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**PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY OF SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND
ADOLESCENTS' ATTITUDE TO LIFE**

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Abstract

Psychological safety of the educational environment is a national priority since it is a prerequisite for harmonious development of a person and, ultimately, well-being of the nation. Safety of the school environment is presumed to be a major factor of psychological well-being of secondary- and high-school students; however, this dependence has not been empirically confirmed or analyzed in detail. Here, the psychological safety of the educational environment and the level of psychological well-being/ill-being were estimated in Russian adolescent school students aged 12–17 years. The adolescents' psychological safety has been found to be at a satisfactory level, varying with age, whereas the level of hopelessness according to the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) is low. The indices of the general psychological safety and its constituents, including satisfaction of students with the basic features of social interactions and the level of protection against mental violence at school, have been found to be positively correlated with affirmative replies to the BHS items reflecting a positive attitude to life and negatively correlated with those reflecting a pessimistic attitude, as well as with the general hopelessness level. The findings confirm that psychological safety of the educational environment is a factor determining psychological well-being in adolescents. The results of this study are expected to be useful in organizing psychological support to adolescents at school.

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Keywords: Educational environment, psychological safety, psychological well-being, hopelessness.



1. Introduction

Safety in general and the sense of safety in particular are paramount for human psychological well-being. Safety of a person is generally understood to mean protectedness of their vital interests. Lack of safety is a strong stress factor interfering with harmonious development of personality. Safety is divided into physical safety and psychological safety (Baeva, 2014). Here we deal with the latter one, which is a prerequisite for the integrity of personality and its capacity for optimal interaction with its social environment, including a positive general attitude to the past, present, and future. Educational environment is a factor largely determining the life of children and adolescents and strongly affects their interaction with the social environment in general and many other aspects of their future adult life. The psychological safety of this environment is crucial for psychological well-being, normal personality development, and formation of a self-actualizing person, which makes the provision of psychological safety at school a priority of the educational system and society as a whole (Baeva, Volkova, & Laktionova, 2011, Baeva & Bordovskaia, 2015).

The notion of hazard is central for the theory of safety. The main hazard to the psychological safety at school is a psychotrauma resulting from mental violence, and psychological safety should be considered in terms of protection against this hazard (Baeva & Gayazova, 2012). Earlier, the following criteria of psychological safety in the education environment were suggested: (i) the significance (referentiality) of the educational environment; (ii) satisfaction of students and teachers with the basic features of their interactions; and (iii) the level of protection against mental violence. These criteria served as the basis for developing the index of psychological safety of the educational environment (Baeva, 2012). In practice, this index is calculated using an inventory for estimating to what degree each criterion is met in a given sample of respondents (Baeva, 2002a); hence, Baeva's method yields an estimate of the sense of safety or psychological safety as perceived by students and teachers.

There are also methods for estimating the desirable result of psychological safety, psychological well-being, or ill-being as its reciprocal measure. The level of hopelessness, reflecting (i) a pessimistic attitude to the future and (ii) the sense of helplessness against anticipated negative experiences (Bannikov et al., 2014), is an important index of general ill-being. The concept of hopelessness was introduced into psychology by Beck et al. (1985). Later, Beck developed an inventory for estimating the level of hopelessness, the Beck Hopelessness Scale (Beck, 1974).

2. Problem Statement

Psychological safety of the educational environment can be regarded as a condition for psychological well-being and the development of a fully functioning person (Baeva, 2002b). However, the actual dependence of the psychological well-being of school students on the psychological safety of the educational environment has not been estimated before. Therefore, we attempted to perform such an estimation for Russian adolescent school students.

3. Research Questions

To estimate well-being of Russian adolescent students and its relationship with the psychological safety of the school environment, we

- analyzed how adolescents estimated the degree of psychological safety at school;
- analyzed the characteristics of the sense of hopelessness in adolescents;
- determined how the adolescents' age affected their estimation of psychological safety of the school environment and their sense of hopelessness; and
- estimated the relationship between the perceived psychological safety and hopelessness in adolescent students.

4. Purpose of the Study

This study was aimed at identifying the relationship between the perceived psychological safety of the school environment and the level of hopelessness in adolescent secondary- and high-school students.

