

A Systematic Literature Review of Neglected Adolescents through an Ecological Perspective

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Abstract: The phenomenon of neglected adolescents is more common than people thought both nationally and internationally. Family environment and adolescents' own ecological system can affect their mental health and learning efficiency. Neglected adolescents encounter social-emotional challenges, yet prior research often overlooks the ecological factors influencing their development. Few studies systematically integrate social, family, and school factors to comprehensively understand their outcomes. This systematic literature review assesses research on the social-emotional development of neglected adolescents from an ecological perspective. Through a database search for literature on neglected adolescents, researchers identified 426 articles which, through a systematic screening process, they reduced to 21 studies focusing specifically on adolescents who have experienced neglect and associated social withdrawal in the United States. Subsequent content analyses of these 21 studies were conducted to examine trends and patterns in the literature. Investigators identified a notable gap in the exploration of neglected adolescents' mesosystems finding that limited research has explored the connections between home and school. This review underscores the need for future research incorporating this perspective to offer a more comprehensive understanding of neglected adolescents' social-emotional outcomes.

Keywords: Neglected adolescents, Family microsystem, School microsystem, Mesosystem, Social Withdrawal.

1. Introduction

Adolescent's wellbeing has increasingly been positioned as a central focus in research on the home and school life of adolescents in the United States [1]. Present research emphasizes the importance of providing a supportive and engaging environment for a developing adolescent, highlighting the detrimental effects of not meeting those needs. A significant proportion of adolescents in the United States suffer from a type of parental absence [2], but while parental absence is a documented problem, physical abuse is more frequently discussed in the literature [3]. A lack of emotional connection can

have a serious impact on the mental and emotional health of adolescents, especially during this critical stage of development [4]. The innate need for emotional bonding and guidance from parents underscores the profound impact of neglect on adolescents' relational and emotional development, with enduring implications into adulthood [5,6]. Despite extensive literature on parental roles, there remains a notable gap in understanding how schools can effectively support neglected adolescents [7]. Schools, often considered a secondary home for adolescents [8], play a crucial role in filling the support void left by inadequate parental care. However, the mechanisms through which schools address these needs remain ambiguous. This research integrates perspectives from child development, family dynamics, social-emotional wellbeing, and educational outcomes. It aims to synthesize existing literature on environments conducive to the social-emotional growth and academic success of adolescents affected by neglect. This work calls for researchers to expand out of epistemological silos in order to imagine educational remedies. By examining the themes and patterns in the underlying epistemological assumptions of the literature, this work hopes to shed light on how the research might expand in the future in ways that can point to novel remedies and solutions. To explore these dynamics comprehensively, this systematic literature review addresses the following research question: To what extent and in what ways does existing education literature on neglected adolescents engage with interactions between home and school life?

2. Theoretical Framework

This literature review utilizes Ecological Systems Theory [9,10] as the framework through which we investigate the phenomenon of neglected adolescents. This perspective highlights individuals' interactions with their settings and sociocultural environments. In particular, it allows us to distinguish between micro-, meso-, and macro- systems in which neglected adolescents are situated. This perspective is particularly useful to us because it allows us to explore the assumptions that research has made about what levels of adolescents' ecological environments are important enough to merit investigation. Through an ecological lens, we are able to see whether particular levels of adolescents' ecologies are over and underrepresented in the existing literature [11]. At the microsystem level, the focus is on groups that immediately and directly impact an individual's development, such as family, school, peers, and neighborhood. The mesosystem, in turn, consists of the interconnections between these microsystems, describing how interactions between an individual's school and family influence their development. Moving beyond the immediate environments, the exosystem involves other formal and informal social structures that do not directly involve the individual but still exert an influence. The macrosystem encompasses the broader cultural elements, including societal norms, values, laws, and customs, that shape the individual's environment. Finally, the chronosystem consists of the pattern of environmental events and transitions over time, as well as socio-historical changes. This level considers how the timing of these events affects the adolescent's development, providing a temporal dimension to the ecological framework [10,12]. An ecological perspective allows us to see the microsystem of the family within its context and examine how the familial microsystem is embedded within a larger ecology. This can be shown by existing studies that adolescents under such parenting are more likely to possess negative emotional status and be less capable of social interaction skills than other peers [13]. Moreover, we also pay close attention to the mesosystem of adolescents because it contributes significantly when shaping the educational outcomes of neglected adolescents, however, it is usually understudied. We analyze this topic by examining the research methods in each study, these include the data collection method, emphasis on school-family connection, targeted participants, and measure of social-emotional outcomes. The ecological system theory allows us to categorize the studies into each ecological layer, so that we could understand more thoroughly the perspectives of different studies,

the situation of neglected adolescents, and which direction a future study could be more comprehensive on the immediate environments surrounding an individual.

