Family influences on adolescent loneliness

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Abstract. Loneliness is one of the negative emotions that is often brought up in everyday life. Loneliness has a variety of negative effects and can lead to suicidal thoughts at best. Loneliness can be felt at different levels at different ages, and adolescents are the most likely to experience it. Therefore, interventions for adolescent loneliness are necessary. Among the many factors that influence adolescent loneliness, the family, as the environment that adolescents are most familiar with and most often exposed to, has a different impact on adolescent loneliness in different dimensions. There are many studies that directly explore family and adolescent loneliness, but the categories are rather heterogeneous. Therefore, this paper collates and summarises three main aspects, namely family function, parenting style, and parent-child relationship, and analyses the effects of these three aspects on adolescent loneliness, finding that they all negatively predict adolescent loneliness. Meanwhile, factors such as personality, peer attachment, and self-esteem play different roles. Therefore, the study suggests that parents should spend more time with their children and adopt positive parenting styles to reduce adolescent loneliness.

1. Introduction

Loneliness is a common problem among adolescents aged 12 to 18. The level of loneliness among Chinese adolescents has been increasing year by year over the past two decades [1]. At the same time, some studies have shown that higher levels of loneliness are felt in the adolescent stage [2]. Loneliness can affect adolescents' physical health, and mental health and reduce sleep quality [3]. These negative effects are extremely detrimental to the physical and mental development of adolescents. Even loneliness can influence the development of suicidal ideation in adolescents [4]. This is why research on adolescent loneliness is so important.

The family is an important aspect of research on the factors influencing adolescent loneliness. Many studies have been conducted from this aspect, however, there is a lack of collation and general knowledge of the findings available. The purpose of this article is to summarise the impact of family on adolescent loneliness and to explore future research directions. This article will first provide a brief definition of loneliness, then discuss the three themes of family functioning, parent-child relationships, parenting styles and parent-child relationships, and finally discuss them from a holistic perspective and provide some reference ideas for research.

2. Overview of loneliness

2.1. Definition of loneliness

Loneliness is often mentioned in life, and systematic research on loneliness has been conducted relatively recently [5]. There is no uniform definition of loneliness, although most studies focus on interpersonal relationships, i.e. they consider loneliness to be a negative emotion that arises when individuals are unable to meet their needs in terms of interpersonal relationships [3]. In other words, the development of loneliness is strongly linked to the lack of interpersonal relationships.

People who spend much time alone may not feel lonely, while those who engage in regular social interaction are also likely to feel lonely. This is due to the difference between the objective manifestations of loneliness and the subjective manifestations of loneliness [6]. There is a clear distinction between being alone or living alone, which can be seen as an objective manifestation of loneliness, and the subjective manifestation of loneliness, which is primarily the feeling of loneliness experienced within an individual. What is commonly referred to as loneliness refers to the subjective manifestation of loneliness, viewing it as a subjective experience. This makes a distinction between loneliness and social isolation, which is an objective situation and the two should not be confused.

The distinction has been made in some studies between voluntary and involuntary loneliness, the difference between the two being whether loneliness is a self-chosen behaviour [7]. Involuntary loneliness, on the other hand, tends to have negative effects, whereas voluntary loneliness has positive effects as an actively sought-out experience of loneliness [8]. Many of the studies that have been conducted do not make a clear distinction, but essentially examine the negative effects of involuntary loneliness, with less research on voluntary
loneliness. Involuntary loneliness is discussed in this paper.

2.2 Loneliness in adolescents

Loneliness is a universal problem. There is a high incidence of loneliness in adolescence. In order to reduce the negative impact of loneliness on adolescents, attention should be paid to the level and characteristics of adolescent loneliness. The overall level of loneliness among adolescents in China is moderate, but the trend is increasing year by year, and the situation of adolescent loneliness is not optimistic [1]. Research on adolescent loneliness is therefore necessary.

3. The impact of family functioning on adolescent loneliness

3.1 Direct effect

Family functioning is the effect that a family as a system has on its members [9]. There is a paucity of research on the impact of family functioning on loneliness, and what research there is indicates a direct link between the two, with family functioning also influencing adolescent loneliness through personality and perceptual differences between parents and children. Overall, the better the family functioning, the lower the level of adolescent loneliness [10]. However, the sample in this study was small and its results lacked credibility. Family functioning was divided into five dimensions: interrelationship, communication, conflict and harmony, parental attention, and parental control. Two of these dimensions, parental control, and conflict and harmony, were direct predictors of adolescent loneliness, and the communication dimension was a significant positive predictor of loneliness. The higher the level of parental control, the higher the level of adolescent loneliness, and the more harmonious the family, the lower the level of adolescent loneliness [11]. Parental control may affect adolescents' socialisation with peers at school, or even direct parental intervention, making it impossible to meet adolescents' social needs with peers at school, which in turn contributes to the experience of loneliness. In contrast, adolescents in harmonious, interconnected, democratic families may be better at socialising with their peers and therefore experience lower levels of loneliness.

