

# Research on Psychological Wellbeing of Adolescent School Children: Perspective on Ethical Considerations

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## ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a distinctive and determinative stage in human life. Adolescent period serves as a transition between childhood and adulthood during which they acquire social, cognitive and emotional skills that determine their future. During these years, adolescent children undergo lot of physical and emotional changes. The quality of the environment where adolescents grow up shapes their physical and psychological well-being. Negative impact on mental health can happen due to encounters in homes, schools or social media which increases the risk of developing mental illness. This could be because of bullying, poverty, violence and mentally ill parents or siblings. In such cases, adolescents struggle to handle their psychological health and unless they get adequate care and support from parents, teachers and peer group, their psychological well-being gets affected. It is estimated that 1 in 7 adolescents worldwide experience mental health conditions. However, majority of these psychological issues go unnoticed and untreated. This article highlights various ethical issues in the Researchers' Perspective when a study was planned to assess the psychological wellbeing of adolescent school children in an urban part of Tamil Nādu, India. Knowing the ethical concerns in conducting the research on psychological wellness of adolescents will help in planning more research studies for a better understanding of the epidemiology of mental illnesses among them.

**Keywords:** Adolescence, psychology, ethics, mental health

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## INTRODUCTION

World Health Organisation defines Health as “a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing, not just absence of disease or infirmity”.<sup>1</sup> In the present era of life with advances in science and technology, wellbeing is now recognised as one of the most precious goods in human life.

Adolescence is a critical phase in human life where an individual transitions from childhood to adulthood.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the rapid phases of human growth and development. It is estimated that there are nearly 1.2 billion adolescents worldwide i.e., every sixth person in the world is an adolescent.<sup>3</sup>

Adolescent period is a crucial period for development and maintenance of social and emotional habits which are important for mental and emotional wellbeing of a person. Globally, Depression is one of the leading causes of illness among adolescents and suicide ranks as the third leading cause of death in adolescents aged 15-19-years.<sup>4</sup> If we do not address the mental health impairment in adolescence, it extends to adulthood and impairs the overall health and wellbeing, thereby preventing the individual to lead a socially and economically productive life. Interventions aimed to promote mental health mainly focus on strengthening an individual's capacity to tackle emotions, avoidance of risk-taking behaviours, build resilience into difficult and adverse situations and promote supportive social and emotional environment for the adolescents.<sup>5</sup> Data on mental wellbeing of adolescents from middle income countries like India is lacking.

With the above background, a study was planned to determine the psychological wellbeing of adolescent school children in the city of Chennai. The secondary objective was to assess the association of socio-demographic variables with the psychological wellbeing of adolescents. School children were chosen as study population as schools are the best places to plan health education activities and intervention programmes for children. This article focuses in brief on the key ethical issues identified in assessing the psychological wellbeing of adolescents.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING OF ADOLESCENTS

Nearly 87% of the global adolescent population live in developing countries. India has the largest adolescent population in the world and nearly 243 million adolescents live in India.<sup>6</sup> In 2013, National Child Health Programme (Rashtriya Bal Swasthiya Karkayram) was launched by the Government of India for children upto 18 years of age with the aim of early detection and management of childhood illnesses.<sup>7</sup> Later in the year 2014, the government launched the National Adolescent health programme known as Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram.<sup>8</sup> School health programme has been a part of health and

wellness component of the National Health Protection Mission (Ayushman Bharat programme). School health programme focuses on activities such as health education, health promotion, disease prevention and access to basic health services at schools. This programme also encourages research on health and wellness of children.<sup>9</sup>

Mental health of a child is predominantly influenced by social and environmental factors such as interaction with sibling, parental affection, time spent in e-gadgets etc. Adverse family circumstances can affect the mental wellbeing of a child.<sup>10</sup> Mental illnesses account for 16% of the global burden of disease and injury in people aged 10–19 years. Half of all mental health conditions start by 14 years of age but most cases are undetected and untreated.<sup>4</sup> There are many tools available to assess the psychological wellbeing of adults and adolescents. Among them, General health questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12) is a short and reliable tool to identify common mental health disorders like anxiety, depression and psychological distress among adolescents.<sup>11</sup> Those who found positive can be tested with more elaborate questionnaires or referred to a psychologist for further evaluation.