5. Research Methods

We used Baeva's (2002b) inventory for estimating the psychological safety of educational environment at school. This inventory yields an integrated estimate of psychological safety based on questionnaires filled by students, their parents, and school teachers. Here, we used only the questionnaires filled by the students. The inventory contains three scales: significance (referentiality) of educational environment, satisfaction with basic features of social interactions, and the level of protection against mental violence.

The level of hopelessness was estimated using Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) (Beck, 1974). The scale consists of 20 items replies to which reflect the respondents' attitudes to their past, present, and future.

6. Findings

The study was carried out in 19 secondary schools of the Northwestern Federal District of the Russian Federation. We used anonymous questionnaires with the respondents' identity coded. The sample comprised 810 adolescent students aged from 12 to 17 years, including 362 (44.7%) boys and 380 (46.9%) girls. 68 respondents (8.4%) did not indicate their gender. The age distribution of the respondents was the following: 12-year-olds, 8 (0.99%); 13-year-olds, 77 (9.51%); 14-year-olds, 343 (42.35%); 15-year-olds, 205 (25.31%); 16-year-olds, 152 (18.77%); 17-year-olds, 8 (0.99%); age not indicated, 17 (2.10%).

The psychological safety of the educational environment was estimated using three Baeva's indices, as well as the total index of the psychological safety of the educational environment (Table 01).

Table 01. Psychological safety of the educational environment as estimated by adolescents

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Standard deviation
Significance (referentiality) of educational environment	3.79	1.00	5.00	0.62
Satisfaction with basic features of social interactions	3.72	1.00	5.00	0.72
Level of protection against mental violence	3.64	1.00	5.00	0.94
Index of psychological safety of educational environment	3.72	1.21	5.00	0.58

All indices of psychological safety have been found to be at a satisfactory level inferred from our preliminary estimates; i.e., the respondents appear to feel rather safe at school.

Analysis of sex- and age-related differences in estimation of the psychological safety of school environment by adolescents (Student's *t* test and one-way ANOVA, respectively) has demonstrated significant differences between the estimates given by respondents of different ages (Table 02, Figure 01).

Table 02. Age-related differences in estimation of the psychological safety at school by adolescents. *n* = 777; age, 12–17 years

	SS effect	df effect	MS effect	SS error	df error	MS error	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Significance (referentiality) of educational environment	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	ns
Satisfaction with basic features of social interactions	10.20	5.00	2.04	396.61	780.00	0.51	4.01	0.00
Level of protection against mental violence	10.42	5.00	2.08	661.05	769.00	0.86	2.42	0.03
Index of psychological safety of educational environment	4.73	5.00	0.95	255.77	783.00	0.33	2.90	0.01

Notes: ns, difference is nonsignificant.

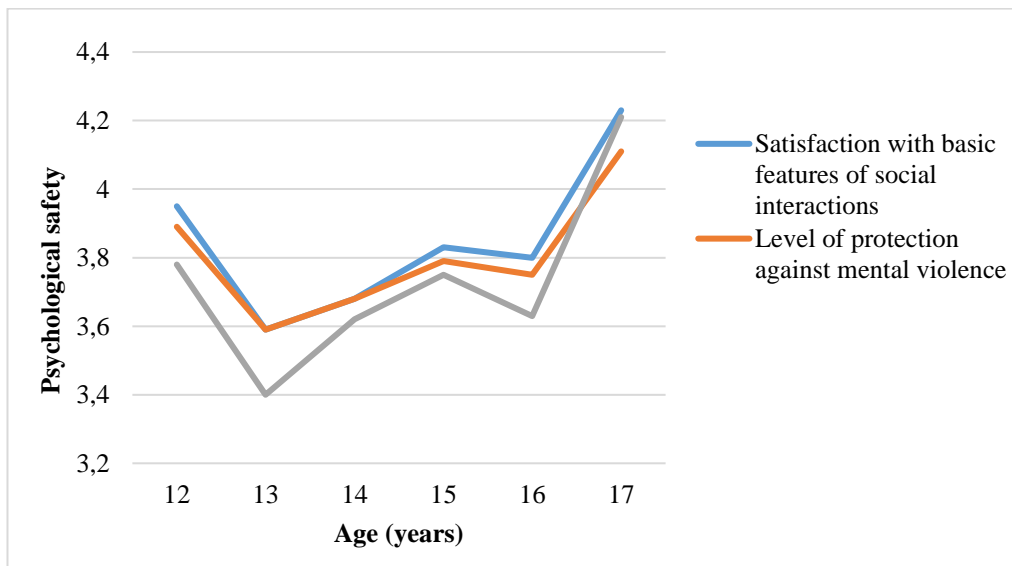


Figure 01. Changes in the estimation of psychological safety at school with students' age.

