

# **Low self-esteem, depressive symptoms 'feed each other' in kids 12-14: study**

*By Beth Newhart*

*Last modified January 14, 2021. Published January 12, 2021.*

Self-esteem levels in early adolescents have a reciprocal relationship with depressive symptoms, particularly among girls rather than boys, according to new research that is the first to study that relationship within this age group.

Identity development fluctuates significantly during adolescence. A popular belief in psychology, known as Beck's theory, is that forming negative self-cognitions, referring to low self-esteem and high self-criticism, is a key early step in the development of depression.

But in a new [paper](#) published Dec. 18 in *PLOS One*, a team of researchers from Australia sought to examine the relationship between changes in adolescent self-criticism, self-esteem and depressive symptoms among early adolescents specifically.

Though Beck's theory is well-known, it has primarily been supported in older adolescents and has not been clearly observed in younger adolescents. Catherine Gittins, a research fellow at the University of Sydney and

lead author of the current paper, analyzed a sample of 243 children between the ages of 12-14 living in Australia.

“The main job of an adolescent, from a psychological point of view, is to work out who you are and what you want from life, so that when you hit adulthood you can make the big decisions for yourself, like what career to pursue,” Gittins told *The Academic Times*.

The researchers surveyed the participants at age 12, and followed up one year later when they were 13 and a second time when they were 14. The children reported their levels of self-esteem and self-criticism by expressing how they felt about themselves, and also recorded any depression symptoms they were experiencing.

The authors defined self-criticism as “the punishment or derogation people deliver to themselves when they assess that they have not met internally instigated standards.” It was measured with the Levels of Self-Criticism Scale-Internalised Self-Criticism subscale, a 10-item, seven-point scale in which higher scores indicate greater self-criticism.

Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale, which assesses global self-esteem through 10 items, and depressive symptoms were measured with the Children’s Depression Inventory-2 Self-Report Short, the most widely used self-report measure for depression in young people.

Gittins and the other researchers expected that all three variables would display significant linear change over the testing period: self-criticism and depressive symptoms would increase, and self-esteem would decrease.

They found this to be largely true, but self-esteem and depressive symptoms appeared to have a somewhat reciprocal relation. Depressive symptoms predicted self-esteem levels between survey one, at age 12, and survey two, at age 13. But self-esteem levels predicted depressive symptoms between survey two and survey three, at age 14.

“So there seems to be a bit of a reciprocal relationship going on here, where, to some extent, they both feed each other,” Gittins said. “What we think might be going on is that, because identity development is so in-flux in this period, it might be influenced by a range of things, including feeling low or depressed.”

The study also determined that self-criticism did not appear to predict the development of depression or lower self-esteem, although self-esteem did predict reduced self-criticism between ages 13 and 14.

When considering gender, the researchers found that girls’ depressive symptoms generally increased and their self-esteem decreased at a significantly greater rate than boys’ symptoms.

At age 12, boys and girls demonstrated similar levels of self-esteem and depressive symptoms. By age 13, girls’

self-esteem was significantly lower and depressive symptoms were significantly higher than boys' symptoms. But at age 14, there was no significant difference in depressive symptoms or self-esteem levels for girls and boys, suggesting that the peak point of differentiation is at around age 13.

Girls' self-esteem reduced and their depressive symptoms increased at significantly greater rates than boys' during the testing period. However, boys' self-esteem still reduced and their self-criticism and depressive symptoms still increased over time.

"These results suggest a refinement of Beck's theory that all types of negative beliefs about the self generally create vulnerability to depression," the authors said in the study. "At least for early adolescents, self-esteem appears to be more important than self-criticism in the development of depression."

Gittins said that researchers should continue study on this topic in order to better understand how depression develops in early adolescents for improved treatment and prevention methods. The evidence of a reciprocal relation between self-esteem and depressive symptoms in particular may have ramifications for depression treatment, the authors noted.

"This is crucial because people who develop depression early in life are at greater risk of having recurrent episodes of depression throughout their life, rather than just a one-off incident," Gittins said.

More study is also needed on how other types of self-beliefs might be leading to the development of depression, she suggested, such as beliefs about how romantically attractive one is to others, and whether that can lead to depression.

“What this research suggests is that an adolescent’s beliefs about themselves are central in developing depression. If we’re serious about reducing depression rates, we need to be doing more to help teenagers develop positive views of themselves,” Gittins said.

*The study “Self-criticism and self-esteem in early adolescence: Do they predict depression?” was published in PLOS One on Dec. 18. Catherine Gittins, of the University of Sydney, was the lead author. Caroline Hunt, a professor at the University of Sydney, served as co-author.*

*This story has been updated to correct the spelling of an author's name.*