3. Methods

3.1. Literature Search

This systematic review of the literature examines research on neglected adolescents, defined as those who have experienced a lack of emotional responsiveness from either parents or schools, published between 1978 and 2023. To gain insight into specific data on neglected adolescents and their immediate environment, peer-reviewed studies were focused only on. Given its comprehensive coverage of academic and educational research, a search was conducted in the EBSCO database on July 16, 2024. The search strategy involved using specific search terms to identify relevant articles (see Table 1). Boolean phrases were used to ensure full coverage. The phrase “OR” was used to join terms listed in the table together. And the phrase “AND” was used to combine those categories for searching. The initial search yielded a total of 426 articles.

Table 1: Search Categories and Terms.

Search Term Category (Joined with AND)	Search Terms in Abstract (Joined with OR)
High School	High school*, upper school*, secondary education*, secondary school*, learning*, education*, teaching*
Neglectful Parenting	Neglectful parenting*, Emotional neglect*, Parental neglect*, Unsupportive parenting*, Emotional unavailability*, Lack of parental responsiveness*, Parental inattention*, Psychological neglect*, Childhood emotional neglect*, Parental absence*, Child neglect*, Neglectful caregiving*
Social withdrawal	Social withdrawal*, Social isolation*, Social exclusion*, General withdrawal*, Lack of communication*, Loneliness*, Social avoidance*, Social anxiety*, Depression*, Negative social interactions*, Peer rejection*, Social phobia*, Adolescent social withdrawal*, Bullying*, Social skills deficit*, Social disengagement*, Insecurit*, Low self-esteem*, Self-doubt*, Lack of confidence*, Anxiet*, Fear of failure*, Fear of rejection*, Vulnerability*, Imposter syndrom*, Social insecurit*, Performance anxiet*, Attachment insecurit*

3.2. Literature Screening

Next, a set of specific inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied using Covidence, a literature review software, and screened the title and abstract of all 426 identified articles. All studies were screened by two coders and all disagreements were resolved through discussion. The criteria were as follows:

- 1. The context must be United States
- 2. Must be focused on adolescents (individuals aged 10-19)
- 3. Must be focused on neglected adolescents

4. Youth security or social withdrawal must be a topic of the study (a study that mentions social withdrawal, but is not the main topic of study will be excluded from the review)
5. Must be written in English
6. Must be a peer-reviewed study (articles, journals and books will be excluded)

Our PRISMA diagram (see Figure 1) shows that 426 studies were initially screened, excluding 330 that did not meet the criteria, leaving 96 studies for further eligibility assessment. After retrieving full texts from ScienceDirect, Taylor and Francis, and other sources, a full text screening was conducted excluding 75 more studies due to irrelevance, focusing on wrong topics, populations, or access issues. Full text screening was also conducted by two coders and all disagreements were resolved through discussion. This process left us with 21 studies for detailed analysis and further research.