3.2 Indirect role of personality factors

Personality factors play a mediating role between family functioning and loneliness. According to the P5 personality division, all four dimensions except prudence play a mediating role in the effect of communication, conflict, and harmony on loneliness [11]. The Family Functioning Assessment Scale in the study was administered to adolescents, which means that the results obtained are actually the family functioning perceived by the adolescents. Due to the differences between the two generations, there may be differences in perceptions of family functioning between parents and children. The greater the perceptual difference, the higher the adolescent's level of loneliness [12]. Loneliness arises as a matter of interpersonal relationships, and differences in perceptions of family functioning between adolescents and their parents can affect communication between the two generations, which in turn affects adolescents' feelings of loneliness.

4. The impact of family functioning on adolescent loneliness

4.1 Direct effect

Parent-child relationships are an important factor influencing adolescents' feelings of loneliness. Current research suggests that parent-child relationships can negatively predict loneliness in adolescents [13]. However, there is no relevant research on the specific mechanism of action. Compared with the non-leaving children group, the leaving children group lacks parental companionship and interaction, and their parent-child relationship may have more problems. The lack of parent-child interaction may further exacerbate their isolation. Some studies using left-behind children as subjects have shown that parent-child relationships still negatively predict loneliness among adolescents, but no significant differences in loneliness levels between the left-behind and non-left-behind groups of children were found. This does not mean that the two groups are similarly situated. It is possible that the closeness of the left-behind children to their parents and peers may have had an impact on this as a protective factor [14].

4.2 Parental Attachment

4.2.1 Direct Attachment

Parental attachment refers to a strong and stable emotional connection between adolescents and their parents [15] and is a facet of the parent-child relationship. Overall, parental attachment has a negative predictive effect on adolescent loneliness [16,17]. However, the study by Bogaerts, S et al. concluded that parental attachment had little effect on adolescent loneliness [18], contradicting the findings of other studies. The reason for this disagreement is that Bogaerts et al.'s study focused on subjective emotional loneliness rather than general, long-term loneliness, so only one question was used in the questionnaire to assess loneliness, leading to the result that there was a small correlation between parental attachment and adolescent loneliness. The study focused on the relationship between parental attachment and emotional loneliness, focusing on subjects' attitudes towards loneliness rather than subjects' subjective feelings of loneliness, whereas the commonly used UCLA loneliness questionnaire assesses subjective feelings of social isolation, so the use of a single question to measure emotional loneliness did not bias the
results of the experiment to a large extent. So this does not affect the existence of a negative predictive effect of parental attachment on adolescent loneliness.

4.2.2 Indirect role of peer attachment and self-esteem

Parents and peers are an important part of adolescents' interpersonal relationships, and there is a link between parental and peer attachment, and both have an impact on adolescents' feelings of loneliness. Peer attachment partially mediates the relationship between parental attachment and adolescent loneliness [16]. Individuals with higher levels of parental attachment have higher levels of peer attachment and lower levels of loneliness. This could be explained by the fact that as adolescents get older, some of the attachment to parents is transformed into attachment to peers. However, the mediating role of peer attachment is still limited and parental attachment still has a greater impact on adolescents' loneliness.

Self-esteem may mediate the relationship between parental attachment and adolescent loneliness through negative sensitivity and social avoidance [17]. The first pathway is that individuals with high levels of attachment have higher levels of self-esteem, hold more positive attitudes, and therefore do not feel lonely, whereas individuals with low levels of attachment are more sensitive to negative emotions and are more likely to experience loneliness. The second pathway is that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to be avoidant in social situations, making it difficult to establish relationships with others and therefore prone to feelings of loneliness. In contrast, individuals with high self-esteem tend to adopt a positive coping approach to social relationships, which allows them to establish sufficient connections with others and reduces feelings of loneliness.

5. The impact of parenting styles on adolescent loneliness

5.1 Emotional warmth

Parenting styles are more stable patterns developed by parents in the process of raising their children. Of the five dimensions of parenting style ("emotional warmth, understanding" "excessive interference" "punishment, harshness" "rejection, denial" "overprotective" and "object of preference"), the relationship between emotional warmth and adolescent loneliness has been the focus of most research. Overall, parental emotional warmth had a significant negative predictive effect on adolescent loneliness [19,20]. There were large gender differences. Firstly, in terms of levels of loneliness, boys had higher levels of loneliness than girls. In terms of the level of parental emotional warmth, it was shown that the level of warmth was higher in mothers than in fathers. In terms of levels of emotional warmth and loneliness, there was no significant effect of fathers' emotional warmth on sons' loneliness, while mothers' warm parenting levels had a greater impact on their children's development of loneliness. Furthermore, between mother-daughter relationships, fathers' positive parenting styles can have a compensatory effect [20]. Interpersonal competence and self-esteem levels mediate the relationship between parental emotional warmth and adolescent loneliness, and there are multiple pathways of influence. The first pathway is that emotional warmth positively predicts interpersonal competence, which in turn negatively predicts loneliness. The self-exposure dimension of interpersonal competence has the highest mediating effect, with no effect on the ability to express dissatisfaction directly [19]. The second pathway is that emotional warmth positively predicts self-esteem levels, which in turn negatively predicts loneliness. The third pathway is that emotional warmth influences loneliness levels in turn through interpersonal competence and self-esteem, with interpersonal competence being positively related to self-esteem levels [20].

