

Loneliness in Childhood and Adolescence

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Contents

Contributors *page vii*

PART I: INTRODUCTION

- 1 Childhood and Adolescent Loneliness:
An Introduction 3
KEN J. ROTENBERG

PART II: THEORETICAL AND ASSESSMENT ISSUES

- 2 The Conceptualization and Measurement of
Childhood Loneliness 11
BEVERLEY TERRELL-DEUTSCH
- 3 Understanding the Origins of Childhood Loneliness:
Contributions of Attachment Theory 34
JUDE CASSIDY AND LISA J. BERLIN
- 4 Developmental Change in the Sources of Loneliness
in Childhood and Adolescence: Constructing a
Theoretical Model 56
JENNIFER T. PARKHURST AND ANDREA HOPMEYER
- 5 Loneliness Through the Eyes of Children 80
SHELLEY HYMEL, DONATO TARULLI, LAURA
HAYDEN THOMSON, AND BEVERLEY TERRELL-DEUTSCH

PART III: LONELINESS IN CHILDHOOD

- 6 Loneliness During Early Childhood: The Role
of Interpersonal Behaviors and Relationships 109
KIM B. BURGESS, GARY W. LADD, BECKY J. KOCHENDERFER,
SHARON F. LAMBERT, AND SONDR A H. BIRCH
- 7 Connections Among Loneliness, the Ability
to Be Alone, and Peer Relationships in Young Children 135
LISE M. YOUNGBLADE, LISA J. BERLIN, AND JAY BELSKY

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|-----|
| 8 | A Social-Information-Processing Approach to Children's Loneliness | 153 |
| | NICKI R. CRICK, JENNIFER K. GROTPETER, AND CAROL M. ROCKHILL | |
| 9 | Parental Antecedents of Children's Loneliness | 176 |
| | KEN J. ROTENBERG | |
| 10 | Dimensions of Children's Friendship Adjustment: Implications for Understanding Loneliness | 201 |
| | JEFFREY G. PARKER, JILL L. SAXON, STEVEN R. ASHER, AND DONNA M. KOVACS | |
| PART IV: LONELINESS IN ADOLESCENCE | | |
| 11 | Adolescent Loneliness, Self-Reflection, and Identity: From Individual Differences to Developmental Processes | 225 |
| | LUC GOOSSENS AND ALFONS MARCOEN | |
| 12 | The Uses of Loneliness in Adolescence | 244 |
| | REED W. LARSON | |
| 13 | Social Self-Discrepancy Theory and Loneliness During Childhood and Adolescence | 263 |
| | JANIS B. KUPERSMIDT, KATHY B. SIGDA, CONSTANTINE SEDIKIDES, AND MARY ELLEN VOEGLER | |
| 14 | Self, Other, and Loneliness From A Developmental Perspective | 280 |
| | LORRIE K. SIPPOLA AND WILLIAM M. BUKOWSKI | |
| 15 | Adolescent Loneliness and Adjustment: A Focus on Gender Differences | 296 |
| | LINDA J. KOENIG AND ROBIN F. ABRAMS | |
| PART V: PROSPECTIVE | | |
| 16 | Examination of Loneliness in Children-Adolescents and in Adults: Two Solitudes or Unified Enterprise? | 325 |
| | DANIEL PERLMAN AND MONICA A. LANDOLT | |
| | <i>References</i> | 348 |
| | <i>Author Index</i> | 393 |
| | <i>Subject Index</i> | 402 |