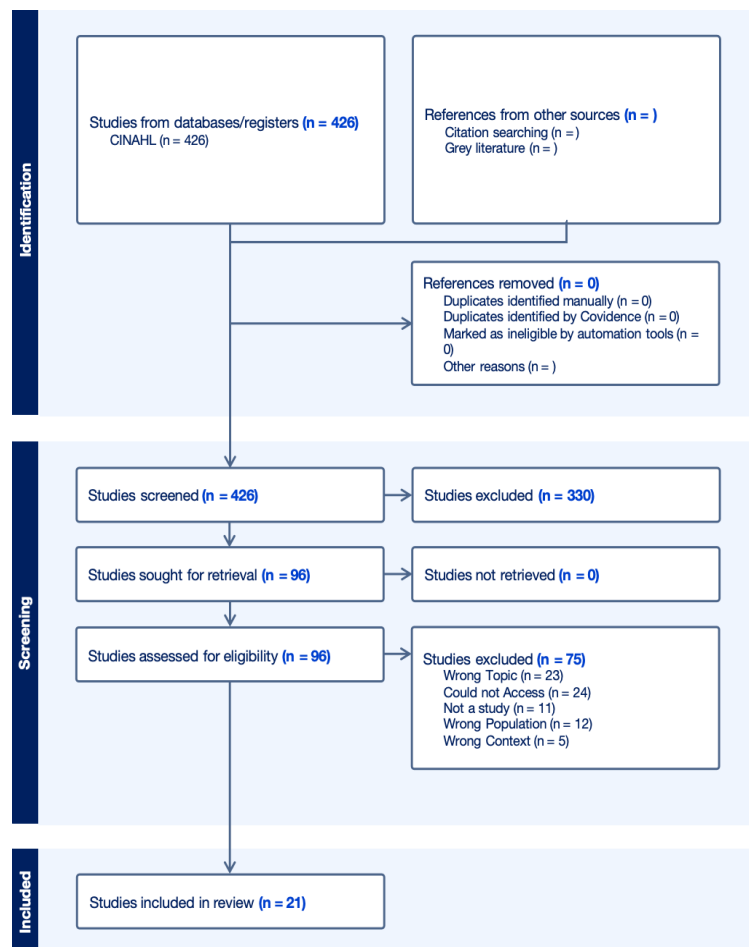


Figure 1: PRISMA diagram of the identification process through Covidence.

3.3. Literature Analysis

After full-text screening, the data was coded in two steps to complete the extraction process. First, each study was determined on whether they discussed neglected adolescents within a larger ecological system, either micro-, meso-, exo-, or macrosystem. Finding an absence of exo- and macrosystem focused research, the remaining studies were categorized into four groups with reference to ecological systems theory: (1) Investigates adolescent wellbeing within the home microsystem; (2) Investigates adolescent wellbeing within the school microsystem; (3) Investigates adolescent wellbeing within the home-school mesosystem; (4) Lacks attention to the adolescent's context (see Table 2). In addition,

the number of studies was converted counted into percentages and plotted the graphs as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Table 2: Overview of Study Characteristics.

Study	Author, Date	Study Focus
A forty year perspective on effects of child abuse and neglect	McCord, 1983	Home Life Microsystem Level
A longitudinal examination of childhood maltreatment and adolescent obesity: Results from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) Study	Shin & Miller, 2012	Home Life Microsystem Level
Longitudinal Relations Between Depressive Symptoms and Externalizing Behavior in Adolescence: Moderating Effects of Maltreatment Experience and Gender	Brensilver et al., 2011	Home Life Microsystem Level
Trauma Adapted Family Connections	Collins et al., 2011	Home Life Microsystem Level
Predicting Program Completion Among Families Enrolled in a Child Neglect Preventive Intervention	Girvin et al., 2020	Home Life Microsystem Level
The Link between Types of Attachment and Childhood Trauma	Erozkan, 2016	Home Life Microsystem Level
Differential correlates of multi-type maltreatment among urban youth	Arata et al., 2007	Home Life Microsystem Level
Childhood emotional maltreatment and later psychological distress among college students: The mediating role of maladaptive schemas	Wright et al., 2009	Home Life Microsystem Level
Examination of the indirect effect of childhood emotional trauma on internalizing symptoms through distress intolerance	Yang et al., 2020	Home Life Microsystem Level
Parental Style: And How It May Influence a Child's Role in Bullying	Myron-Wilson, 1999	School Life Microsystem Level
Trajectories of maternal verbal aggression across the middle school years: Associations with negative view of self and social problems	Donovan & Brassard, 2011	School Life Microsystem Level
Risks and resources for college students mental health: ACEs, attachment, and mindfulness	Hatton-Bowers et al., 2021	School Life Microsystem Level
Prevalence and Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Chicago Public School Students in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey	Korpics et al., 2021	School Life Microsystem Level
The neglected shadow: European perspectives on emotional supports for early school leaving prevention	Downes, 2018	School Life Microsystem Level

Table 2: (continued).