## KEY ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study population included in the research project are adolescent children enrolled in selected schools. Since they are in the age group of 12-18 years, they are considered minors and they are not in a position to give informed consent to participate in the study. We require written informed consent from the parent and written assent from the minor child, after explaining in detail the objectives of the study.

The ethical issues identified in the conduct of this study are

- a) Convincing the school management about the significance of psychological wellbeing of children and obtaining permission to conduct the study. The key issue is that the school authorities may be worried that the identity of the educational institution will be revealed in the study report.
- b) Do adolescent school children face any issue in participating in the study? Children would be worried regarding whether information will be shared with teachers or parents.
- c) Will the minor child be able to understand the purpose of the study? Here, the concern is the impact of children's perceptions in participating in a survey on their psychological wellness. They should be able to perceive and appreciate the importance of mental health assessment.
- d) What if the parents refuse to allow their children to participate in the study? This depends on the parents' trust towards the researchers and their understanding on the objectives of the study. If parents deny to give their consent, non-response rate will be more and it will affect the results of the study.

e) What if the parent is willing but minor child refuses to participate? In this scenario, it is determined by the child's feelings towards the participation in research and their confidence on the researchers.

f) What if we identify that the mental health of a minor child is in danger? Should the researcher provide sensitive information to the parents regarding their children? Parents would want to know their children's research information, but children would like to keep their survey data confidential.

g) Can the researcher disclose confidential data to teachers? The children could reveal negative experiences in learning which is in-turn affecting their psychological health. They may have a fear that the researchers can disclose the details to the concerned teachers.

h) How to coordinate further evaluation of children identified to have psychological disorders? It needs further screening and follow-up and the data of the children identified have to be shared with the parents for early diagnosis and management.

i) Exclusion of chronic absentees, school dropouts and out of school adolescents. These Key populations will be missed out in school-based studies. The reason for chronic absenteeism or drop out from school can be due to psychological illnesses or experiences preventing the children from getting educated.

## CONCLUSION

Mental health problems in adolescent children are on the rise and the real burden of this health issue remains hidden. More studies are needed in a larger scale in India covering both rural and urban areas to know the epidemiology of mental disorders in adolescents. These studies will give us the baseline data on the prevalence of mental health disorders and associated social determinants. This in turn would help the policy makers to plan for mental health programs, identify at-risk children and develop strategies for preventive and promotive interventions. Taking into consideration, the ethical concerns in doing research on psychological health of adolescents need to be kept in mind and study has to be planned with robust methodology. Researchers have to explain the parents, teachers and children the purpose of the study in a comprehensive manner and assure them on data safety and confidentiality.

Specific issues need to be addressed are:

a). There is a need to develop standard guidelines on the consent process for mental health research among adolescents. The guidelines should also discuss exceptional circumstances like a minor's willingness to participate in spite of parental refusal.

b). The research team should be trained in how to convince the parents and school authorities and make them understand the significance of this research. The school management must ensure that the analysis report will not reveal any identifying infor-

mation. The research team should also gain the confidence of children and let them know they are free to withdraw from the study if they feel uncomfortable and there is no undue pressure for them to participate in the research. Confidentiality is a common and important concern in adolescent research. Children should be assured of before initiating the study.

c). To do studies on adolescent psychological well-being, we need to create more awareness among the community on the importance of mental wellbeing of children. Parents should be educated on the significance of mental wellbeing of their children which plays a major role in their quality of life in adulthood. Once the researchers obtain the trust of parents by orienting them to the importance of such research studies, the implementation becomes easier.

d). School management authorities should be given regular orientation on the importance of making the child feel comfortable at school and avoid unnecessary stress/pressure in showing top performances in studies. The research team should make the authorities realize that the assessment of psychological wellbeing of students is important and the data will be kept confidential without revealing any identifying information.

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