1 Childhood and Adolescent Loneliness: An Introduction

KEN J. ROTENBERG

After reviewing the literature, both academic and nonacademic (e.g., popular media), it has become obvious to me that loneliness is an inherent part of the human condition. Most likely, every person experiences loneliness at some time during the course of his or her life, at least in a transient form. Moreover, loneliness appears to be a cross-cultural phenomena, one identified and examined in an array of countries: Australia (e.g., Renshaw & Brown, 1992), Canada (e.g., Boivin, Hymel, & Bukowski, 1995), Belgium (e.g., Marcoen & Brumagne, 1985), Israel (Margalit & Ben-Dov, in press), and the United States (Cassidy & Asher, 1992). The universality of loneliness may well arise, as Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory implies, from the universal need for belongingness – the need to establish stable social bonds with others who care. In that context, loneliness is the cognitive and affective reaction to the threat to social bonds. Indeed, loneliness has been regarded in the literature as comprising two related components: (a) a cognitive component, comprising the discrepancy between desired social relationships and actual social relationships, either quantitatively or qualitatively, and (b) an affective component, comprising the negative emotional experiences of disorientation, lostness, and loneliness (see Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Rotenberg, 1994). The chapters in this book are guided by this conceptualization of loneliness, although they vary considerably in the emphasis placed on the two components.

Research supports the conclusion that a stable pattern of loneliness poses a serious threat to an individual's mental health and psychosocial functioning (see McWhirter, 1990). This is exemplified by the link between psychosocial maladjustment and loneliness when it is assessed by conventional scales, such as the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale and Asher, Hymel, and Renshaw's (1984) Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Scale. For example, loneliness has been found to be associated with depression, alcoholism, obesity, and suicide in adults (Anderson & Harvey, 1988; Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Sadava & Thompson, 1987; Schumaker,

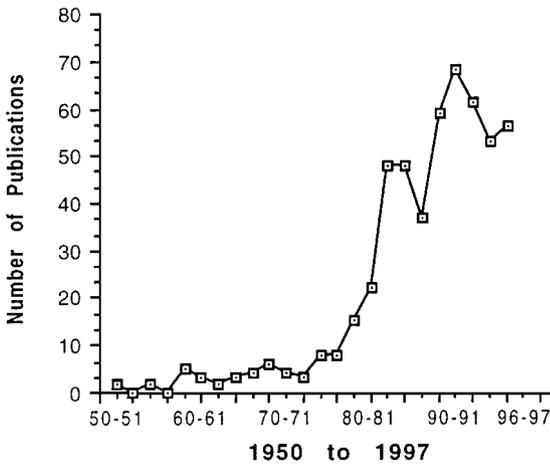


Figure 1.1. Number of publications on loneliness during childhood and adolescence from 1950 to 1997.

Krejci, Small, & Sargent, 1985; Wenz, 1977). Loneliness in children has been found to be associated with being rejected by peers, being victimized, aggression, shyness, and disruptive behavior (Asher et al., 1984; Asher & Wheeler, 1985; Boivin et al., 1995; Cassidy & Asher, 1992).

Given the apparent universality of loneliness and its link to psychosocial maladjustment, it is truly surprising that research on loneliness has emerged rather recently in the history of psychology. Although interest in loneliness dates back several decades (see Perlman & Landolt's chapter, this volume), loneliness in adulthood was examined by researchers in psychology primarily within the past 25 years, and researchers have only made a concerted effort to investigate loneliness in childhood and adolescence within the past 15 years. Figure 1.1 displays the publication rates of research on loneliness during childhood and adolescence (excluding college samples) from 1950–1951 to present day. As the figure displays, there is a scarcity of research on that phenomenon prior to the 1980s. By the mid-1980s, particularly after Asher et al. (1984) published their influential article and scale, there was a dramatic increase in research on loneliness during childhood and adolescence. As shown in Figure 1.1, the research on this topic has progressed at a rapid pace. As is often the case in emerging domains of inquiry, however, the research has been guided by varied theories and by divergent methods and measures; all of which have been published across a wide array of journals. The purpose of this book is to bring these varied theories and lines of research “together” to

provide a source for future investigators. To that end, the book includes chapters that cover the prevailing theoretical and conceptual frameworks, new theories, integrations of research findings, and novel findings on the topic. This book is published with the hope that it will help make loneliness in childhood and adolescence a premier topic in the discipline of developmental psychology.