Characteristics and Predictors for Students Classified with Emotional and Behavioral Disorder Who Have Also Experienced Maltreatment	Mattison et al., 2021	School Life Microsystem Level
Child Maltreatment, Bullying, Gender-Based Harassment, and Adolescent Dating Violence: Making the Connections	Wolfe et al., 2009	Home-School Life Mesosystem Level
Understand the Link between Early Exposure to Family Violence and Later Involvement in School Bullying: How Can School Connectedness Help	Liu, 2019	Home-School Life Mesosystem Level
The relationship between early maltreatment and teenage parenthood	Herrenkohl et al., 1998	Home-School Life Mesosystem Level
The Effect of Maltreatment Type on Adolescent Executive Functioning and Inner Speech	Kirke-Smith et al., 2015	Lacks Attention to the Adolescent's Context
Instrumental learning and cognitive flexibility processes are impaired in children exposed to early life stress	Harms et al., 2018	Lacks Attention to the Adolescent's Context
Emotional Clarity as a Mechanism Linking Emotional Neglect and Depressive Symptoms During Early Adolescence	Jessar et al., 2017	Lacks Attention to the Adolescent's Context

4. Findings

The emergent findings suggest that educational research on social wellbeing of neglected adolescents has primarily focused on three distinct levels of their broader ecological systems: (1) the home microsystem, (2) the school microsystem, and (3) the home-school mesosystem. Each of these levels shapes the methodology employed in studies, focusing either on parental influences, school system dynamics, or the interactions between these two contexts. The analysis revealed that about half (42.86%) of the studies reviewed investigated adolescent wellbeing within the home microsystem (see Figure 2, 3 and Table 3). Literature in this system frames adolescent wellbeing from the parental perspective, using measures such as parental questionnaires and sampling as their source of measure. Furthermore, discussions revolved around how the parent is able to improve home environments when it was previously ignored or whether practitioners and counselors should modify their behavior to better meet the needs of those neglected [14-16]. The data also demonstrates that about one-third (28.57%) of the studies are aligned with adolescent wellbeing within the school microsystem (see Figure 2, Figure 3 and Table 3). Literature in this system frames adolescent wellbeing from the perspective of peers or teachers, using measures such as the participant role scale [17], in which measures were taken by asking adolescents to nominate whether their peers took part in any of the specified behaviors. These types of measures take into consideration the perspective of peers.

Perhaps our most significant finding is the lack of research that aligned with the home-school mesosystem. Out of 21 studies analyzed, only 3 studies (14.29%) investigated the relationship between home and school life interactions (see Figure 2, Figure 3 and Table 3). One study explored whether neglect in childhood would lead to adverse relationship outcomes and dating violence while

another investigated attachment style [18, 19]. The last study, which is longitudinal and categorized in the home-school mesosystem, implemented several approaches from different perspectives. They include instruments such as Educational Testing, Parent and Teacher Checklists and Child Psychiatric Evaluation. Those measures created a bidirectional analysis of adolescents who experienced maltreatment. The study illustrates both negative social-emotional behaviors shaped by family experience and how those can affect school performance [20]. As the secondary home of adolescents, schools are able to utilize this opportunity to compensate for the lack of emotional connection received from the home environment [21]. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the ways in which behavioral guidance can best assist those that suffer from neglect. Whether through additional school counseling, enhanced academic support, or provision of comfort and care, the specific mechanisms remain unclear.

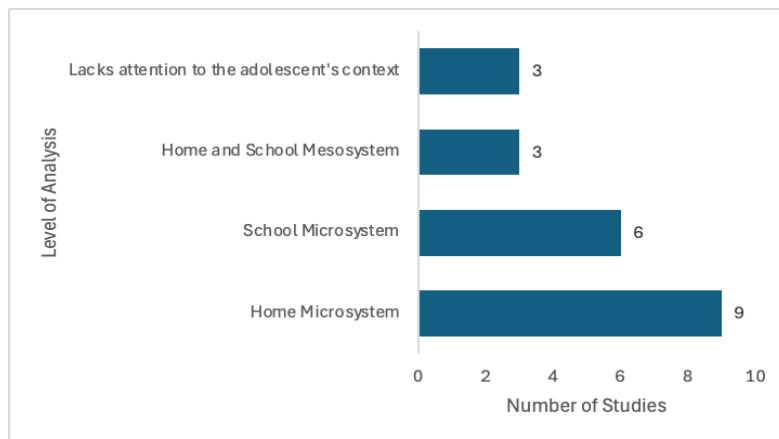


Figure 2: Distribution of Total Articles by Level of Analysis.

