



## Research Article

# The relationship between parental favoritism and self-esteem in adolescent girls

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### Abstract

Self-esteem plays a crucial role in the successful formation of self-identity during adolescence. For adolescent girls, self-esteem is particularly influenced by interpersonal relationships, including those within the family. Parental favoritism—characterized by unequal expressions of affection and control—is a form of parental injustice that may impact adolescents' psychological development. This study aimed to examine the relationship between parental favoritism and self-esteem in adolescent girls. A quantitative correlational design was employed, involving 408 female participants. Parental favoritism was measured using an instrument with two dimensions: affection ( $\alpha = 0.931$ ) and control ( $\alpha = 0.897$ ), while self-esteem was assessed using the State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES;  $\alpha = 0.880$ ). Data were analyzed using non-parametric statistical methods. The results of the Spearman Rank Correlation revealed a significant positive relationship between the affection dimension and self-esteem ( $\rho = 0.293$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and a significant negative relationship between the control dimension and self-esteem ( $\rho = -0.103$ ,  $p = < .05$ ). These findings suggest that parental favoritism is significantly associated with self-esteem among adolescent girls. It is recommended that parents foster acceptance of each child's unique strengths and limitations, while educators support students in managing personal challenges.

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## Introduction

Self-esteem is a general evaluative judgment individuals make about themselves (Rosenberg et al., 1995). Self, in this case refers to the values, beliefs, and attitudes held by a person (Deshpande & Chabriya, 2013). This evaluation is certainly not always positive, but it can also be negative (Baron & Branscombe, 2012). Heatherton & Polivy (1991) state that self-esteem has three dimensions of assessment, namely, performance self-esteem, social self-esteem, and appearance self-esteem.

Self-esteem has a major impact on the development of other aspects, especially in adolescent girls. Some studies reveal that when entering adolescence, women's self-esteem levels are lower than men's self-esteem levels (Bang et al., 2020; Bleidorn et al., 2016; Hameed et al., 2019; Minev et al., 2018). To prove this statement, research was then conducted on various ethnicities, namely America, Asia, and Europe, which produced similar results that female adolescents had lower levels of self-esteem than male adolescents (Bachman et al., 2011; Neill & Proeve, 2000). This will certainly have a

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negative impact on the achievement of developmental tasks because individuals with low levels of self-esteem will be less competent to overcome difficulties (Stavropoulos et al., 2015) and tend to have a negative view of many things, both other people and their own circumstances (MacKinnon, 2015). Meanwhile, those with a high level of self-esteem are better able to interpret happy moments, handle unpleasant situations, overcome problems effectively, and build good interpersonal attachment (Holloway, 2016).

The impact that self-esteem has on the process of human development has led many studies to uncover the factors that can influence self-esteem levels. In some studies, parents are one of the factors that influence the level of self-esteem of an individual. Parents play a role in providing care, being the first place for children to gain experience and a sense of security before they go directly to the real world. It is known that parental behavior is related to the level of children's self-esteem (Weber, 2001), where children who get acceptance from parents have higher self-esteem than those who get rejected or ignored (Deshpande & Chhabriya, 2013). Szkody et al. (2021) also added that parenting has a more significant effect on girls than boys. This is because self-esteem in women tends to be obtained from their relationships with others (Norona et al., 2015). If other people view themselves positively, they will evaluate themselves positively, which results in an increased level of self-esteem.

There is a quote "be kind to your parents; it's their first time living a life too", meaning that both the child and the parents are experiencing a new role for the first time in their lives. Since there is no formal training for becoming a parent, it is impossible for parenting to be completely perfect. Parental favoritism is one example of parental injustice in parenting. More specifically, it is a situation where parents treat or are perceived to treat one or more children more positively than others and choose one or more children to be treated negatively ((Salmon et al., 2012). Singer and Weinstein (2000) also suggest that favoritism stems from differences in how parents show affection and exert control over their children, leading to preferential treatment of certain children over others. This difference in treatment is often unnoticed by parents, so the child's experience is the main key to assessing the existence of the phenomenon of parental favoritism in a family. This assessment can be seen in two dimensions, namely affection and control. Affection refers to how parents feel about their children in the form of pride, comfort, interest, partiality, and sensitivity to their feelings. Meanwhile, the control dimension refers to the rules that parents impose on their children.