5.2 Parental punishment

The study by Yun Luo et al. explored the effects of parental punishment, self-concept, teacher-student relationships, and adolescent loneliness, proposing a hypothetical model of the mediating role of self-concept and the moderating role of teacher-student relationships. The study included 1,169 adolescents aged 10 to 18 years and the results had good credibility. Adolescent loneliness was negatively correlated with parental punishment, and the general self-concept was partially mediated between parental punishment and adolescent loneliness, with parental punishment being detrimental to the development of adolescent self-concept and thus increasing loneliness. The moderating effect of teacher-student relationships, on the other hand, was mainly reflected in the pathway of parental punishment on loneliness and self-concept [21].

In general, positive parenting styles can help young people feel less lonely, while negative parenting styles are more likely to make young people feel lonely. The direct effect of parenting style on loneliness is not significant, but it can indirectly affect adolescent loneliness through a variety of factors such as interpersonal skills and self-esteem levels and is an important influencing factor.

6. Discussion

Many aspects of the family have an impact on feelings of loneliness, and even this factor of the family has a profound effect on adolescent loneliness. In terms of the concept of loneliness, as a negative emotion that is closely linked to interpersonal relationships, it is natural that the people with whom adolescents have the most contact on a regular basis, their parents, have an immeasurable impact on adolescents' feelings of loneliness. However, the overall body of research on related content is lacking. In particular, there is less research on family functioning, and further research
could be carried out in this area. In addition to parent-child relationships, family relationships also include husband-wife relationships and sibling relationships. These two relationships may also have a greater impact on adolescent loneliness, but there is a gap in research, with essentially no researcher focusing on these two factors, and this should be a direction of interest if we are to further understand the factors influencing adolescent loneliness.

The gender differences reported in the studies currently available are worth noting. The first is the difference in levels of loneliness between boys and girls, with disagreement between the findings, with some suggesting that boys have higher levels of loneliness than girls, and others suggesting that girls have higher levels of loneliness than boys. This divergence may be influenced by region, school, and the age group of the study participants. Gender differences also existed between parenting styles and adolescent loneliness, for example, the emotional warmth of the father did not have a significant effect on the loneliness of the son, and the emotional warmth of the father would also have a compensatory effect on the mother-daughter relationship, which was not found between mothers and sons [20]. The influence of both parents on adolescents also varies, as Gangmin Xu et al. conducted a study on the quality of mother-son relationships [22]. Examining parental influences separately may help to identify more specific mechanisms of influence, although more research would be needed to fully explain the effects of both parents on their children's loneliness. This is not a distinction that has been made in general research and more in-depth research could be conducted in this area.

Research can also be carried out with different groups of people. For example, it is worth exploring the level of loneliness of children left behind in comparison to those not left behind, and the impact of parental absence on their feelings of loneliness. In addition, adolescents in single-parent families may have different feelings about parental attachment and parent-child relationships than adolescents in ordinary families due to the absence of their fathers or mothers, and the mechanisms by which their feelings of loneliness are influenced by their families may also be different from those of ordinary adolescents. In conclusion, it is necessary to explore the feelings of loneliness in different groups of adolescents, which will help in the intervention of adolescent loneliness.

Interpersonal skills play a mediating role in the influence of different factors on adolescents' feelings of loneliness. Because loneliness is caused by problems with interpersonal relationships, interventions should focus on how to help young people improve their interpersonal relationships. From a family perspective, it is important to focus on the kind of parent-child and sibling relationships that will reduce the chances of the young person feeling lonely. This requires parents or other relatives to devote sufficient time to their children, rather than leaving them at home in a state where they are always alone on their phones. As teenagers are more prone to conflict with their parents at this stage, it is important that parents learn how to communicate with their children to minimise conflict. However, parents do not need to be around their teenagers all the time, but rather give them some time to be alone or socialise with their peers. The way parents parent their teenagers may influence their relationships outside the home in several ways, which in turn may affect feelings of isolation. It is recommended that parents adopt a warm and understanding parenting style, rather than causing problems in their teenager's relationships through over-interference and over-protection.

7. Conclusion

Family functioning, parent-child relationships, and parenting styles all have an impact on adolescent loneliness, and their specific effects are: (1) Family functioning negatively predicts adolescent loneliness, with personality factors mediating this. (2) Parent-child relationship negatively predicts adolescent loneliness, with peer attachment and self-esteem mediating the relationship between parental attachment and adolescent loneliness. (3) Emotional warmth in parenting and parental punishment negatively predicted adolescent loneliness, while self-concept and teacher-student relationship mediated and moderated the relationship between parental punishment and adolescent loneliness respectively. Parents can take measures to reduce adolescent loneliness by increasing time spent with them and adopting positive parenting styles. This paper has chosen three directions to explore the factors that influence adolescent loneliness, and the scope and number of references are lacking. A family is a complex unit, and its influence on adolescent loneliness exists in many ways than just the four directions given in this paper.

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