

Solitude in Canadian Youth – why do adolescents want to be alone? First look

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Introduction

Next to toddlerhood, adolescence is the ‘second growth spurt’ of self-consciousness and social awareness where youth learn how to make decisions about how they wish to spend their time – either alone or with others (Blakemore, 2018).

Compared to social engagement, solitude provides youth with opportunity for crafting safe and private mental space for room to reflect, explore and grow.

Although solitude is important for self-growth in adolescence, little is known about why youth chose to be alone, what they like to do in their alone time, and how they feel when they are alone (Hipson et al., 2021).

Current Study

- This study explored adolescents’ preference for solitude and their reasons why.

Method

Participants

- 71 adolescents (11 -18 years, 33 males, 34 females, 3 preferred not to say, 1 non-binary; $M_{age} = 13.5$ years, $SD = 5.436$) from Ontario and Quebec community and school samples, mainly Euro-Canadian, English-speaking, middle SES.

Measures

Questions were a combination of forced choice and open-ended responses. Sample items included: Are you alone more often than you are with others (yes/no). If yes/no – please explain why. List some reasons for why you chose to be alone. List your favourite solitary activities and how long you spend time alone during typical day?

Procedure

- Data taken from Year 1 of ongoing multi-year longitudinal study on solitude, mentalization, and well-being in adolescence.
- Participant engaged in 1-hour on-line survey about their motivations and preferences for solitude

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Results

Youth more likely to spend time with others rather than alone (57/71, 80%).

Time spent alone each day ranged from 15 min to up to 3 hours, $M=1$ hr per day.

- Emotions felt during time alone ranged from positive (calm, peaceful) to negative (sad, lonely, bored).
- 67/71 (94%) mentioned technology in their preferred solitude activities (phone, laptop, video games, etc.)

Preferred Solitary Activities

Reasons for choosing to be alone included:

- Social (I want to be away from others)
- Emotional/personal (I don’t like putting on a happy mask.)
- Physical (I am tired).

Solitary activities:

- Passive (watching tv)
- Engaged (reading, writing)
- Relax and Re-energize (slack and do nothing, self-dialogue)
- Spending time in nature (walking, listening to birds, etc.)

Discussion

- Results show that participants’ reasons for, and preferred activities of solitude were more similar than different across ages and gender.
- Our findings so far demonstrate the need to view solitude in context, and suggest that solitude represents a sacred and safe space for youth to flourish in their mental and emotional growth.

Implications and Future Directions

- Theoretical* – our study highlights the importance of solitude during adolescence and its major role in well-being and identity formation of youth.
- Practical* – our study provides empirical groundwork for educational programs aimed to address the importance of solitude for youth and how it can help them to strengthen their reflective and creativity skills, intrapersonal skills (self-compassion), and develop a sense of identity.

Limitations

- Sampling* – lack of diversity, participants mainly Euro-Canadian, English-speaking, SES.
- Further exploration is needed to include more fluid definitions of gender such as perceived gender orientation and preferred gender identity.

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