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Adolescent Perceptions of Attachment:  
Parents, Friends, and Impact on Self Esteem

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## ABSTRACT

Attachment is generally described as an enduring affectional bond of substantial intensity. Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory implies that optimal outcomes are associated with an attachment relationship that is characterised by a confidence in the accessibility and responsiveness of the caregiver. Three studies were designed to explore changes in New Zealand adolescents' perceptions of their attachment to mothers, fathers, and friends, and the relative impact of these relationships on three measures of self esteem. Two dimensions of the attachment relationship were assessed, the utilisation of emotional support and proximity, and the quality of affect.

Study 1 ( $n = 180$ ) revealed that although adolescents utilised their mothers for support and proximity more than their fathers, and perceived their mothers as more responsive than fathers, they did not differ in their quality of affect towards their parents. Friends were utilised significantly more in support seeking situations than in proximity seeking situations.

Study 2 ( $n = 493$ ) revealed that male and female adolescents differed in their perceptions of their attachment to mothers in late adolescence. With increasing age, females reported that they would utilise maternal support and proximity more, whereas males reported utilising their mothers less in both types of situation. However, both male and female adolescents continued to report a high quality of affect towards their mothers throughout adolescence. No differences were found in male and female adolescents' perceptions of their attachment to fathers. With increasing age, males and females utilised paternal support and proximity less, and reported a lower quality of affect towards their fathers. Adolescents continued to utilise their friends highly for support throughout adolescence, and increased their utilisation of friends for proximity as they got older. Regardless of age, females reported a higher quality of affect towards their friends than males. These findings

suggested that substantial changes take place in attachment relationships from early to late adolescence, and that these changes are affected by the sex of the adolescent and the sex of the parent. Further analyses revealed that Pacific Island adolescents utilised their mothers significantly less for support than European/Pakeha adolescents. Adolescents from one-parent families utilised their fathers significantly less for support and proximity, and had a lower quality of affect towards them than adolescents from two-parent families. The utilisation of support and proximity from mothers, fathers, and friends was minimally related to overall self esteem, coping abilities and social competence. The quality of affect towards mothers and fathers was significantly related to all three measures of self esteem, whereas the quality of affect towards friends was significantly related only to social competence. Adolescent attachment to parents appears to exert a relatively stronger effect on self esteem than adolescent attachment to friends, regardless of the sex or age of the adolescent.

Study 3 (n = 80) examined the main reasons for utilising parents and friends for emotional support, and for feeling close to parents and friends. Content analysis revealed that the reasons did not differ according to the age or sex of the adolescent but varied according to the attachment figure.

Overall, the three studies revealed that New Zealand adolescents' descriptions of their relationships with parents and friends differed at both the cognitive-affective and behavioural levels of attachment. The divergent patterns of support seeking and proximity seeking highlighted these differences, and clearly illustrated the need to distinguish these two aspects of the behavioural dimension of attachment in adolescence. The implications of the findings for adolescent attachment to parents and friends are considered, and future directions for research are discussed.

We shall not cease from Exploration  
And at the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

*T. S. Eliot*

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