Popular misconceptions have sometimes served to impede research during the course of history. For example, the great psychologist William James in 1980, and various psychologists and physicians during the 1950s and 1960s, viewed infants as passive nonperceivers whose world was one characterized by confusion. Such beliefs delayed the discovery of what researchers now know today: Infants possess an amazing array of perceptual and cognitive abilities (see Mandler, 1990). Beliefs regarding the absence of loneliness in children may have similarly delayed the investigation of loneliness for that period in development. Sullivan (1953) proposed that loneliness first emerged during preadolescence and arose when adolescents failed to establish chumships – close relationships with same-sex peers. Similarly, Weiss (1973) advanced the notion that loneliness was only possible in adolescence; the point in development when individuals strived to achieve attachment to others besides their parents. As a counterpoint to this presentation, let me emphasize that both Sullivan and Weiss have made significant contributions to the understanding of loneliness and social functioning.

One major difficulty typically encountered in emerging lines of inquiry is how to conceptualize and measure the phenomenon under consideration. Not surprisingly, this is one of the challenges faced by researchers examining loneliness during childhood and adolescence. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that whatever theoretical framework authors adopt, loneliness is regarded as a subjective experience. By necessity, researchers assess loneliness from individuals' self-reports of their perceptions, affective states, or both. Furthermore, this task is particularly difficult because the self-reports are provided by children and adolescents. Children have limited linguistic ability and they, as well as adolescents, may express themselves in ways that do not coincide with adult expression and interpretation. In recognition of these issues, the book begins with a chapter by Terrell-Deutsch (Chapter 2) that is dedicated to examining the ways that loneliness in children and adolescents have been conceptualized and measured in the literature. In the next chapter (Chapter 3), Cassidy and Berlin outline the application of attachment theory to loneliness. According to this theory, when children develop an insecure attachment to the adult caregiver, they form internal working models of child and adult that,

through generalization, increase the likelihood that they will experience loneliness in peer interactions.

The book includes chapters that present new theories to account for loneliness in childhood and adolescence. In Chapter 4, Parkhurst and Hopmeyer focus on loneliness as an emotion. On the basis of normative patterns of social and cognitive development, these authors propose a model of how loneliness changes with age and of the skill deficit, and other emotions which are associated with loneliness at different ages. In contrast to that orientation, Crick, Grotpeter, and Rockhill describe in Chapter 8 the cognitive, social-information-processing approach to loneliness. These authors propose that children's experience of loneliness is determined, in part, by their establishment of social databases that are compiled from their experiences with peers. As a result of those experiences—database, children develop patterns of making attributions to peers, developing goals, and generating responses to peer interaction. Crick and her colleagues present research indicating that there are links between those cognitive components and children's loneliness. In addition to attachment theory, Cassidy and Berlin draw on transactional principles in their chapter (Chapter 3) to explain how parents affect their children's loneliness. In yet another chapter (Chapter 5), Hymel, Tarulli, Hayden Thomson, and Terrell-Deutsch adopt a phenomenological approach to the study of loneliness in children and examine children's naive concepts and experiences of loneliness. These researchers found that children describe loneliness as affective and cognitive in nature and as associated with a variety of contexts or causes including loss, conflict, broken loyalties, rejection, exclusion, temporary absence, being ignored, and dislocation. It is interesting to note that there were a number of similarities but also some important differences between the ways that children conceptualize loneliness and the ways that researchers in the field conceptualize loneliness in children.

There is a growing interest in the nature and causes of loneliness in young children, and this interest is evident in a number of chapters. This line of investigation may be truly regarded as a new frontier because, as mentioned, loneliness was believed to emerge only by adolescence. Burgess, Ladd, Kochenderfer, Lambert, and Birch (Chapter 6) describe the theory and research pertaining to loneliness in children when they enter school, specifically during kindergarten. These authors review recent research indicating that loneliness in kindergarten children is linked to friendship, peer-group acceptance, victimization, aggression, withdrawal, teacher-child relationships, parent characteristics, and parenting styles. In Chapter 7, Youngblade, Berlin, and Belsky describe their

research on the relation between 5- to 7-year-old children's loneliness and their social functioning earlier in development. Similar to research on adolescents and adults, these authors distinguished between loneliness and being alone; they found that the children's loneliness was not significantly correlated with the aversion to being alone nor the ability to be alone. These researchers found, however, that the children's loneliness was significantly correlated with classroom behavior, time in peer settings, perceived peer acceptance, and specific quality of friendship interactions with peers. In some cases though, the direction of the correlations was contrary to expectation.

