



## Investigating the dynamics of social support and supportive figures in children: an exploratory study

<https://doi.org/10.56238/homeIIsevenhealth-062>

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### ABSTRACT

Social support is a construct that refers to the social-affective support networks that an individual has during his or her development. In school-aged children, the main support networks described in the literature are family, friends, teachers, and other people of the social environment. In this work, we sought to investigate whether there are differences in Social Support and in the configuration of support figures in children according to the variables "biological sex" and "age". This work is part of an umbrella project submitted to and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal de Goiás. To this end, 44 children were studied, 22 males and 22 females, aged between 6 and 12 years old. The children answered the Social Support Appraisals - SSA questionnaire. The data analysis consisted in scoring each subscale of the questionnaire, which were: "family", "friends", "teachers" and "other people", followed by calculating the average of how much each subscale was influencing the total score of Social Support. The sources of support were then discriminated in "primary source", that is, the one with the highest percentage score of contribution to the global score of Social Support, and "ultimate source", being the one with the lowest percentage score in the global score of Social Support. After that, the data were submitted to a normality test via Shapiro-Wilk, followed by a Correlation test (Pearson's or Spearman's, depending on whether or not the assumptions of parametric statistics were met) aiming to investigate if there was a relationship between increasing age and the strength of each source of Social Support in boys and girls. A group comparison analysis was also carried out to investigate if there was a discrepancy between the first and last sources of social support according to the sex of the individuals. The results pointed to the non-existence of a statistically significant correlation between the scores of the Social Support subscales and age. There was no statistical difference between sources of support per age group of 6-9 years and 10-12 years, however, boys presented in a larger amount, "friends" as the ultimate source of support than girls ( $p=0.048$ ). The ultimate source of support may be related, in practice, to a source of no support or very little support. This result is due to greater competition, rivalry and bullying, more evident in boys than in girls. The study of Social Support and its dynamics is important for a better understanding of the individual's social networks and sources of support, and may be strongly related to mental health indicators for children, being crucial for the investigation of psychopathology alterations and quality of life in this age group.

**Keywords:** social networks, sources of support, psychobiology, mental health, childhood