



Relationship of verbal aggressiveness with self-esteem and depression in verbally aggressive adolescents at public middle school[☆]

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Abstract This study determines the relationships of verbal aggressiveness with self-esteem and depression in early adolescents. Quantitative, cross-sectional design were conduct in 415 middle school students with verbal aggressiveness in Jakarta that has been screened as participants. The Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (VAS), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), and 11-ITEM Kutcher Adolescent Depression Scale (KADS-11) questionnaires that had been validity and reliability tested were used. From all participants, 55.9% committing a moderate level of verbal aggressiveness, 45.5% had low self-esteem, and 50.4% experienced depression. The Pearson product-moment test showed a significant relationship between verbal aggressiveness and self-esteem in early adolescents with verbal aggression, while the Mann–Whitney test also indicated verbal aggressiveness and depression in early adolescents with verbal aggression are related. This study recommends related parties to pay more attention to the verbal aggression incident in early adolescents.

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Introduction

Adolescence spans from 11 to 20 years of age and is divided into three phases: early (11–14 years), middle (15–17 years), and late adolescents (18–20 years).¹ Fundamentally,

the family is the source of security to support adolescents development.² When the sense of security is family is not fulfilling, adolescents will turn to friends to satisfy their needs of friendship, self-esteem, and intimacy.² When failing to belong to a group of friends, adolescents may encounter low self-esteem, loneliness, and depression.³ Therefore, some adolescents showing the typical attributes of group to be accepted, even by committing violent behavior such as verbal aggressiveness.³

Verbal aggressiveness is a behavior of using aggressive language which can violate the rights of others, usually in the form of interrupting habit, sarcasm, or other forms of verbal abuse, including bullying.⁴ The perpetrators may become popular in the group, which has the same attitude

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and have an increased self-esteem accordingly so that they keep this behavior.³ Some studies found that adolescents with verbal aggressiveness usually have low life satisfaction, poor family background, and low self-esteem.⁵ On the other hand, the victims of verbal abuse may experience psychological trauma and even psychiatric disorders, such as panic attacks, phobias, and depression.

Self-esteem is an individual's personal judgment about self-worth based on the person's self-ideal.⁶ Self-esteem has an important role for adolescents to develop the identity and the basic self-attribute to connect with others in meaningful and satisfying relationships.⁷ In addition, self-esteem also reflects the success of adolescents in adapting to the world. Self-esteem can be shaped by the person's experience related to their own perception of self-worth, often referred to as the 'bottom line', which specifies their response when a similar situation arises, regardless of the appropriateness. If a person keeps applying an inappropriate response to a situation, and never change it, then low self-esteem may persist and can lead to depression.⁶

In 2018, Indonesia ranked 65th in the global suicide prevalence, with 2.9 suicide incidence per 100,000 people.⁸ In 2015, 40% of children and adolescents committed suicide due to bullying. Meanwhile, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission revealed they had received reports of 26,000 cases of bullying from 2011 to September 2017.⁹ The Indonesian National Development Planning Agency showed that until May 2018, Indonesia's youth population had reached 45.1 million or 17% of the total Indonesia population.¹⁰ Given the growing number of adolescents in Indonesia, coupled with the increase in psychosocial matters surrounding this young population, it is important to assess the verbal aggressiveness among adolescents. In this study, we investigated the relationship of verbal aggressiveness with the self-esteem and depression in Indonesian adolescents who were committed verbal aggression.

Method

A cross-sectional, descriptive-correlative design was used in this study. The participants were recruited at a public middle

school in Jakarta, Indonesia, using purposive sampling. We screened all grade VII and VIII students for verbal aggressiveness and had 415 eligible students who took part in the study.

Three questionnaires were used to measure the variables, the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (VAS),¹¹ Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES),¹² and 11-item Kutcher Adolescent Depression Scale (KADS-11).¹³ We modified these questionnaires and tested them for the validity and reliability of 30 students of another middle school in Jakarta. All questionnaires were found to be valid and reliable (Cronbach's Alpha of VAS = 0.851; RSES = 0.848; KADS-11 = 0.758).

Data were analyzed univariately and bivariately to describes the characteristics of each variable and assess the relationships of variables. The independent variable of this study was the verbal aggressiveness, while the dependent variables were self-esteem and depression.

We adhered to ethical principles for research involving human subjects. Ethical approval was issued by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing, Universitas Indonesia, in the letter number SK-202/UN2.F12.D1.2.1/ETIK.FIK.2019.

