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**Differences in Self-Esteem between Genders: A Look at Middle School**

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The Graduate College of  
Marshall University**

**In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Education Specialist  
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**by**

**Beth S. Michael**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Differences in Self-Esteem between Genders: A Look at Middle School**

**By Beth S. Michael**

Most theorists suggest that the development of self-esteem is formed through interactions and experiences. However, these experiences may greatly differ between males and females in early adolescence because of developmental differences between the genders. Socialization may also play an important role in the self-esteem differences between genders. Overall, males and females have different developmental levels at the middle school age. Early or late development may impact the adolescent's self-esteem. This study will examine the differences in self-esteem between genders in middle school adolescents.

## Differences in Self-Esteem between Genders: A Look at Middle Schools

Psychologists have studied self-esteem for many years. Self-esteem involves the subjective evaluation of one's self (Woo Bae & Brekke, 2003). Research has shown that high self-esteem is largely associated with good mental health, social skills, and higher achievement. Some positive outcomes of high self-esteem may include healthy social relationships, positive perceptions by peers, academic achievement, persistence, and improved coping skills (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). On the contrary, low self-esteem has been associated with depression (Woo Bae & Brekke), antisocial behavior (Trzesniewski, et al.), drug and alcohol use, and criminal behavior (Woo Bae & Brekke).

It is commonly believed that males and females differ in many ways. However, do they differ in their views of themselves? In a study by Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins (2003), researchers found that stability in self-esteem did not differ by gender over an entire lifespan. However, could an individual's self-esteem differ by gender at a certain age, such as early adolescence? During this time, the individual's body begins to change. This can greatly affect adolescent's subjective perception of self and self-esteem. In general, females develop earlier than males do (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). Therefore, it is possible that there is a self-esteem difference based on gender and overall physical and other developmental trajectories in early adolescence.

The shift into adolescence is often unstable. Adolescents encounter many cognitive, biological, and social changes. Next appears the introduction of new roles and intimate relationships (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). These changes in adolescences can affect how an individual perceives himself/herself. Changes may

influence individuals differently depending on several factors such timely maturity and how peers may view the adolescent (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). “For example, adolescents who physically mature earlier than their peers may lose self-esteem whereas adolescents who mature at the same time as their peers may gain self-esteem (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003, pg. 17).”

## Review of Literature

### *Definitions of Self-Esteem*

There are many definitions of self-esteem. According to Nathaniel Branden (1994):

Self-esteem is the experience of being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness. It consists of two components: (1) Self-efficacy — confidence in one's ability to think, learn, choose, and make appropriate decisions, and, by extension, to master challenges and manage change; and (2) self-respect — confidence in one's right to be happy, and, by extension, confidence that achievement, success, friendship, respect, love, and fulfillment are appropriate for oneself. (p.2)

### *Theories of Self-Esteem Development*

Most theorists suggest that the development of self-esteem is formed through interactions and experiences (Berk, 2001). Children learn through observation and imitation. While learning socially appropriate behaviors, children will then internalize this information and form an image of self (Berk, 2001). Forming an image or identity of self that does not coincide with others in his/her environment can thus lower a child's

self-esteem. Studies show that approval and support from parents and peers can greatly influence an early adolescent's self-esteem (Berk, 2001).

*Maslow.* Abraham Maslow's primary research was on motivation. He developed a theory of motivation including a hierarchy of needs that humans must meet (Huitt, 2003). In Maslow's hierarchy of needs there are two main categories; deficiency needs, and growth needs (Huitt, 2003). Within Maslow's hierarchy, each need must be satisfied in order to move into the higher levels of needs. Figure 1 shows that the fourth level is esteem. In this level an individual will strive to achieve, and gain approval from others. Failure to meet the esteem needs can result in lower self-esteem. Therefore, when relating this information to students, a question that must be answered is "Does achievement produce high self-esteem or does high self-esteem produce achievement?"

