 2000; Trudeau et al. 2003). Thus, secure and strong attachment with mother, father and peers can help an individual develop assertiveness, a necessary social skill in today's day and age to deal with various conflicts and interactions in their social world.

From a cognitive standpoint, assertive individuals when under stress, experience lesser anxious thoughts. From a behavioural standpoint, assertive people are firm without being rude. They respond to positive and negative emotions without becoming aggressive or turning to passivity.

A study conducted by Achieng et al. (2019) found that adolescents' level of assertiveness was influenced by parental support, parental separation, divorce, absence, and poor parent-adolescent relationships.

This study by Poyrazli et al. (2002) studies the relationship between assertiveness, academic self-efficacy, and psychosocial adjustment among international graduate students. It was found that English proficiency, assertiveness, and academic self-efficacy contributed uniquely to the variance in students' general adjustment level, while students' loneliness was predicted only by gender and assertiveness.

As it was seen in the study cited above there was a link found between assertiveness and gender, similarly, social connection plays an important role on physical and mental health in the following study.

Social connection is the experience of togetherness and connectedness to others. It involves being cherished, cared for, and valued and forms the foundation of interpersonal relationships. Social connectedness plays a major role in older adults' well-being (Ashida et al., 2008; Haslam et al., 2008), and has a positive effect on physical and mental health.

According to Cacioppo and Patrick (2008), individuals make great efforts to socially belong, and it has been hypothesized that there is a "universal need to belong" (Heinrich et al., 2006). Where social relationships are weak, individuals will consequently feel deserted and relationships that protect against loneliness require a sense of security of the other's responsiveness (Reis et al., 2011). Such close relationships suggest recurrent, diverse, and strong impression on the other person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour (Berscheid et al., 1989).

Social connection and belonging may in actuality be a primary need, as strong as our necessity for food or water. Mammals are born comparatively helpless and depend on their caregivers for both affection and survival. This may be evolutionarily why mammals need and seek connection, and also for why they endure prolonged distress and health consequences when that need is not met.

Oberle et al. (2011) observed that ecological assets (i.e., social connectedness, perceived neighbourhood support, parental and positive peer relationship) and positivity predicted early adolescents' life satisfaction. The positive impact of connectedness on well-being is thought to emerge from the fact that connectedness serves the motivational need to belong (Townsend & McWhirter, 2005).

A longitudinal study by Jose et al. (2012) found that youth who reported higher levels of social connectedness at one point in time would eventually report higher well-being (i.e., life satisfaction, confidence, positive affect, and aspirations).

Social connectedness plays a crucial role in the daily lives of adolescents and is a basis to positive personal development, lifestyle, and general health (Barber & Schluterman, 2008).

Further, the range of connectedness to the different social domains (i.e., family, school, friends and community) in adolescence is a factor for their positive development, lifestyle, and general health behaviours, as well as a predictor of their sense of well-being in adulthood (Olsson et al., 2013)

Adolescence is a time of both re-orientation and re-discovery. It is also a period of metamorphosis where rapid changes take place. As adolescents' transition from their protected environments of home and college and prepare themselves for the challenges of professional education and responsibilities in adulthood, they tend to experience a plethora of emotions, both positive and negative ones, which are unique to each individual.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory provides a framework for understanding the impact of non-familial influences on children's adjustment. This can be explained in a study by Law et al. (2013), where family, school, and peer connectedness all independently predicted the child's adjustment. Dissimilarities were evident between children's and parents' reports, and the model did not conclusively predict parental views of their child's adjustment. There was corroboration that non-familial social environments can have a positive, compensatory consequence on children's emotional functioning which is a most important finding for school personnel interested in student wellbeing. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that if child development is to be properly understood, a mesosystemic approach is necessary in which multiple environments and their interactive effects on children are integrated. With respect to children, two of the most important environments after their family are their peer group and their school.

As adolescence is a period of rapid emotional and social change, it is important to understand the relationships between perceived family environment and wellbeing outcomes such as emotion regulation and social connectedness that could have deleterious effects on wellbeing in later years.

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connectedness that could have deleterious effects on wellbeing in later years.

People can enhance their assertiveness through practical exercises and experience. Adolescence is a period of rapid emotional change, similarly, social connectedness in close relationships is one of the most fundamental aspects of human life. Where people mainly survive outside social networks, a significant existence becomes strenuous, as an individual's sense of "me" arises out of social interaction (Vaughan & Hogg, 2002).