Results

The adolescents in this study were aged 12–14 years (mean = 13.48), which fell into the early adolescent age bracket. We had a fairly similar proportion of the adolescent boys and girls who had committed verbal aggressiveness (48.9% male; 51.1% female).

The summary of the verbal aggressiveness, self-esteem, and depression categories of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Concerning the verbal aggressiveness, the majority of the participants did a moderate level of verbal aggressiveness (55.9%). According to the age group, the oldest group (14 years) had committed more verbal aggressiveness. We also found that girls had more significant and moderate levels of verbal aggressiveness than their boy counterparts (16.5% vs. 4.4% at the significant level; and 56.6% vs. 55.2% at the moderate level).

Table 1 Participant's verbal aggressiveness, self-esteem, and depression categories (n = 415).

Overall	Verbal aggressiveness			Self-esteem		Depression	
	Low 139 (33.5%)	Moderate 232 (55.9%)	Significant 44 (10.6%)	Low 189 (45.5%)	High 226 (54.5%)	No 206 (49.6%)	Yes 209 (50.4%)
<i>Grade</i>							
VII	65 (33.7%)	107 (55.4%)	21 (10.9%)	96 (49.7%)	97 (50.3%)	26 (12.8%)	177 (87.2%)
VIII	74 (33.3%)	125 (56.3%)	23 (10.4%)	93 (41.9%)	129 (58.1%)	64 (30.2%)	148 (69.8%)
<i>Age</i>							
12 y.o	8 (33.3%)	13 (54.2%)	3 (12.5%)	8 (33.3%)	16 (66.7%)	13 (54.2%)	11 (45.8%)
13 y.o	56 (33.7%)	91 (54.8%)	19 (11.4%)	48 (28.9%)	118 (71.1%)	78 (47.0%)	88 (53.0%)
14 y.o	75 (33.3%)	128 (56.9%)	22 (9.8%)	34 (15.1%)	191 (84.9%)	115 (51.1%)	110 (48.9%)
<i>Gender</i>							
Boy	82 (40.4%)	112 (55.2%)	9 (4.4%)	26 (12.8%)	177 (87.2%)	124 (61.1%)	79 (38.9%)
Girl	57 (26.9%)	120 (56.6%)	35 (16.5%)	64 (30.2%)	148 (69.8%)	82 (38.7%)	130 (61.3%)

Table 2 Correlations of verbal aggressiveness and self-esteem of the Indonesian adolescents with verbal aggressiveness ($n = 415$).

		Verbal aggressiveness	Self-esteem
Verbal aggressiveness	Pearson correlations	1	-0.191 ^a
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	415	415
Self-esteem	Pearson correlations	-0.191 ^a	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	415	415

^a Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 Correlations of verbal aggressiveness and depression of the Indonesian adolescents with verbal aggressiveness ($n = 415$).

Correlations				
	Depression	N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks
Verbal aggressiveness	No depression	206	182.73	37,642.00
	Depression	209	232.91	48,678.00
	Total	415		
Test statistics ^a				
			Total AV	
Mann-Whitney <i>U</i>			16,321.000	
Wilcoxon <i>W</i>			37,642.000	
<i>Z</i>			-4.274	
Asymp, Sig. (2-tailed)			0.000	

^a Grouping variable: depression.

From the self-esteem categorization, we can see that more than half of the participants (54.5%) had high self-esteem. A higher number of adolescents with high self-esteem is found in grade VIII, aged 14 years, and adolescent boys.

Furthermore, we obtained half of the participants in this study (50.4%) reported to have depression. The distribution of depression was somewhat fair in grade VII and VII participants. While the adolescents aged 13 years had a slightly higher proportion of depression (53.0%), the proportion was notably high among the adolescent girls (61.3%).

We then performed the Pearson product-moment test to see the relationship between the verbal aggressiveness and self-esteem of the participants (Table 2).

The verbal aggressiveness was statistically significantly correlated with self-esteem ($p = 0.000$). The *Pearson correlation* value between these two dimensions was -0.191 , indicating the higher the verbal aggressiveness level of the participants, the lower their self-esteem.

Finally, we conducted a Mann-Whitney test to analyze the correlation between verbal aggressiveness and depression (Table 3).

The correlation was found to be statistically significant ($p = 0.000$; *Z* value = -4.274).

