

A review of the impact of peer relationships on junior high school students: based on interpersonal values, interpersonal distance, and family socioeconomic status

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Abstract: Junior high is a critical period for adolescents' socialization and personality development, with peer relationships profoundly influencing academic performance, mental health, and social adaptation. This paper reviews the key factors shaping peer relationships, focusing on interpersonal values, interpersonal distance, and family socioeconomic status (SES). Positive interpersonal values enhance interaction quality; interpersonal distance acts as a psychological and behavioral mediator; and family SES provides structural resources that support social development. The study offers a theoretical framework for understanding the multidimensional mechanisms underlying adolescent peer relationships and informs educational practice.

Keywords: peer relationships; interpersonal values; interpersonal distance; junior high school students

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Introduction

As junior high students grow, their peer relationships increasingly extend beyond the classroom. Compared with elementary school, they spend more time at school and interact more with peers, yet many experience social anxiety, hesitating in discussions or showing signs of nervousness. Conflicts may lead to silence or aggressive behaviors, emphasizing the need to foster harmonious peer relationships.

Online social platforms expose students to diverse friendship philosophies, some promoting superficial or materialistic interactions. Research indicates that adolescents who embrace values such as mutual assistance, sharing, and fairness are more likely to form positive peer relationships (Chen et al., 2018). Gender differences and the transition to a new school environment can further widen psychological distance, while strong value identification helps students engage more openly and maintain closer social connections (Liu, 2008).

Family socioeconomic status also shapes peer interactions by providing resources and opportunities that enhance social competitiveness (Cheng et al., 2018).

This paper reviews the influences on junior high students' peer relationships from the perspectives of interpersonal values, psychological distance, and family socioeconomic status, aiming to inform research on adolescent social adaptation and educational practice.

1 Overview of Research on Peer Relationships among Junior High School Students

1.1 The Concept of Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are a vital aspect of adolescent socialization, influencing emotional experiences, behavior patterns, self-identity, and mental health. Research shows that these relationships are complex, interactive, and developmental.

Early international studies highlighted their multi-dimensional nature. Bukowski (1994) described peer relationships as encompassing both positive aspects—companionship, intimacy, and support—and negative experiences such as conflict and stress. Card and Hodges (2007) emphasized that negative interactions, including rejection and exclusion, significantly affect adolescents' emotional development and social adaptation.

Domestic research has also deepened over time. Lin (1995) defined peer relationships as special interpersonal connections formed through peer interaction. Zou (1998) stressed that such relationships, formed among individuals with similar psychological development, are crucial for social skill and emotional understanding. Zhou et al. (2015) further highlighted their systemic role in communication, cooperation, and social adaptation, providing essential emotional support during adolescence.

1.2 Overview of Research on Peer Relationships among Junior High School Students

During junior high, peer relationships become more independent and influential, affecting behavioral development, academic engagement, and mental health. Positive peer interactions promote prosocial behaviors such as cooperation and helping, enhancing social skills and group integration (Qi et al., 2024). They also boost learning motivation, particularly in cooperative activities and extracurricular engagement, with stronger effects for migrant children (Liu et al., 2022). Additionally, supportive peer relationships aid emotional regulation, reduce negative emotions, and improve well-being (Ma et al., 2022). Overall, peer relationships are crucial for adolescents' social adaptation, academic performance, and psychological health, highlighting the importance of understanding their underlying mechanisms.

2 Major Factors Influencing Peer Relationships Among Junior High School Students

2.1 Interpersonal Values

2.1.1 Concept and Development

Interpersonal values, long understudied in social interaction research, reflect individuals' judgments of others and preferred interaction patterns. Early work emphasized evaluating others' characteristics and behaviors (Heider, 1958), while later studies highlighted behavioral orientations and ideal interaction states (Locke, 2000).

Domestic research further clarified contextual differences: values vary across relationships, such as self-interest and mutual benefit in same-sex friendships, or emotional understanding in teacher-student interactions (Huang, 1994). Li & Zhang (2006) emphasized that interpersonal values form a stable belief system shaped through long-term interactions, guiding social adaptation and interpersonal behavior.

In sum, interpersonal values constitute a key psychological foundation influencing how individuals evaluate others and navigate social interactions.

2.1.2 Interpersonal Values and Peer Relationships

Interpersonal values have gained increasing attention for their role in shaping communication attitudes and behaviors, contributing to the harmony and stability of relationships. Li (2009) found that positive values among only-child college students enhance understanding and cooperation, reducing conflict and improving relationship quality. Similarly, Liu (2023) reported that positive interpersonal values help medical students navigate complex interactions and improve teamwork. In university dormitories, positive values promote mutual assistance and respect, enhancing relationship satisfaction and overall atmosphere (Zhang et al., 2024). Overall, interpersonal values are crucial for communication, conflict resolution, and the maintenance of harmonious relationships among adolescents and young adults.

2.2 Interpersonal Distance

2.2.1 Concept

The theory of interpersonal distance, proposed by Edward (1959) in *The Silent Language*, categorizes distance into intimate, personal, social, and public, reflecting relationship closeness, emotional connection, and interaction context. Intimate distance applies to close relationships (e.g., family or partners), while public distance is used in formal or unfamiliar situations. Interpersonal distance encompasses not only physical space but also psychological and emotional dimensions. Shorter distances reduce aggressive behavior and promote prosocial actions (Fox, 2008), while also reflecting the degree to which individuals incorporate others into their self-concept (Aron et al., 2004). Thus, interpersonal distance is a key factor influencing empathy, helping behavior, and a sense of group belonging.

