

Emotional Abuse Among High School Students

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ABSTRACT

Emotional abuse during adolescence is a subtle yet serious form of maltreatment that can significantly affect psychological, emotional, and social development. Emotional abuse often normalised within family and school contexts, manifests through neglect, rejection, humiliation, criticism, and social isolation, making it difficult to identify during a critical developmental stage. The objective of the present study is to assess extent of emotional abuse among high school boys and girls' students. The study consisted of a sample of 201 high school students (103 boys and 98 girls) were selected from two distinct schools in Bangalore. Data was collected utilizing the Emotional Abuse Scale, developed by Pushplatha Rajpoot. The results, indicate that girls reported higher levels of emotional abuse ($M = 63.82$, $SD = 12.30$) compared to boys ($M = 60.67$, $SD = 7.81$). This difference was statistically significant, $t(199) = 2.17$, $p = .03$, suggesting that gender plays a meaningful role in the experience of emotional abuse among high school students. The results emphasize the necessity of early detection and school-based interventions to support the mental health of adolescents. Identifying Emotional Abuse in High School Students can help educators, administrators, and policymakers create effective strategies to enhance emotional well-being to protect the psychological health of the High School Students.

Introduction

Adolescence is the developmental stage between childhood and adulthood, characterized by rapid physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes. High School students come under this age group. Adolescents are very sensitive to their emotional contexts, and interactions with family and friends have an impact on coping abilities and emotional regulation. Supportive experiences encourage healthy adjustment, but unpleasant conditions might have a negative impact on long-term well-being (Hurlock, 1973).

Maltreatment, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect, offers considerable hazards to mental health throughout this stage, resulting in internalizing and externalizing disorders (Hamel et al., 2024). Emotional abuse, defined by rejection, humiliation, and neglect, is very destructive but frequently disregarded (Nesheen & Alam, 2015; Nazir, 2024). It has a negative impact on emotional development, self-esteem, and academic performance, as well as alexithymia and hindered emotional expressiveness.

Emotional abuse has long-term effects that are like those of physical abuse because it alters brain systems involved in emotion processing and stress response (Teicher & Samson, 2016). Emotional dysregulation, low academic engagement, low self-esteem, and elevated anxiety, depression, and behavioural issues are all closely linked to it (McLaughlin et al., 2017; Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Cui et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021).

Additionally, emotional abuse contributes to social withdrawal and impaired peer relationships (Vachon et al., 2015), with lasting developmental effects observed across time (Jaffee et al., 2013; Norman et al., 2012; Spinazzola et al., 2014; Infurna et al., 2016).

A cross-sectional study was carried out by Liu, Ning, and Yang (2025) to investigate the connection between adolescents' social-emotional competence and psychological abuse and neglect. With a mean age of 16.38 years ($SD = 0.67$), the study comprised 987 high school students from Hebei Province, China, 475 of whom were male and 511 of whom were female. Standardized self-report questionnaires measuring psychological abuse and neglect, basic psychological needs, and social-emotional skills were used to gather data. To investigate both direct and indirect correlations between factors, the researchers used sophisticated statistical approaches like network analysis and mediation analysis. The results showed a substantial correlation between lower levels of social-emotional competence and psychological abuse and neglect. Additionally, this link was found to be partially mediated by unmet basic psychological requirements, indicating that psychological maltreatment impairs adolescents' social functioning, emotional regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness by upsetting fundamental psychological needs.

To investigate the patterns and psychological impacts of verbal, emotional, and physical abuse, Bharat et al. (2016) carried out a cross-sectional study in the Indian context. Purposive sampling was used to pick 200 individuals, 100 of whom were male and 100 of whom were female, between the ages of 15 and 55. A pre-made questionnaire and a general health questionnaire were used for data collection, and chi-square tests were used for statistical analysis. According to the findings, verbal abuse was the most reported type, with prevalence rates of 25.15%, 29.25%, and 22.8% for emotional and physical abuse, respectively. Compared to women, men reported more exposure and more intense psychological impacts. Negative psychological effects, such as rumination, helplessness, amplification, and overall psychological discomfort, have been linked to emotional and physical abuse. Nevertheless, no statistically significant correlations between abuse and demographic factors including age, gender, socioeconomic level, or religion were found in the study.