Furthermore, research on the relationship between parental favouritism and self-esteem was conducted using several different research designs. Rolan and Marceau (2018) discussed the impact of parental favoritism on the self-esteem of children, including favored and unfavored children. The results of this study show that children who do not experience favoritism and favored children have a higher level of self-esteem than children who are unfavored by their parents. It is corroborated by research from Rauer and Volling (2007) that children who lack affection from parents will experience jealousy towards their siblings, which results in low levels of self-esteem. Conversely, the findings of this study also reveal that increased self-esteem can occur in children whose affection is fulfilled—none other than the favored child. McHale et al. (2000) also emphasis that one of the consequences of parenting injustice has an impact on the achievement of one's self-esteem level, where one here refers to adolescents. This is because research findings based on the age of the subjects show that adolescent subjects tend to be more reactive to parental favoritism than middle childhood subjects.

Examining recent studies, parental favoritism is strongly associated with self-esteem. Regardless of whether the research subjects were part of the unfavored child or favored child group, they both showed low self-esteem levels when under the care of favoritism (Seol & Kim, 2018). This is reinforced by the results of Woo's (2019) research, which found that differences in treatment in parenting carried out by parents have an impact on the quality of sibling relationships and the self-esteem achievements of each child. In this study, it was also found that the relationship between parental favoritism and self-esteem is more evident in children who have siblings of the same gender (e.g., between sisters).

Several studies have investigated parental favoritism in relation to various psychological and behavioral variables, including sibling relationships (Iftikhar & Sajjad, 2023), problematic behavior (Pillemer et al., 2017), gadget addiction (Zhao et al., 2021), self-confidence (Conteh, 2021), and self-esteem (Rolan & Marceau, 2018). However, most of these

studies have been conducted in Westerncultural contexts. Research on parental favoritism within Asian cultures—particularly in Indonesia—remains limited. As is well known, cultural factors influence parenting styles (Ho et al., 2008) as well as individual levels of self-esteem (Bachman et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2015). This represents an important novelty in the present study, which aims to explore the relationship between parental favoritism and self-esteem among Indonesian adolescent girls

Research Questions

Based on the results of literature studies for adolescent girls, the author sees an urgency to conduct research on the relationship between parental favoritism and self-esteem of adolescent girls. During adolescence, females tend to have a more pronounced decrease in self-esteem levels compared to males. In accordance with previous studies, self-esteem plays a major role in the achievement of adolescent developmental tasks, and this achievement will be the foundation for increasing the probability of successful fulfillment of developmental tasks in the following period. Therefore, researchers should consider exploring self-esteem of girls as a topic related to parental favoritism.

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Is there a relationship between parental favoritism of the affection dimension and the self-esteem of adolescent girls?,
- Is there a relationship between parental favoritism of the control dimension and the self-esteem of adolescent girls?

Hypothesis:

- There is a relationship between parental favoritism of the affection dimension and the self-esteem of adolescent girls.
- There is a relationship between parental favoritism of the control dimension and the self-esteem of adolescent girls.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a non-experimental quantitative approach using a correlational method. The correlational design was chosen to examine the relationship between parental favoritism (independent variable) and self-esteem (dependent variable) in adolescent girls.

Participants

The study was conducted in Tasikmalaya City, which has a population of 59,460 adolescent girls aged 15 to 24 years. Purposive sampling was used as the sampling technique, which involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics (Sugiyono, 2013). In this study, the inclusion criteria were: (1) female gender, (2) aged between 18 and 22 years, and (3) having at least one sibling. The minimum sample size was calculated using Slovin’s formula (Darwin et al., 2021), with a significance level of 5%, yielding a required sample of approximately 397 respondents. A total of 408 participants were ultimately included in the study, exceeding the minimum requirement.