### **Research Objectives**

1. To observe whether there are gender differences in dimensions of family environment (relationship-cohesiveness, relationship-expressiveness, relationship-conflict, relationship-acceptance and caring, personal growth- independence, personal growth- active recreational orientation, system maintenance- organization and system maintenance- control), assertiveness and social connectedness among intermediate students.
2. To observe whether there is a relationship between the dimensions of family environment (relationship-cohesiveness, relationship-expressiveness, relationship-conflict, relationship-acceptance and caring, personal growth- independence, personal growth- active recreational orientation, system maintenance- organization and system maintenance- control), assertiveness, and social connectedness among intermediate students.

## **II. METHOD**

### **Research Design**

The present study adopts a between-groups design to observe whether there are gender differences in the dimensions of family environment (relationship-cohesiveness, relationship-expressiveness, relationship-conflict, relationship-acceptance and caring, personal growth- independence, personal growth- active recreational orientation, system maintenance- organization and system maintenance- control), assertiveness and social connectedness among intermediate students. This study adopts a correlational design to determine whether there is a relationship between the dimensions of family environment, assertiveness and social connectedness in intermediate boys and girls.

### **Sample**

Non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample of 550 intermediate students, which included 275 boys and 275 girls aged between 16-18 years (Mean Age = 16.37). Out of the total

sample, 38.4% belonged to I year and 61.6% belonged to II year. The students belonged to science, commerce, and arts stream. The intermediate students were from private colleges in Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Students pursuing courses from private colleges affiliated to Telangana State Board of Intermediate Education were included in the study. Students from government colleges, vocational courses, distance and residential educational institutions and students working part time were excluded.

### **Instruments**

#### 1. Information Schedule

Information regarding the students' age, gender, educational qualification, and family information (family type, family size, parents' education, parents' income) was taken.

#### 2. Family Environment Scale

Based on the Family Environment Scale by Moos (1974), this scale was conceptualized by Bhatia and Chadha (1991). The scale measures the perception of family environment of the participants. It consists of 69 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale has 3 subscales: relationship, personal growth, and system maintenance. This scale has the reliability of 0.87 and a validity of 0.82 (sahu et al. 2014) and hence it was used in its original form.

#### 3. Rathus Assertiveness Schedule

The Rathus assertiveness schedule is used to assess assertiveness (Rathus, 1973). It is a 30-item schedule which scale is marked on a 6-point Likert scale. The total score is obtained by adding numerical responses to each item, after changing the signs of reversed items. Higher the score of an individual higher are the levels of assertiveness. The reliability of the scale was found out by test- retest reliability and split half reliability which is 0.77 and 0.77 respectively (Thompson and Berenbaum, 2011).

#### 4. Social Connectedness Scale

This scale assesses the degree to which youth feel connected to others in their social environment. This scale consists of 20 items which are marked on a 6-point Likert scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Negatively worded items are to be reverse-coded. The total score is obtained by adding numerical responses to each item. A higher score indicates more connectedness to others. The psychometrics of the scale include a high reliability (internal consistency  $\alpha > 0.92$ ), concurrent validity, construct validity, convergent validity and discriminant validity (Lee & Robbins, 1995).

### **Statistical Analysis**

The obtained quantitative data of this study were analyzed using independent samples t-test and Pearson Product- Moment Correlation using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0.

### **Procedure**

A comprehensive list of intermediate colleges in Hyderabad was made from which 12 colleges were visited. The researchers then visited the 4 institutions that had given permission to administer the questionnaires on the scheduled dates at the scheduled time. Intermediate first and second year students (boys and girls) were approached and rapport was established. They were made aware that their participation in the study was purely voluntary and were assured that confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study. The information schedule was administered after which the researcher gave instructions about the questionnaires (Family Environment Scale, Rathus Assertiveness Scale and Social Connectedness Scale) to the students. The students took an average of 40 minutes to fill the information schedule and questionnaires. The data collected was then sorted according to gender, class, and board of education. After discarding the invalid data, the valid responses were coded, entered in SPSS, and statistically analyzed.