At the next stage of the study, we estimated the hopelessness level in the sample. The results are shown in Table 03.

Table 03. Level of hopelessness in adolescents

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Standard deviation
Hopelessness level	5.89	1	20	3.98

Analysis of sex- and age-related differences in the level of hopelessness in adolescents (Student's *t* test and one-way ANOVA, respectively) has demonstrated significant differences between respondents of different ages (Table 04, Figure 02), whereas no sex-related differences have been found.

Table 04. Age-related differences in the level of hopelessness in adolescents. *n* = 709; age, 12–17 years

	SS effect	df effect	MS effect	SS error	df error	MS error	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Hopelessness level	201.42	5	40.28	11200.62	720	15.56	2.59	0.02

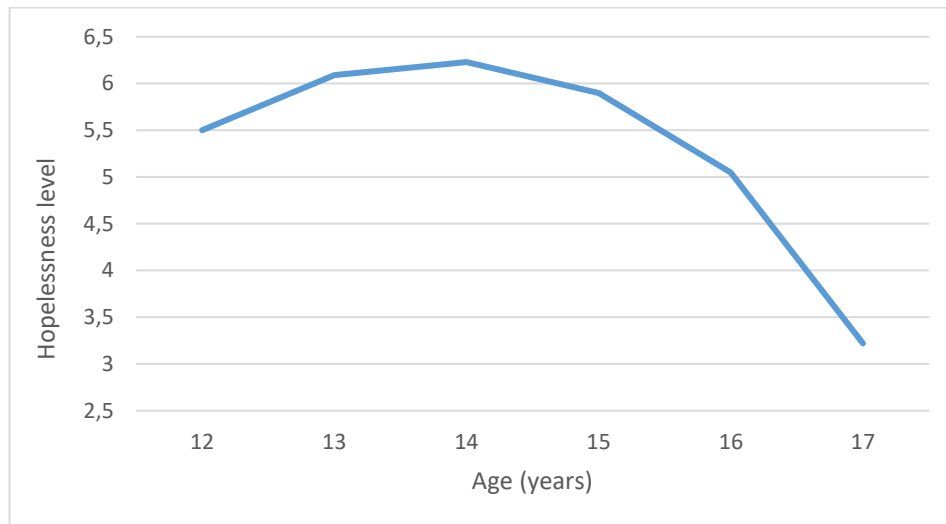


Figure 02. Changes in the hopelessness level with students' age.

Of special interest was analysis of the relationship between the psychological safety index and integrated hopelessness index (Table 05).

Table 05. Relationship between the integrated hopelessness index and factors of the psychological safety at school self-estimated by adolescents. Pearson's rank-order correlation, *n* = 673

	Significance (referentiality) of educational environment	Satisfaction with basic features of social interactions	Level of protection against mental violence	Index of psychological safety of educational environment
Hopelessness index	-0.19***	-0.29***	-0.23***	-0.31***

Notes: *** Significant correlation ($p \leq 0.001$).

As seen from Table 05, the hopelessness index was highly significantly correlated with all the three indices of psychological safety, as well as the integrated safety index calculated from them. Thus, an increased level of each of the three factors of psychological safety of the educational environment—significance of the environment, satisfaction with social interactions, and the level of protection against mental violence—favors psychological well-being of adolescents.

In order to determine how the psychological safety and each of its constituents affected specific factors of psychological well-being, we estimated the correlations of the psychological safety indices with affirmative replies to the 20 items of BHS (Table 06).