Table 1. Demographic data

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	408	100
Age	18 years	63	15,4
	19 years	65	15,9
	20 years	60	14,7
	21 years	95	23,3
	22 years	125	30,6
Birth Order	Firstborns	162	39,7

Sibling's Gender	Middle-Child	103	25,2
	Lastborns	143	35,0
	Woman	121	29,7
	Men	144	35,3
	Both	143	35,0
Economic Status	Low	30	7,4
	Average	371	90,9
	High	7	1,7
	Students	342	83,8
Job Status	Employee	41	10,0
	Unemployment	25	6,1

### Data Collection Tools

The instrument used to measure parental favoritism consists of 35 items divided into two dimensions: affection (20 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.931$ ) and control (15 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.897$ ). The instrument was developed by the researcher based on the theoretical framework of Rowe and Plomin (1981), focusing on the child's perception of differential treatment received from parents. Construct validity and reliability were examined using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The standardized factor loadings for the 35 items ranged from 0.412 to 0.813, indicating acceptable to strong item contributions to the latent constructs.

The State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES), developed by Heatherton and Polivy (1991), consists of 20 items across three dimensions: performance, social, and appearance. The instrument was translated into Indonesian following the cross-cultural adaptation procedures proposed by Beaton et al. (2000), which include: 1) Translation, 2) Synthesis, 3) Back translation, 4) Expert committee review, 5) Pretesting. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was then conducted to assess the scale's construct validity and reliability. The final version retained 18 items, with factor loadings ranging from 0.309 to 0.789 and a Cronbach's alpha of 0.880, indicating good internal consistency.

The research data were analyzed in two phases. First, a descriptive analysis was conducted to obtain the minimum (Min) and maximum (Max) scores, mean, and standard deviation (SD) of the data. Second, hypothesis testing was performed using Spearman's Rank Correlation, a non-parametric statistical method developed by Charles Spearman. As a non-parametric test, it does not require prior assumption testing, such as normality (Sugiyono, 2013). This method was chosen because the data were ordinal in nature and did not meet the assumptions required for parametric tests.

## Results

### Descriptive Analysis

Table 2. Results of descriptive variable analysis parental favoritism and self-esteem

Variable		Hypothetic				Empiric			
		Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Parental	Affection	20	100	60	13,33	25	98	62,57	12,17
Favoritism	Control	15	75	45	10	17	72	41,9	9,17
Self-Esteem		18	90	54	12	26	83	54,2	9,5

Categorization is carried out using hypothetical data, which aims to see the relative position of individuals on the research instrument, so that the results of the categorization of the two variables are as follows.

Table 3. Categorization of parental favoritism

Subscale	Category	Range	n	%
Affection	Low	$X < 46,67$	66	16,2
	Average	$46,67 \leq X < 73,33$	246	60,3
	High	$X > 73,33$	96	23,5
Control	Low	$X < 35$	106	26
	Average	$35 \leq X < 55$	265	65
	High	$X > 55$	37	9,1

Based on Table 5, in both the affection dimension and the control dimension, most participants have scores at a moderate level. In the affection dimension, there were 66 participants (16.2%) at a low level, 246 (60.3%) participants at a moderate level, and 96 (23.5%) participants at a high level. Meanwhile, for the control dimension, 106 (26%) participants were at a low level, 265 (65%) participants at a moderate level, and 37 (9.1%) participants at a high level. This means that most participants in the study had a fairly good experience with the acceptance of affection and control.

**Table 4.** Self-esteem categorization

Category	Range	n	%
Very Low	$X < 30$	6	1,5
Low	$30 \leq X < 42$	57	14
Average	$42 \leq X < 66$	287	70,3
High	$66 \leq X < 78$	54	13,2
Very High	$X > 78$	4	1

Based on Table 6, it was found that most participants had a moderate level of self-esteem, 287 (70.3%). Only 6 (1.5%) participants at the very low level, and 57 (14%) participants at the low level. Not much different from participants who have a level of self-esteem above moderate, namely 54 (13.2%) participants at a high level, and only 4 (1%) participants at a very high level.

### Hypothesis Test

Hypothesis testing was carried out using the Spearman's Rank Correlation Test because the normality assumption test was not fulfilled. The results of the research hypothesis test are as follows.