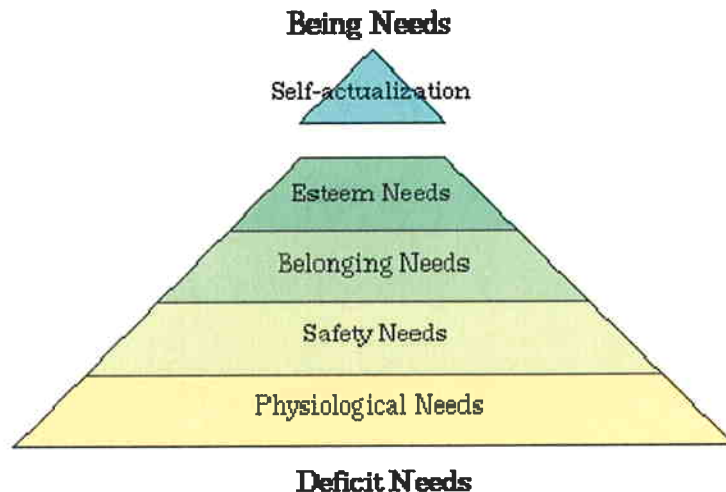


Figure 1 from Boeree, (1998). (p.2)

*Rogers.* Carl Rogers (1902-1987) is known for his person-centered therapy. Like Maslow, Rogers felt that humans were driven by a motivating factor, the need for self-

actualization. If, in infancy, the child receives unconditional love and acceptance (positive regard) from the mother, then the child will grow up with a sense of self worth and be able to achieve self-actualization. A child that grows up without unconditional positive regard is more likely to develop self-esteem difficulties (Schultz & Schultz, 1996).

*Adler.* Alfred Adler (1870-1937) believed that humans have a component of personality that forces them to strive for superiority (Schultz & Schultz, 1996). He felt that the prominent factors affecting a child's development were routed in birth order. Depending on the family, the order of birth can make the child feel inferior causing an "inferiority complex." Such a complex can lead to feelings of lower self-esteem and cause the child to seek behaviors that might eliminate these feelings (Hunt, 1993).

*Erikson.* Erik Erikson (1902-1994) thought that the most important task in adolescence was to establish a strong sense of identity. While constructing an identity, an individual defines his/her value and who he/she is (Berk, 2001). During this time, an adolescent may go through periods of self-exploration in an attempt to discover his or herself (Stienberg, 1995). Adolescents may pursue various identities and roles. Erikson called this stage identity versus identity confusion. He was the first to coin the phrase "identity crisis" to describe the period of confusion during adolescence (Berk, 2001). When these personality changes cause conflict or disapproval, adolescents can experience lowered self-esteem. Erikson believed that adolescents experiment with different roles and images to best fit their ego. Forming and accepting an identity during adolescence can produce low self-esteem and anxiety (Schultz & Schultz, 1996).

### *Developmental Differences*

Michael Gurian (2002) refers to puberty as the “second birth” filled with multidimensional changes. Early adolescence is a period of rapid physical, cognitive, and social changes. Girls are more likely to begin changes in the earlier grades than are boys (Kaplan, 1998). Changes in development can greatly affect the self-esteem of middle school adolescents. Typically, females develop earlier than males (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). These changes can cause strenuous relationships between males and females (Gurian, 2002). Once an adolescent has reached puberty, his/her body will begin to change at a rapid pace. Both sexes will begin to develop sexual characteristics such as breasts in females and facial hair in males (Stienburg, 1998).

There are many problems adjusting to developmental changes in adolescents. Studies have shown that, if adolescents are taught what to expect during this difficult and stressful time of transition, then they will have a better opportunity to adjust to their changing bodies (Stienburg, 1998). However, knowledge does not always prevent lowered self-esteem and self-image. Timing of physical maturation can also lower an adolescent’s self-esteem (Stienburg, 1998). In females, early maturation may lead to teasing from other peers. Early maturing girls are less popular, more withdrawn, lack self-confidence, and are rarely leaders in groups. Studies have shown that females that mature earlier were more likely to engage in problem behaviors or have poor achievement in school settings than timely developing females (Berk, 2001).



In contrast, late maturing boys are liked less by others than early maturing boys. When asked to describe males that mature late, others viewed them as “anxious, overly talkative, and attention seeking (Berk, 2001, pg.357).” Stienburg (1998) states:

[E]arly-maturing boys tend to be more popular, to have more positive self-conceptions, and to be more self-assured than their later-maturing peers, whereas early-maturing girls may feel awkward and self-conscious. (p. 2)

### *Importance of Self-Esteem*

It has long been thought that a regard for oneself is vital for good mental health. Many connections between self-esteem and cognitive functions have been made in research studies. How an individual feels about his/herself can greatly affect his/her behavior and performance in many areas (Stienberg, 1995). Thus, higher self-esteem can result in higher levels of positive regard for oneself.

Self-esteem can be related to self- confidence (Stienberg, 1995). For example, a person with high self-esteem may feel confident in his/her abilities and try (and succeed at) many activities. For students this may not only include academic achievement but also succeeding in social situations. Because adolescence is such a difficult and confusing time, high self-esteem is an essential tool to obtain.