In Chapter 9, I outline the fundamental theories and hypotheses advanced to account for the parental antecedents of children's loneliness; this refers to the parental behavior and emotional states that affect children's loneliness. I found that the antecedents of children's loneliness during adolescence were different from those in middle childhood. Adolescents' loneliness was linked to their mothers' loneliness, perceived lack of warmth by their mothers and fathers, and lack of their mothers' tendency to promote peer relationships positively. By contrast, children's loneliness was linked to greater warmth and involvement by mothers. The different pattern of findings were interpreted with respect to compensatory parenting practices by mothers.

In Chapter 10, Parker, Saxon, Asher, and Kovacs clarify the distinction between friendship and peer acceptance as factors contributing to loneliness in children and adolescents. Parker and his colleagues complete their chapter by summarizing their research indicating that loneliness in children and adolescents is linked to the qualities of friendship.

The chapters on loneliness during adolescence exclusively deal primarily with three themes: (a) the distinction between being alone and loneliness, (b) the identity development, and (c) the implication of loneliness for mental health and academic achievement. In Chapter 11, Goossens and Marcoen conceptualize loneliness as a multidimensional phenomena and address the issue of whether loneliness in adolescents is linked to ego-identity development. In Chapter 12, Larson considers adolescence as a time when, in western culture, adolescents are pulled between an imperative for social connection and an imperative for individualism. Larson used his well-known method of having adolescents report their emotional state during their daily living to examine naturally occurring instances of loneliness. The research revealed that psychological maladjustment in adolescents is consistently correlated with experiencing loneliness in social contexts but not reliably correlated with experiencing loneliness when they were alone at home. Larson proposes that being

home alone serves a positive function for adolescents by providing them with the opportunity for emotional regulation and exploration of their self-identity. Both the chapters by Goossens and Marcoen and by Larson provide some intriguing data on the positive outcomes associated with loneliness and solitude as an opportunity for emotional regulation and exploration of self-identity. Kupersmidt, Sigda, Sedikides, and Voegler report research in Chapter 13 that was guided by an integration of self-discrepancy theory and contemporary findings on the social facets of loneliness. Kupersmidt and her colleagues report finding that loneliness in adolescents was associated with the frequency with which they experienced discrepancies between their ideal self and their actual self, with respect to such domains as having a best friend and being accepted by the peer group. Sippola and Bukowski (Chapter 14) take the approach that loneliness during adolescence is linked to divided self, comprising an individual's experience of being phony and not expressing what he or she really thinks and feels. In support of this hypothesis, Sippola and Bukowski report two studies showing that divided self was significantly associated with loneliness in adolescents and mediated the relation between loneliness and self-disclosure. In Chapter 15, Koenig and Abrams review the research bearing on sex differences in loneliness and report that sex differences appear to emerge by adolescence, with girls demonstrating lower loneliness than boys. In addition, these authors report a 2¹/₂-year longitudinal study that examined the links between loneliness and subsequent psychopathology and academic performance. Koenig and Abrams report that chronic (consistent) loneliness in girls was associated primarily with psychopathology, whereas chronic loneliness in boys was associated primarily with poor academic performance.

In the final chapter (Chapter 16), Perlman and Landolt describe the links between the theory and research on loneliness during childhood and adolescence (as covered in this book) and the large body of theory and research on loneliness in adults. In so doing, these authors place the theory and research covered in this book within a broad developmental scheme.

Let me conclude by saying that this edited book is truly a collective effort. It represents the convergence of a myriad of theories, approaches, and studies – all designed to reveal the nature of loneliness during childhood and adolescence. The grand hope is that the light that has been shed on that topic will serve to guide research for years to come.