**Table 5.** Results of hypothetical dimensional affection test with self-esteem

		Parental (Affection)	Favoritism	Self-Esteem
Parental (Affection)	Favoritism	Correlation Coefficient (rho)	1,000	0,293
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0,000
Self-Esteem		Correlation Coefficient (rho)	0,293	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	.

The results of hypothesis testing presented in Table 5 indicate a significant relationship between the affection dimension of parental favoritism and self-esteem, with a significance level of 0.01. The correlation coefficient ( $\rho = 0.293$ ) suggests a positive but weak relationship. This implies that as adolescents perceive higher levels of parental affection, their self-esteem tends to increase. Conversely, a decrease in perceived parental affection is associated with lower self-esteem among adolescents.

**Table 6.** Results of hypothetical dimensional control test with self-esteem

		Parental (Control)	Favoritism	Self-Esteem
Parental (Control)	Favoritism	Correlation Coefficient (rho)	1,000	-0,103
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0,037
Self-Esteem		Correlation Coefficient (rho)	-0,103	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0,037	.

The hypothesis testing results for the control dimension of parental favoritism revealed a significant relationship with self-esteem at the 0.05 significance level. In contrast to the affection dimension, the control dimension demonstrated a negative correlation ( $\rho = -0.103$ ), although the strength of the relationship was very weak. This finding suggests that adolescents who perceive lower levels of parental control tend to report higher levels of self-esteem. Conversely, as the level of parental control increases, adolescents' self-esteem tends to decrease.

## Discussion

The results of descriptive data analysis show that adolescent girls in both the affection dimension and the control dimension are mostly at a moderate level. The affection dimension shows that 23.5% of respondents get higher affection than others, it can be interpreted that respondents in the study have received sufficient fulfillment of affection, which tends to be high from parents. In contrast, in the control dimension 26% of respondents had low control experiences from parents, this number is even further adrift with adolescents who get a high level of control. Iftikhar and Sajjad (2023) said that children who get high affection, low control, and have less burden from domestic responsibilities are considered favored. This indicates that certain participants in this research encountered a greater level of favoritism compared to other adolescent girls, but in the role of a favored child.

Based on birth order, respondents were dominated by firstborns and youngest children. Generally, the eldest child receives a lot of attention as the hope of the family, while the youngest child requires guidance as they explore the world. So often, the middle child becomes the victim of favoritism by becoming the unfavored child. This opinion is not only developed without scientific proof, Salmon et al.'s (2012) research proves that if there is favoritism in a family, most of the eldest and youngest children become the favored children, especially by the mother. However, a study by Rohde et al. (2003) stated that the youngest child is more often the favored child because parents are more emotionally open and expressive than the eldest or middle child.

The gender of the respondent's sibling, in addition to birth order, also influences the high level of favoritism. In this study, there were more adolescent girls who had male siblings as well as girls and boys. It is likely that favoritism is more common among siblings of the opposite gender because girls are considered more reliable to take care of parents in old age than boys (Salmon et al., 2012). This means that when girls have siblings of the opposite sex, the possibility of parental favoritism in care will be higher.

From the results of the descriptive data analysis, it can be concluded that most adolescent girls have moderate self-esteem. Only a few have a self-esteem level above average, even adolescents who have self-esteem at a low-very low level are 1.3% higher than adolescents who have self-esteem at a high-very high level. In terms of demographic data based on age, more than half of the sample was over 21 years old. Huang (2010) analyzed the results of several longitudinal self-esteem studies and concluded that although the biggest changes in self-esteem occur in adolescence (18–22 years), the impact obtained is still relatively small. So, changes in self-esteem in adolescence (18–22 years) have increased, but not so drastically.

Based on economic status, 371 (90%) respondents came from middle-income families. In accordance with research by von Soest et al. (2018), individuals who have low socio-economic status tend to have low self-esteem levels. 342 respondents being students implies that their financial needs are likely met by their families. Nguyen et al. (2019) found that students who took extra classes were at lower risk of having poor self-esteem, and they found that most students who had this experience came from families with higher socio-economic status. This means that socioeconomic status can be one of the bridges for individuals to get better experiences, in the hope that it can have a positive influence on their self-esteem.