2.2.2 Interpersonal Distance and Peer Relationships

Interpersonal distance is a key indicator of intimacy and significantly shapes peer relationships among middle school students. Closer distance fosters trust, emotional connection, and social identification, while greater distance signals estrangement (McCall & Singer, 2015). It also affects emotional regulation, as students rely on psychologically close peers for support (Yao et al., 2025), and influences empathy and prosocial behavior, with closer distance enhancing understanding and willingness to help (Song et al., 2016). Thus, interpersonal distance is a critical factor in the formation, maintenance, and quality of adolescent peer interactions.

2.3 Family Socioeconomic Status

2.3.1 The Concept of Family Socioeconomic Status

Family socioeconomic status (SES) is based on the concept of socioeconomic status and refers to the position of an individual and their family in the acquisition, allocation, and use of social resources (Matthews & Gallo, 2011). It reflects the relative differences among families in terms of income, prestige, and education (Fang & Hou, 2019) and has a profound impact on the growth, development, and social adaptation of family members.

Operational definitions of family socioeconomic status typically encompass indicators such as income level, parental education level, occupation type, family material conditions, and regional economic development level (Davis-Kean, 2005). Families with high SES usually have more educational resources, better social networks, and economic support, thus positively impacting children's cognitive abilities, emotional development, and social adaptation; families with low SES may face more developmental challenges due to limited resources.

2.3.2 Family Socioeconomic Status and Peer Relationships

Family socioeconomic status (SES) significantly influences junior high students' peer relationships through multiple pathways. High SES provides material and educational resources that enhance academic performance, social skills, and peer acceptance, while low SES may limit these advantages (Cheng et al., 2019). SES also shapes parenting styles: supportive, democratic parenting in high-SES families fosters emotional regulation and cooperation, whereas controlling or neglectful parenting in low-SES families can lead to withdrawal or aggression, hindering positive peer interactions (Han, 2024). Thus, SES affects both social status and interpersonal competence, shaping the quality of adolescents' peer relationships.

2.4 Research on Peer Relationships, Interpersonal Values, Interpersonal Distance, and Family Socioeconomic Status

Although few studies have directly examined the moderating role of family socioeconomic status (SES) in the relationship between interpersonal values and peer relationships, existing research suggests several relevant pathways. SES influences children's value formation through parental education, occupation, and resource allocation: high-SES families provide richer educational opportunities, fostering positive values and behaviors, whereas low-SES families may limit value development due to resource scarcity (Bradley, 2002). SES also shapes parenting styles and family atmosphere, with high-SES parents tending toward supportive and tolerant approaches, and low-SES parents more

often relying on control or punishment (Qu & Zou, 2013).

Regarding interpersonal distance, low-SES children may experience greater social exclusion and fewer opportunities to develop extensive social networks, resulting in increased interpersonal distance, while high-SES children benefit from richer social resources and higher social status (Karney, 2021). Research also shows correlations between SES, interpersonal values, and social distance: lower SES is associated with greater social distance in intergroup interactions, and children from low-SES families often exhibit distinct educational values and future orientations (Chen & Xu, 2020).

These findings suggest that SES may moderate the relationship between interpersonal values and interpersonal distance. Specifically, children from low-SES families may experience a stronger impact of their interpersonal values on interpersonal distance, as social pressures and resource limitations amplify the influence of values on their social interactions.

3 Discussion and Implications

A deeper analysis of peer relationship mechanisms shows that interpersonal values, interpersonal distance, and family socioeconomic status (SES) interact to shape junior high students' social interactions. Interpersonal values play a central role: students with positive values such as mutual assistance, fairness, and sharing tend to engage in constructive strategies like cooperation and communication, reducing psychological distance and fostering stable, harmonious peer relationships. This underscores the importance of value guidance in education to cultivate effective communication and social skills.

Interpersonal distance acts as a psychological and behavioral regulator, influencing trust, emotional support, empathy, and cooperation. Closer interpersonal distance enhances intimacy, emotional regulation, and the quality of peer interactions (Bilius et al., 2021).

Family SES serves as a resource moderator. High-SES students benefit from better educational resources, social capital, and extracurricular opportunities, enhancing social attractiveness, mental health, and peer relationship quality. Conversely, low-SES students may face social marginalization or exclusion due to limited resources. Empirical studies confirm these effects: higher SES correlates with better peer relationships (Li et al., 2020) and positively predicts prosocial behavior through psychological mechanisms like parent-child attachment and self-esteem (Luo et al., 2025). Together, these findings highlight the synergistic effects of values, distance, and SES in shaping adolescents' peer relationships.

4 Conclusion

Interpersonal values, interpersonal distance, and family SES jointly influence junior high students' peer relationships. Positive values promote cooperation and reduce psychological distance, enhancing relationship stability. Closer interpersonal distance fosters trust, empathy, and social support, while high SES provides resources and social opportunities that improve social integration and prosocial behavior. Together, these factors synergistically shape adolescents' peer interactions and social development.

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