Stienberg (1995) suggests that self-esteem is also associated with proper adjustment. Studies suggest that self-esteem is a useful tool when dealing with stressful events. In adolescence, normal everyday events may be stressful. Adolescents can use high self-esteem productively when dealing with the changes they are experiencing. Self-esteem in adolescence is multidimensional. Steinberg states:

[I]t is possible for an adolescent to have high self-esteem when it comes to his academic abilities, low self-esteem when it comes to athletics, and moderate self-esteem when it comes to his physical appearance. (pg. 3)

### *Differences in Gender*

Traditionally it has been thought that females exhibit lower self-esteem than males. There have been various studies searching for an explanation for this difference. Students between 15 and 18 years old exhibit the largest gender gap in self-esteem (Daubman, 2001). Most studies on gender differences in self-esteem focus on adolescents but fail to target early adolescents such as 12-14 year olds. Daubman (2001) discusses that even a small difference in self-esteem could lead to important consequences. For example, girls with lower-self esteem may choose less difficult classes or less challenging careers.

Piers concluded that there are several gender differences when completing the Piers-Harris Self-Concept scale (Hattie, 1992). Males generally report less anxiety and more problematic behaviors than females (see Table 1).

*Importance of physical appearance.* The obvious difference between self-esteem and gender can be attributed to the importance Western culture places on physical appearance. Judgment of physical attractiveness affects self-esteem in both males and females. Females often report greater dissatisfaction with their appearance than males (Daubman, 2001). Females in general are more concerned with body image and weight than males (Kileen, & Forehand, 1998). Magazines and media help set the standard of

how “beautiful” women should look. This emphasis on appearance can contribute to the lower-self esteem of adolescent females.

During puberty, the body is rapidly changing. The difference between males and females in their approval with their own physical appearance may be caused by the different perception of physical maturation for both genders. Males generally develop muscle. However, females gain fat, creating a contrast between the ideal of female beauty and the adolescent’s own developing body (Daubman, 2001).

Females trying to look like models in the media also have to overcome the physical changes that their bodies are going through. Therefore, this struggle between nature and culture can be frustrating and lower an individual’s self-esteem and self-image. Some females may attribute their self-worth to their looks instead of abilities. This can lead to eating disorders.

*Socialization.* Another explanation for gender differences in self-esteem is the process of socialization. Peer interactions can support gender stereotypes and differences in self-esteem. At a young age, children will play in groups mostly of their gender (Kileen & Forehand, 1998). For example, a young boy will generally play with other boys and exclude girls who try to enter the group.

Boys tend to exhibit more dominance and self-confidence in their interactions; whereas girls who show these same behaviors may be criticized for doing so. By socializing females in this manner, society in turn is teaching females that self-confidence is a masculine trait. This lack in confidence can contribute to females feeling less valued than males and thus result in lower self-esteem (Kileen & Forehand, 1998).

*Relationships.* Females are often socialized to value relationships than males.

Females will use their relationships more to define who they are. Therefore, the quality of their friendships affects their self-esteem. Daubman (2001) suggests that quality of relationships predicts self-esteem in adolescent females and not males.

### Conclusion

Most theorists suggest that the development of self-esteem is formed through interactions and experiences. However, these experiences may greatly differ in early adolescents because developmental differences between genders. Socialization may also play an important role in the self-esteem differences between genders. Overall, males and females have different developmental levels at the middle school level. Early or late development can affect the adolescent's self-esteem. Maslow argued that the primary goal of humans was motivation to have their needs met. An individual will strive to achieve, and gain approval from others to meet these needs. Failure to meet the esteem needs can result in lower self-esteem. Erikson, however, felt that the most important aspect in adolescence was to establish a strong sense of identity. Failure or interference in this process can result in lowered self- esteem.

### Research Question

Are there differences in the self-esteem of middle school adolescents based on gender?

### Operational Definition

Self-Esteem, for the purpose of this study, refers to the adolescent's self-concept based on the six measurable scales of the Piers Harris Children's Self Concept Scale,

which include physical appearance and attributes, freedom from anxiety, intellectual and school status, behavioral adjustment, happiness and satisfaction, and popularity.

#### Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to examine differences in the self-esteem of middle school adolescents based on gender.

#### Significance of Problem

The rate at which an individual develops has a great impact on self-esteem. If a female is an early bloomer, she may be subject to teasing or other hurtful remarks thus lowering her self-esteem and self-image. The significance of this study is based on the fact the adolescents develop at different times in middle school. Boys typically go through puberty later than girls do. Therefore, girls may have lower self-esteem during their early adolescent years.