The study population was taken in Tasikmalaya City, West Java, with a majority of Sundanese ethnicity. As discussed earlier in this study, most respondents had a moderate level of self-esteem. However, it is different from Amalianita's (2021) research on adolescents with Minangkabau ethnic backgrounds that adolescents' self-esteem is at a low category level. In accordance with the opinion expressed by Bachman et al. (2011) that geographical location and race/ethnicity affect how individuals evaluate themselves (self-esteem).

The results of the overall data processing indicate that the hypothesis of this study, which suggests a relationship between parental favoritism and self-esteem in adolescent girls, is accepted. More specifically, the affection dimension has a positive relationship with self-esteem, whereas the control dimension has a negative relationship with self-esteem. The following will further discuss the results of both hypothesis tests.

The findings of this study indicate that higher levels of parental affection are associated with higher self-esteem in adolescents. Conversely, adolescents who receive lower levels of affection from their parents tend to report lower self-esteem. These results are consistent with the findings of Martinez et al. (2020), who stated that parental warmth, expressed through affection, contributes to higher levels of self-esteem in children. However, Chong et al (2014) found that as individuals transition from late adolescence to early adulthood, the impact of parental affection on self-esteem tends to diminish. This may help explain why, in the present study, the positive correlation between affection and self-esteem, although significant, is relatively weak in strength.

In contrast to the affection dimension, the results of hypothesis testing between control and self-esteem show that both are significantly related, but with a negative relationship direction. Parents giving higher levels of control results in lower self-esteem in children. This applies conversely, if parents provide a low level of control over their children, their self-esteem level will increase. Some believe that parents provide direction to adolescents who are searching for themselves through control in parenting. However, sometimes parents forget that too much control can hurt children (Hunter et al., 2015). These hurt feelings stem from children developing perceptions that they are unreliable.

This study successfully revealed that there is a significant relationship between parental favoritism and self-esteem in adolescent girls. In this study, respondents were dominated by adolescents who had siblings of different genders, so research by Woo (2019), which states that the relationship between parental favoritism and self-esteem is more evident in siblings of the same gender was not proven in this study. Regardless of whether a child is favored or unfavored, receiving parenting in which there is parental favoritism has a negative influence on self-esteem. As revealed in several studies, children who experience parental favoritism tend to have lower self-esteem levels than those who do not (Seol & Kim, 2018; Wiener, 2012).

This study is subject to potential biases, including social desirability and perceptual bias due to the use of self-report questionnaires. Additionally, the sample's limited geographic and gender scope introduces sampling bias, reducing the generalizability of findings. Since the parental favoritism scale was researcher-developed, the possibility of researcher bias cannot be entirely ruled out, although validation procedures were applied to minimize this risk.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study demonstrate that the affection dimension of parental favoritism is significantly and positively related to self-esteem, whereas the control dimension is significantly and negatively related to self-esteem. These results underscore the complex role of parental favoritism in adolescent development. While preferential treatment expressed through affection may enhance self-esteem by fulfilling emotional needs, favoritism expressed through heightened control may diminish self-esteem by restricting autonomy and reinforcing feelings of inadequacy. Therefore, parental behavior must be evaluated not only in terms of fairness but also in terms of how different forms of favoritism influence psychological outcomes.

To strengthen the affection dimension in parenting, parents must ensure that emotional expressions of love, support, and appreciation are provided equitably. When children perceive affection as consistent and sincere across different contexts and among siblings, the negative perception of favoritism may be reduced, and self-esteem can be enhanced.

Further research is recommended to use a longitudinal study design to track changes in parental favoritism and its effects on adolescents' self-esteem over time. This approach would allow researchers to observe developmental patterns, identify causal relationships, and better understand how the impact of parental affection and control may evolve from adolescence into early adulthood.

Educators play a vital role in supporting students' self-esteem by creating emotionally safe environments, providing constructive feedback, and guiding students through personal challenges. Helping students develop problem-solving and emotional regulation skills empowers them to navigate difficulties independently, thereby fostering a stronger and more resilient sense of self-worth.

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