Table 06. Relationship between the specific indices of hopefulness/hopelessness and factors of the psychological safety at school self-estimated by adolescents. Pearson’s rank-order correlation, $n = 673$

	Significance (referentiality) of educational environment	Satisfaction with basic features of social interactions	Level of protection against mental violence	Index of psychological safety of educational environment
(1) I look forward to the future with hope and enthusiasm	0.16***	0.13***	nc	0.14***
(2) I might as well give up because there’s nothing I can do to make things better for myself	-0.11**	-0.16***	-0.15***	-0.18***
(3) When things are going badly, I am helped by knowing that they can’t stay that way for ever	nc	0.14***	nc	0.12***
(4) I can’t imagine what my life would be like in ten years	nc	nc	nc	Nc
(5) I have enough time to accomplish the things I most want to do	0.09*	0.13***	0.14***	0.16***
(6) In the future I expect to succeed in what concerns me most	0.15***	0.14***	0.13***	0.18***
(7) My future seems dark to me	nc	-0.12**	-0.08*	-0.10**
(8) I happen to be particularly lucky and I expect to get more of the good things in life than the average person	nc	0.15***	0.09*	0.12***
(9) I just don’t get the breaks, and there’s no reason to believe that I will in the future	nc	-0.13***	-0.08*	-0.11**
(10) My past experiences have prepared me well for my future	0.18***	0.20***	0.15***	0.22***
(11) All I can see ahead of me is unpleasantness rather than pleasantness	nc	-0.17**	-0.11**	-0.15***
(12) I don’t expect to get what I really want	nc	nc	-0.12**	-0.12**
(13) When I look ahead to the future I expect I will be happier than I am now	nc	nc	nc	Nc
(14) Things just won’t work out the way I want them to	-0.15***	-0.17***	-0.15***	-0.20***
(15) I have great faith in the future	0.12**	0.19***	0.10**	0.18***
(16) I never get what I want, so it’s foolish to want anything	nc	-0.17***	-0.15***	-0.17***
(17) It is very unlikely that I will get any real satisfaction in the future	nc	nc	nc	Nc
(18) The future seems vague and uncertain to me	-0.08*	nc	nc	-0.08*
(19) I can look forward to more good times than bad times	0.08*	0.13***	0.13***	0.15***
(20) There’s no use in really trying to get something I want because I probably won’t get it	-0.09*	-0.17***	-0.13***	-0.17***

Notes: Significant correlations: * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$. nc, no correlation found.

Our earlier studies (Bannikov et al., 2017) have shown that some of the BHS items particularly strongly reflect the degree of general psychological well-being/ill-being. These are items 2, 9, 12, and 20.

As could be expected, our analysis of the psychological safety of the school environment as perceived by adolescents and the sense of hopelessness in them has shown positive correlation of psychological well-being with the estimated level of psychological safety and its specific constituents.

The psychological safety significantly varies with the respondents' age in the interval from 12 to 17 years. Specifically, it decreases after the age of 12 years and then rises until the age of 17.

Analysis of the relationship between the psychological safety and hopelessness indices within the groups of 13-, 14-, 15-, and 16-year-old students (those aged 12 and 17 years were excluded because the samples were too small for the analysis) has shown significant correlation between the psychological safety and hopelessness. That is, the indices are correlated with each other irrespective of the respondents' age.

7. Conclusion

The psychological safety of the educational environment as perceived by secondary- and high-school students aged 12–17 years has been estimated. The degree of the students' satisfaction with basic features of social interactions at school and the level of protection against mental violence, as well as the integrated index of psychological safety, have been found to vary with age: in these respects, 12- and 17-year-old students feel safer than 13- to 16-year-old ones. The significance of the educational environment for the students does not depend on age. In general, the degree of psychological safety has been found to be satisfactory.

The level of hopelessness has been estimated in the same students. The mean hopelessness level in them appeared to be within the normal range estimated earlier for the Moscow and St. Petersburg adolescent populations and within the interval of low hopelessness levels according to Beck, the scatter of individual values being relatively small. Analysis of age- and sex- related differences in this index has shown a weak dependence on the respondents' age and no dependence on their sex.

Analysis of the relationship between the psychological safety of the environment and the hopelessness level has shown that psychological well-being as a whole and its specific indices are positively correlated with the psychological safety.

More detailed scrutiny of individual entries of the BHS has shown that affirmative replies to the items reflecting an optimistic attitude to the respondents' present and future are positively correlated with the level of psychological safety and its individual factors. On the other hand, affirmative replies to the items that we earlier found to be the most characteristic of psychological ill-being are negatively correlated with the psychological safety level.

We believe these findings to be useful for improving the psychological support system in Russian secondary and high schools.

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