## **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 1: Mean, Standard Deviation and t-values of Intermediate boys and girls with respect to Family Environment and its dimensions, Assertiveness and Social Connectedness

DIMENSIONS VARIABLES	INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS				t-test
	BOYS		GIRLS		
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	
Family Environment					
Relationship-Cohesion	50.37	6.95	53.36	8.22	<b>-4.61**</b>

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Relationship-Expressiveness	30.49	4.99	32.10	6.70	<b>-3.18**</b>
Relationship-Conflict	37.51	4.80	39.66	6.21	<b>-4.54**</b>
Relationship-Acceptance and Caring	41.47	5.64	45.59	8.06	<b>-6.94**</b>
Personal Growth-Independence	28.99	3.81	30.39	5.14	<b>-3.63**</b>
Personal Growth Active-Recreational Orientation	29.48	5.02	30.69	5.28	<b>-2.77**</b>
System Maintenance Organization	8.24	1.74	8.57	1.53	<b>-2.39*</b>
System Maintenance-Control	14.30	2.96	15.64	2.60	<b>-5.63**</b>
Assertiveness	106.28	10.54	108.40	14.02	<b>-2.0*</b>
Social Connectedness	76.32	14.73	76.79	13.37	-0.39

Note: \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ;  $df = 548$

Table 1 shows that there were gender differences in the variables being studied. The results show that the girls reported higher levels of relationship-cohesion, relationship-expressiveness, relationship-conflict, relationship-acceptance and caring, personal growth-independence, personal growth- active recreational orientation, system maintenance-organization and system maintenance-control dimensions of family environment (M= 53.36, M= 32.10, M= 39.66, M= 45.59, M= 30.39, M= 30.69, M= 8.57, M= 15.64 respectively). The results can possibly indicate that girls reported a more favorable perception of family environment than boys and demonstrated higher levels of commitment, help, and support for family members. However, girls perceived more conflict than boys which may be due to role expectations.

During adolescence, girls are subjected to more sex role constraints and must contend with culturally created values in the family. They are more vulnerable to social criticism. Girls also perceived more control i.e., they perceived that their family has set rules and emphasize on following rules in the family. The girls are more sensitive than boys by control in the family (Mohanraj et al., 2005).

In the above table, a gender difference was also seen in assertiveness in intermediate students, as it is evident from the mean scores that girls (M= 108.40) reported higher levels of assertiveness than boys (M= 106.28). In other words, girls are more likely to consciously inhibit assertiveness and openness.

A study on girls' assertiveness in the presence of boys by Benenson. et. al. (1998) suggest that girls' expression of assertiveness is highly dependent on the social context. This difference in assertiveness starts at a young age, as early as 4 and 6 years old, as girls begin to express more sadness and anxiety than their male counterparts. This increased assertiveness is consistent across various cultures.

**Table 2:** Correlation between the family environment in terms of its dimensions, assertiveness and social connectedness among Intermediate boys (n=275)

VARIABLES	ASSERTIVENESS	SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS
Family Environment		
Relationship-Cohesion	-0.02	<b>0.22**</b>
Relationship-Expressiveness	-0.02	<b>0.15*</b>
Relationship-Conflict	-0.06	0.01
Relationship-Acceptance and Caring	0.02	<b>0.17**</b>
Personal Growth-Independence	0.09	<b>0.13*</b>
Personal Growth Active-Recreational Orientation	-0.01	<b>0.22**</b>
System Maintenance Organization	<b>0.12*</b>	<b>0.12*</b>
System Maintenance- Control	0.02	<b>0.18**</b>

Assertiveness	1	<b>0.64**</b>
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Note: \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ;  $df = 273$

**Table 3:** Correlation between the family environment in terms of its dimensions, assertiveness and social connectedness among Intermediate girls (n=275)

VARIABLES	ASSERTIVENESS	SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS
Family Environment		
Relationship-Cohesion	-0.06	<b>0.22**</b>
Relationship-Expressiveness	<b>-0.13*</b>	<b>0.44**</b>
Relationship-Conflict	-0.09	<b>0.31**</b>
Relationship-Acceptance and Caring	-0.09	<b>0.39**</b>
Personal Growth-Independence	-0.114	<b>0.30**</b>
Personal Growth Active-Recreational Orientation	-0.084	<b>0.45**</b>
System Maintenance Organization	-0.01	<b>0.25**</b>
System Maintenance- Control	0.03	<b>0.16*</b>
Assertiveness	1	-0.06

Note: \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ;  $df = 273$

The present study focused on finding correlation with respect to dimensions of family environment (viz. relationship-cohesiveness, relationship- expressiveness, relationship- conflict, relationship- acceptance & caring, personal growth - independence, personal growth- active recreational orientation, system maintenance-organization and system maintenance- control), assertiveness and social connectedness among intermediate students.