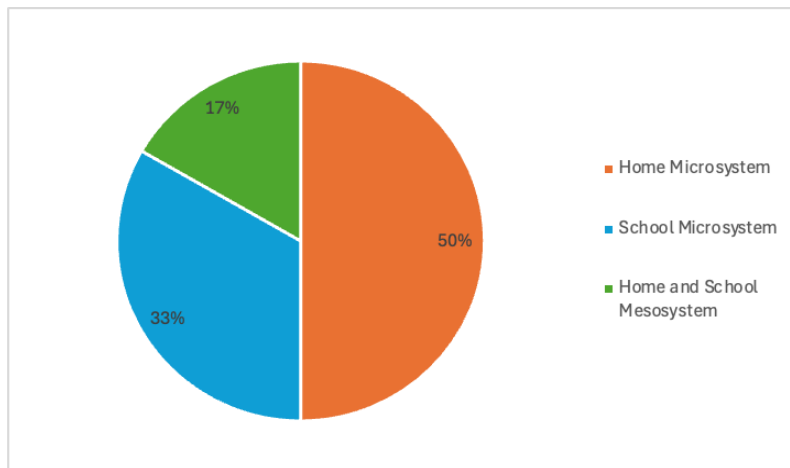


Figure 3: Distribution of Articles by Level of Analysis (Excluding “Lacks attention to the adolescent’s context”).

Table 3: Categorization and Distribution of the Reviewed Literature as it Relates to Learning.

Level of analysis	Definition	Example	Distribution of articles
Investigates child wellbeing within the home microsystem	The wellbeing within the home microsystem was defined as those studies that illustrate the interrelationship between parents and adolescents. Particularly, it explores how a neglectful parenting style impacts adolescent's wellbeing and the related preventive intervention.	An example of the study [22]. It explores several interventions that prevent adolescent neglecting. This study is viewed as a home microsystem as all of its participants come from families with high risk of neglecting and its purpose is to address neglecting problems.	42.86% of articles
Investigates child wellbeing within the school microsystem	The wellbeing within the school microsystem was defined as the peer or teacher impacts toward adolescents. It includes bullying and isolation amongst peers and the intervention by teachers to reduce such incidence.	An example study [23]. It studies students' Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their outcomes. It can be seen as a school microsystem study since it not only focuses on the individual items of those students, but also collects relevant data of peer-to-peer physical abuse.	28.57% of articles
Investigates adolescent wellbeing within the home-school mesosystem	The wellbeing within the home-school mesosystem refers to the interactions between home and school environments that affect adolescents. It includes parent-teacher collaboration and communication channels.	An example of the study [18], which examines the interconnectedness of child maltreatment and bullying. This study is considered within both school and home microsystems as it focuses on the interactions of adolescents within their school and home environment.	14.29% of articles
Lacks attention to the adolescent's context	The lack of attention to the adolescent's context was defined as the insufficient consideration of the various environments and situations in which an adolescent grows and develops.	An example of the study [24]. It investigates the impact of different types of maltreatment on adolescent inner speech and highlights the lack of attention to the child's broader familial, social, and cultural environments.	14.29% of articles

5. Conclusion

This systematic literature review reveals that the research on adolescents experiencing neglect has tended to situate the problem firmly within isolated microsystems: either as a home or a school problem. However, there is a notable gap in understanding how interactions between these environments shape the emotional growth of adolescents. Moreover, research exploring the influence of broader social and cultural systems on neglected adolescents is sparse. External social structures, cultural influences, and temporal dynamics, are often overlooked in the existing research, resulting in an incomplete understanding of the factors that shape adolescent development. This research illustrates how the field as a whole has neglected cross-system analyses that might allow us to think across systems to expand the ways that we are able to support youth. All layers of adolescents learning ecologies contribute to their wellbeing and when researchers focus their analyses only on discrete levels, we lack opportunities to think creatively across the system as a whole. This research urges researchers to break out of analytical silos and expand their analytic lenses in order to support the development of new approaches to ameliorating the persistent problem of neglect in adolescence.

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