Adolescents with low-self esteem can often be maladjusted in many ways. Some may act out, become delinquent, present problems in the classroom (Fenwick, & Smith, 1994). Lower self-esteem may result in lower academic achievement and risky behaviors such as sexual activity and drug use. Therefore, it is important to study or look at self-esteem in early adolescence in order to understand and help students succeed. This study may be beneficial to students, parents, educators, counselors, and other school personnel. This study looks at the difficult time of adolescence and strives to help others understand this developmental period and differences between genders.

## Methods

### *Subjects*

The participants of this study were selected from a middle school (grades 6-8) in southeastern Ohio. There are 710 students total. All students will be asked to participate. The students are comprised of grades six (x=228), seven (x=232), and eight (x=250). There are 378 males and 332 females. Out of the 710 students, 98 students are receiving special education services.

### *Instrumentation*

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition will be used in this study. Ellen V. Piers, and Dale B. Harris developed the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. The first Piers-Harris was published in 1969. Along with Piers and Harris, David S. Herzberg revised the scale in 1984 (Piers, 1984). A second edition of the scale was printed in 2003 by Piers and Herzberg. The authors define self-esteem as "a relative stable set of attitudes reflecting both description and evaluation of one's own behavior and attributes." (Piers, & Herzberg, 2002, p.3)

The Piers-Harris 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition is a self-report questionnaire consisting of 60 items (Piers, & Herzberg, 2002). The test is normed and used for children age 7 to 18 years old. The test items are written at a second grade reading level and usually takes about 10-15 minutes to complete. It consists of six scales including physical appearance and attributes (PHY), freedom from anxiety (FRE), intellectual and school status (INT), behavioral adjustment (BEH), happiness and satisfaction (HAP), and popularity (POP)(Piers, & Herzberg, 2002). The respondents indicated whether or not the question describes them by circling yes or no.

Physical appearance shows the child's attitudes to his or her physical appearance. The anxiety scale measures general emotional disturbance and mood. Intellectual and school status communicates the child's self-assessment of his or her abilities, his or her satisfaction with school, and his or her future expectations. Happiness and satisfaction relates to emotional self-concept or feelings. Finally, the popularity scale relates to class popularity, being chosen for games, and friendship (Hattie, 1992).

The Piers-Harris 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition includes two validity scales. The first validity scale is the Inconsistent Responding index (INC) which identifies random response patterns. The Response Bias index (RES) which measures a trend in the student's responses regardless of the question. (Piers, & Herzberg, 2002).

The Piers-Harris 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition was standardized on 1,387 school-aged children (Piers, & Herzberg, 2002). There are over 300 studies conducted using the Piers-Harris scale. Scoring of the Piers-Harris yields a score converted to percentiles, t-scores, and stanines (Hattie, 1992). The test-retest reliability of the Piers-Harris 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition for grades 3, 6, and 10 is ( $r = +.77, .71, \text{ and } .72$  respectively) (Piers, & Herzberg, 2002).

### *Procedure*

Several teachers will be asked to participate and educated on the experimental procedure before starting the experiment (See Appendix B). Every student will take home a consent form (See Appendix A) to be completed by both the student and their legal guardian. To participate, the students must have a consent form completed. Students will be given the Piers-Harris in their homeroom at the start of the day. Each student will come into homeroom, give his or her consent form to the researcher or participating teacher, and be given a Piers-Harris Self-Esteem scale to complete along with an index

card with a number on it. Each student is asked to put their name on the back of the index card and the number of the index card on their Piers-Harris scale. After the student has completed the scale, he/she is asked to leave the scale and index card on their desk face down as they proceed to their next class. The researcher or participating teacher will then collect the scale after all students have left. Index cards will subsequently be destroyed to ensure confidentiality after the cards are used for data collection purposes. Students that participate in this study will have their records reviewed disability, and demographic information.

The data will be analyzed by using a between-subjects design. There are several questions to be analyzed such as:

1. Do middle school males and females as a group differ in self- esteem?

This question will be answered using a chi-square test.

2. Do 6<sup>th</sup> grade males and females as a group differ in self –esteem? This question will be answered using a chi-square test.

3. Do 7<sup>th</sup> grade males and females as a group differ in self –esteem? This question will be answered using a chi-square test.

4. Do 8<sup>th</sup> grade males and females as a group differ in self –esteem? This question will be answered using a chi-square test.