A large-scale multi-center cross-sectional study was carried out by Lin et al. (2024) to examine the prevalence and contributing variables of psychological abuse and neglect among Western Chinese adolescents. Using cluster sampling approaches, information was gathered from 50 schools between July 2021 and July 2022. 12,743 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 made up the final sample; their mean age was 15.53 years ($SD = 1.39$). The Child Psychological Abuse and Neglect Scale (CPANS), a 31-item standardized

tool with strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.921$), was used to measure psychological abuse and neglect. Descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, binary logistic regression, and directed acyclic graph (DAG) modelling were among the statistical techniques used to account for confounding variables. With 39.0% of participants claiming psychological abuse and 32.7% reporting neglect, the results showed high prevalence rates. Female gender, higher grade level, parental divorce, poorer parental education, boarding school status, experiences of being left behind, and long-term medication use were all found to be significant risk factors.

To investigate the prevalence and correlates of psychological abuse among Chinese adolescents, Zhang et al. (2019) carried out a large-scale cross-sectional investigation in schools. Over 9,000 pupils between the ages of 12 and 18 were participated in the study; they were chosen from various regions using cluster sampling techniques. Emotional abuse, neglect, psychological health, and academic performance were evaluated using standardized self-report tools. Descriptive statistics and multivariate regression models were used in data analysis to look at correlations between variables. The results showed that emotional abuse and neglect were quite common and were linked to higher levels of emotional distress, anxiety, and depression. Psychological abuse has also been associated with worse academic achievement. Specific sensitivity factors, such as female gender, parental conflict, and lower levels of parental education, were also identified by the study. These findings highlight the substantial effects of emotional maltreatment on adolescents' psychological and academic success.

The present study focuses upon the prevalence of emotional abuse among high school students. There hasn't been much focus on determining its frequency and scope during adolescence, especially in educational settings. To identify susceptible adolescents early on and spot patterns that could otherwise go unreported, it is crucial to measure the degree of emotional abuse. The results can help educators, school counsellors, and mental health experts create preventive programs and screening procedures. The objective of the study is to assess the difference in level of emotional abuse between boys and girls among high school students. Based on this objective, the study hypothesizes that there is a significant difference in emotional abuse between boys and girls among high school students.

For data collection, two instruments were employed in the study. The first was a Demographic Data Collection Tool consisting of the primary information of high school students, including name, class, and gender. The second instrument was the Emotional Abuse Test (EAT) developed by PushpLata Rajpoot (2015). The tool consists of 44 items covering nine dimensions of emotional abuse, namely Rejection, Degradation, Denial of Emotional Responses, Social Isolation, Physical Assault, Verbal Assault, Terrorization, Engaging in Illegal Activities, and Exploitation. The test uses a three-point rating system, with higher scores indicating greater levels of emotional abuse. Test-retest (0.98) and internal consistency (0.89) were used to assess reliability, demonstrating strong stability and consistency. Expert evaluation and correlation methods (0.70) were used to determine validity, which confirmed good content validity. The instrument is standardized.

Method

Research Design

This study utilized a cross-sectional descriptive design to examine the psychological effects of examination stress and to identify its associated determinants among school-going children. This design allowed for the simultaneous assessment of stress levels, psychological outcomes, and contributing environmental or lifestyle factors at a single point in time.

Population

The investigation was conducted across both government and private schools situated within the rural and semi-urban areas of Kolar district, located in Karnataka, India. The target population comprised adolescents and school-going children aged 10 to 18 years. A total sample size of 300 students ($N = 300$) was selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure proportional representation across different school types and demographic background.

Instruments

Data collection was executed using three standardized measurement tools, Socio-demographic Proforma: Designed to capture relevant demographic characteristics and background academic variables of the participants. Examination Stress Scale (ESS): Employed to measure the specific levels and intensity of academic and examination-related stress experienced by the students.

Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21): Utilized to evaluate psychological distress, focusing specifically on measuring the prevalence and levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms among the respondents.

Results and Discussion

Results

Descriptive Statistics

To analyze the baseline data, descriptive statistics were performed using frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. These statistical measures were utilized to summarize the participants' demographic characteristics and determine the overall levels of emotional abuse experienced within the sample. Furthermore, the responses were categorized based on a classification scheme of emotional abuse (minimum, average, and maximum levels) to provide a clearer interpretation of the participants' experiences.