Discussion

Puberty occurs at the adolescents period and is associated with emotional instability,¹ and at the same time, increasing

autonomy and the need of friendship.¹⁴ To be accepted at a certain peer group, adolescents may exhibit the behavior related of the group, including verbal aggression or bullying.³

We had 51.1% girl participants, a little higher than the boy participants. Whereas, in a prior study done by Febriawan, Takwin, & Muhamad, adolescent boys tended to have a higher average of verbal aggressiveness scores than the adolescent girls.¹⁵ Our finding is also different from the previous study in Indonesia that found adolescent boys tend to have a higher average verbal aggressiveness score than the adolescent girls.¹⁵ Different location, demography, and the limitation of this cross-sectional study design may explain this difference.¹⁶

We also found 55.9% of 415 participants have done a moderate level of verbal aggressiveness. Verbal aggressiveness may emerge when family, as the main support system of the adolescents, is not fulfilling its role, which leads the teenagers to look for peer groups to replace that roles.² The verbal aggression problem arises when the peer group chosen by the adolescents has a tendency toward verbal aggression.

The results of this study are in accordance with the Bandura's social learning theory, which argues that aggressive behavior can be learned from the environment.¹⁶ Bandura argue that adolescents learn the behavior by imitating their peers or other people and receiving positive response from others toward their learned behavior.¹⁶ Fourteen years-old adolescents in this study reported a higher level of verbal aggressiveness. All participants, however, were in the

early adolescence, which previous studies had indicated its increasing trend of verbal aggressiveness.⁶

Regarding self-esteem, we found that more adolescents who had been committing verbal aggressiveness (54.5%) had high self-esteem. On the other hand, Esteves, Jimenez, & Moreno reported that verbal aggressive adolescents tend to have low self-esteem.⁵ The results of this study are in accordance with the literature, which states that as we age, our personality will develop in a more mature direction.¹⁷ In addition, girls are more susceptible to lower self-esteem, as in our study finding, because they tend to be more sensitive so that they are easier to feel sad and lonely.¹⁸ A research in Bulgaria also found that girls had lower self-esteem levels than the adolescent boys.¹⁹

Around half of the adolescents in this study (50.4%) reported to have depression. Adolescents coming from the dysfunctional family may have academic as well as social problems, which then can contribute to the emergence of depressive symptoms in adolescents.²⁰ Poor relationship with peers is also linked to depression in adolescents, according to Vanhalst & Lau, as cited by Santrock.²⁰ Adolescents who do not have close friends, lacked interaction with friends, and rejected with peers are more prone to get depressed.²⁰ This notion is supported by research from Bukowski, Laursen, & Hoza that found friendship can prevent depression in adolescents.²⁰

As in low self-esteem, depressions were found in a larger proportion of adolescent girls (61.3%). This finding is aligned with previous study findings that depression is more common among adolescent girls.^{18,20} Rose et al. argue that hormonal imbalance can bring a heightened emotional instability, which may lead to depression in girls.²⁰ However, we did not examine further how these factors can influence the level of depression of adolescents.

The result of this study demonstrates the correlation between verbal aggressiveness and self-esteem in adolescents who committed verbal aggression. We also found that the higher the level of verbal aggressiveness, the lower the self-esteem. This finding agrees with the study result of Esteves, Jimenez, and Moreno.⁵ Walker and Bright, as cited by Teng, Liu, and Guo argued that people with low self-esteem tend to behave aggressively to protect themselves, to cover up feeling awkward, and eventually increase their self-esteem again.² The high social status in the eyes of peers can make teenagers more confident and increase their self-esteem.³ As explained by the social learning theory, the reinforcement of aggressive behavior in the adolescent's social environment may sustain such behavior.¹⁶

There was also a significant relationship between verbal aggressiveness and depression in this study. This result is in accordance with the result of the prior studies.⁵ The depressive symptoms in the perpetrators of verbal aggression can be caused by family factors that also trigger the verbal aggression behavior.²⁰ When the adolescents need for the family's role as the main support system is not appropriately fulfilled, the adolescent tends to have depressive symptoms and then will turn to peers as their major support system.² However, we did not examine the factors that affect depression in the respondents so that further research is needed.

Conclusion

From all participants in this study, 55.9% committing a moderate level of verbal aggressiveness, 45.5% had low self-esteem, and 50.4% experienced depression. This study also indicated a significant relationship between verbal aggressiveness and self-esteem in early adolescents with verbal aggression. The relation between verbal aggressiveness and depression in early adolescents with verbal aggression are also shown. Accordingly, it is important to pay more attention to the verbal aggression incidents in early adolescents.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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