Two variables will be analyzed; gender and self-esteem to determine whether or not there is a relationship between the variables. A chi-square test will then be performed because the groups are categorical. If the chi-square analysis proves to be significant, the examiner will then conduct a z-test for proportions.



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**Table 1**  
**Items from Piers-Harris that Discriminate Between Males and Females**

<b>Item Number</b>	<b>Item</b>
<i>Males greater than females</i>	
69	I am popular with girls.
79	I cry easily.
80	I am a good person.
45	I hate school.
56	I get into a lot of fights.
12	I am well behaved at school.
71	I would rather work alone than with a group.
29	I have pretty eyes.
70	I am a good reader.
24	I am a good in music.
78	I think bad thoughts.
<i>Females greater than males</i>	
30	I can give a good report in front of the class.
7	I get nervous when teachers call on me.
28	I am nervous.
57	I am popular with boys.
64	I am clumsy.
37	I worry a lot.
10	I get worried when we have tests in school.
74	I am afraid often.
15	I am smart.
8	My looks bother me.

## Appendix A

### Parent Consent for Child Participation

Dear Parent or Guardian:

We would like to ask your permission for your son or daughter to help us by participating in our thesis research about children's self-esteem. This research project will help us to assess different aspects of self-esteem. This group project will assess self-esteem as compared to students G.P.A., their weight, between gender, and between students with and without disabilities.

***What is involved?*** Students who participate will be asked to spend approximately 15- 20 minutes of one school day taking part in a research project about of self esteem. The students will take the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition and we will obtain information from the student's school records such as if they are participating in special education and their current G.P.A.

***Potential Benefits and Concerns.*** Although we will schedule the student's time out of class so that your son or daughter does not miss important lessons, please be aware that he or she may have to make up missed work. One possible benefit of being in the project may be that the student may become more self-aware of their feelings about themselves.

***Participation is voluntary.*** Your son or daughter's participation in this study is completely voluntary. There will be no penalty if you do not wish your son or daughter to take part in this study, and he or she may withdraw at any time during the study and refuse to answer any of the questions. This research has been approved by Jackson Middle School and the Board of Education.

***Information is confidential.*** All information will be held as confidential as is legally possible. Only the researchers will see the results of the scale and any other information obtained from the school. Once all of the data has been collected, your child's name will be removed and replaced with an identification number so that he or she can no longer be connected to any specific answers. We will however keep your parental consent forms on record in a sealed envelope.

***Questions?*** We appreciate it if you would return this form whether or not you would like your child to participate, so that we know that this information has reached you. You may keep a copy of this letter for your records. If you have any questions, please feel free to call Nicole Lemley at (304) 216-9335, Susie Michael at (740-682-0772), Crista Hill (304) 743-0440, or Heather Paxton (304) 937-2661. Either of us can arrange for you to see the rating scale in advance if you wish. The Institutional Review Board at Marshall University 1-800-642-9842 can also answer questions about the rights of participants in research.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Nicole Lemley (304) 216-9335

Susie Michael (740) 682-0772

Heather Paxton (304) 927-2661

Please check the appropriate spaces below and then sign and date the form and return it to the school with your child.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have read and completely understand this permission letter. I give my consent for my child to participate in this research.

Please provide student's Sex \_\_\_\_ Weight \_\_\_\_ Height \_\_\_\_ G.P.A. \_\_\_\_

Special Education: Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_ Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not wish for my child to participate in this research study.

Parent's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Teacher Directions for Administering the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

Dear Teachers,

First of all, we would like to thank you for your participation and cooperation within our graduate school research project. We greatly appreciate your time and effort in completing the following tasks. Please follow the instruction below for administering the Piers-Harris 2 to your students.

1. Please distribute the answer sheets enclosed **only** to the student's who return their parental consent form signed by the student and parent.
2. Distribute the index cards numbered 1-30 to the students who are participating.
3. Instruct the students to place the homeroom teacher's last name on the index card.
4. Students are now to fill out the top of the answer sheet and place the number and teachers name in the space provided for their name.
5. Instruct the students to begin answering the yes/no questions.
6. When the student's have completed the questionnaire have them to place their name on the back of the index card provided.
7. Place the answer sheets, index cards, and parent consent forms in the envelope provided.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter. Please administer this test on \_\_\_\_\_. When completed please have the envelope sent to the office. If you need any further information or have any questions please feel free to contact any one of us in the project.

Sincerely,

Nicole Lemley (304) 216-9335

Susie Michael (740) 682-0772

Heather Paxton (304) 927-2661