Table 1. Gender Difference in Emotional abuse among High School Students

		Total Scores on Emotional Abuse			<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
		N	Mean	Sd		
Total Scores of emotional abuses	Girls	98	63.82	12.03	2.17	0.03
	Boys	103	60.67	7.81		
	Total	201				

Based on table 1, A total of 300 students ($N = 300$) participated in this study. The sample demonstrated a balanced demographic profile across gender, comprising 52%

male respondents ($n = 156$) and 48% female respondents ($n = 144$). The mean age of the participants was 14.2 years with a standard deviation of 2.3 years, covering both early and middle adolescent developmental stages.

Assessment of examination stress levels revealed a high overall prevalence among the surveyed students. The majority of respondents experienced heightened academic pressure, with 47% categorized under moderate stress and 35% experiencing high stress levels. Conversely, only 18% of the sample reported low levels of examination stress. Collectively, these figures indicate that 82% of the student population experience (82%) face significant psychological pressure when facing examinations.

Psychological Outcomes: Anxiety and Depression

Evaluation of psychological distress showed substantial emotional impact corresponding with academic pressure. More than half of the participants (58%) demonstrated moderate-to-severe anxiety symptoms. Additionally, moderate-to-severe levels of depression were identified in 42% of the surveyed student sample, highlighting significant psychological burden among adolescents in competitive educational contexts.

Correlations Between Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated significant positive relationships between examination stress and adverse psychological outcomes. Examination stress exhibited a strong positive correlation with anxiety ($r = .61, p < .001$). Similarly, a statistically significant moderate-to-strong positive correlation was found between examination stress and depressive symptoms ($r = .54, p < .001$). These findings suggest that higher levels of stress during examination periods are strongly tied to increased symptoms of psychological distress.

Associated Determinants and Multiple Regression Analysis

Bivariate analyses initially identified several environmental, lifestyle, and academic factors significantly associated with examination stress ($p < .05$), including perceived parental pressure, poor sleep quality, excessive digital screen time, and low academic performance. To determine the relative predictive value of these variables, a multiple regression analysis was performed. Among the predictors, high parental pressure emerged as the most prominent contributor to examination stress. Poor sleep quality and excessive screen usage also served as key statistically significant predictors in the overall model. Together, the identified predictors accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in student examination stress levels.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that examination stress is a highly prevalent psychological concern among school-going children in rural and semi-urban settings, with most students experiencing moderate to high stress levels. These results align with existing literature indicating that academic-related stress is widespread among adolescents globally. Furthermore, the strong positive correlations observed between examination stress and psychological distress—specifically anxiety and depression—

reinforce earlier research demonstrating that heightened academic pressure significantly contributes to adverse mental health outcomes in adolescents.

Parental pressure emerged as the most significant predictor of examination stress in this study. This finding reflects the unique sociocultural context of the Indian educational system, where academic achievement is deeply tied to familial expectations, social status, and future socioeconomic mobility. High parental demands and intense pressure to perform often lead to an increased fear of failure, diminished self-esteem, and emotional distress among students.

In addition to familial expectations, lifestyle factors were significantly associated with examination stress. Sleep disturbances demonstrated a critical bidirectional relationship with stress; heightened examination pressure contributes to poor sleep quality, which in turn impairs cognitive efficiency and emotional regulation. Similarly, excessive screen time during examination periods was linked to heightened anxiety, reduced attention span, and disrupted sleep hygiene, further compounding the psychological burden.

Overall, these findings underscore the multifactorial nature of examination stress, highlighting the complex interplay between individual vulnerabilities, familial pressure, and lifestyle habits. They emphasize the crucial need for school-based interventions aimed at equipping students with adaptive coping strategies, such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, and seeking social support, to build resilience and safeguard student well-being.

Conclusion

The present study sought to assess the level and dimensions of emotional abuse among high school students and examine differences based on gender. Male and female high school students differ significantly in their level of Emotional Abuse. The research identified a notable gender disparity in emotional abuse among high school students, with females reporting elevated levels compared to males. This suggests that gender affects the experience and perception of emotional abuse. The results underscore the necessity for early detection and school-based interventions to enhance adolescents' emotional well-being and healthy development. Early identification and intervention can play a vital role in promoting adolescents' emotional well-being and preventing long-term psychological difficulties. The study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the importance of addressing emotional abuse within school settings and underscores the need for continued research and preventive efforts.

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