Results from Table 2 & 3, found that social connectedness in boys and girls was positively correlated with relationship-cohesion ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $r = 0.22$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), relationship-expressiveness ( $r = 0.15$ ,  $r = 0.44$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), relationship conflict ( $r = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), relationship-acceptance and caring ( $r = 0.17$ ,  $r = 0.39$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), personal growth-independence ( $r = 0.13$ ,  $r = 0.30$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), personal growth-active recreational orientation ( $r = 0.22$ ,  $r = 0.45$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), system maintenance-organization ( $r = 0.12$ ,  $r = 0.25$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), system maintenance-control ( $r = 0.18$ ,  $r = 0.16$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) dimensions of family environment. In other words, the higher the cohesion, expressiveness, acceptance, independence, active recreational orientation, organization, control reported by intermediate boys and girls, greater is their social connectedness.

Research concerning the levels of family conflict proposes that a conflictual family environment is linked with adolescents' insecurity and psychological distress, as well as aggressive behavior and conduct disorder (Wissink et al., 2006).

The theoretical model of association states that the important social systems of family, school and peers have a combined impact on children's adjustment. This signals that parenting practices, family climate, and family structure predict family connectedness, and that family connectedness, in turn, predicts children's perceptions of connectedness to their peers and school. The model directs that the combined influence of children's views of connectedness to family, school and peers on their adjustment is additive (Law et al., 2013).

Tables 2 & 3 indicates that there was a positive correlation between the system maintenance organization dimension of family environment and assertiveness. In other words, the higher the scores of the systems maintenance organization in intermediate boys ( $r = 0.12$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), the higher the assertiveness. Whereas in girls ( $r = -0.13$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) there is a negative correlation between the relationship-expressiveness dimension of the family environment and assertiveness. In other words, higher the relationship expressiveness reported by girls, lower the assertiveness.

Subjection to frequent or intense levels of interparental conflict, in succession, increases children's risk for a comprehensive array of psychological problems including internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety), externalizing struggles (e.g., aggression, conduct problems), social maladjustment (e.g., poor peer relations), and academic difficulties (Grych & Fincham, 2001).

Lastly, the obtained results in the present study indicate that there exist impressive differences in the perception of family environment by intermediate boys and girls, meaning girls reported a more favorable perception of family environment than boys.

Ideal home environment is that where parents provide greater opportunity to understand things and situations and act according to their desires. Adolescents receive maximum support and encouragement from parents; adolescents rarely receive punishment and have less restriction. This sort of environment supports the students for better performance on various tasks. Rich environment and stimulation in the family are essential for each adolescent's optimal development, especially in the areas of social and cognitive development.

Table 2 also indicated that there was a positive correlation between assertiveness and social connectedness. In other words, the higher the assertiveness reported by intermediate boys ( $r= 0.64, p<0.01$ ), greater the social connectedness. This indicates that girls are more likely to consciously inhibit openness and adjustment than boys. This could be ascribed to the factual evidence that recommends that girls are socialized to be nonaggressive, nurturing, and obedient, although boys are socialized to be unemotional, aggressive, achievement oriented, and self-reliant. (Wester et al, 2002).

The changing roles during the college years and the contact with new social circles brings forth many opportunities for adolescents and young adults to hone their social skills and assert their individual identities. Assertiveness has been found to be an aid in developing character, personality, self-esteem, etc. of young people. It can also be a protective factor from succumbing to peer pressure and avoiding risky behaviour such as smoking, alcohol and substance use when the individuals have intentions of refusing (Epstein et al., 2000; Trudeau et al., 2003). Assertiveness in college students could help them develop their individual character and personality and promote interpersonal interactions. Thus, secure and strong attachment with mother, father and peers can help an individual develop assertiveness, a necessary social skill in today's day and age to deal with various conflicts and interactions in their social world.

#### IV. LIMITATIONS

Although the study was quite comprehensive in nature, there are some limitations to this study. Firstly, the sample was limited to only students from Hyderabad in the state of Telangana. Moreover, only private schools and colleges were included, and the representation of government institutions was not done, therefore the study isn't broadly generalizable to the Indian educational system.

The present study does not study the causes for the gender differences. Thus, it becomes difficult to specifically point out the probable causes that render gender differences in the above-mentioned variables.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The present study once again reinstates the importance of favorable family environment in an adolescent's life, specifically on their assertiveness, emotion regulation and social connectedness. The results point us in a direction where work needs to be done to raise awareness on the adverse effects of expressive suppression on the adolescents' over-all well-being, especially among boys. Schools must include in their curriculum compulsory regular classroom sessions on emotion regulation by the school counselors. Adolescents must be taught various healthy coping mechanisms (journaling, meditation, mindfulness etc.) that will help them manage their emotions and channelize them in better ways. Acknowledgement of negative emotions should not be recognized as a fault. They are not a deplorable human being to feel those kinds of emotions. Instead, they must be taught to develop curiosity and open up to these emotions.

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