



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



## Forming bonds and the self: A study on adolescents from defense backgrounds with frequent relocations

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2026, 30(01), 1602-1609

Publication history: Received on 08 March 2026; revised on 13 April 2026; accepted on 16 April 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2026.30.1.0990>

### Abstract

The present study explored how adolescents from defence backgrounds experiencing frequent relocations form peer attachments and negotiate identity within changing social environments. A qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to examine the lived experiences of fifteen adolescents from defence backgrounds. Data were collected from 15 adolescents from defence background through semi-structured interviews and analyzed through an iterative process of coding, interpretation, and thematic development. The analysis generated five superordinate themes: repeated experiences of loss and disrupted belonging, rebuilding bonds through selective peer attachment, emotional and communicative adaptation, negotiation of identity across changing contexts, and resilience and meaning-making in mobility. The study highlights that relocation functions as both a developmental challenge and a resource, reshaping attachment processes and identity exploration during adolescence. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of psychosocial adjustment among defence adolescents and underscore the importance of supportive school environments and psychologically informed transition practices.

**Keywords:** Adolescents; Defence Families; Frequent Relocation; Peer Attachment; Identity Formation

### 1. Introduction

Human development is embedded within relational and ecological contexts, where individuals construct their sense of self through ongoing social interactions [1]. Adolescence represents a particularly critical developmental period characterized by expanding social networks, increasing autonomy, and heightened self-reflection [2]. Central to this stage is identity formation, as conceptualized in psychosocial theory, wherein individuals negotiate questions of self-definition, belongingness, and social perception [3]. These processes are inherently relational, with peer interactions providing key contexts for affirmation, comparison, and belonging [4,2].

As adolescents shift from parental dependence toward peer-oriented relationships, friendships become central to emotional support, validation, and self-evaluation [5]. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that peer attachment contributes to self-esteem, social competence, and identity development, with supportive peer relationships facilitating identity exploration and commitment [6,7,8]. At the same time, peer dynamics operate within broader socio-cultural frameworks, influencing behavioural norms and self-concept formation among adolescents [9]. Adolescent development, however, is shaped by contextual variations. In India, adolescents from defence and paramilitary families experience a unique developmental environment characterized by frequent geographical relocations, institutional discipline, and occupational demands. Recurrent transfers necessitate repeated school changes and the restructuring of peer networks, requiring adolescents to rebuild friendships and renegotiate social identities. Research on mobile populations indicates that such transitions foster adaptability and cultural exposure while simultaneously disrupting social continuity and belongingness [10,11].

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These disruptions are particularly significant during adolescence, a stage heavily reliant on stable peer affiliations for identity exploration [12,13]. Frequent school mobility has also been associated with delayed peer bonding and increased adjustment demands, potentially constraining identity development [11].

At the same time, research highlights the coexistence of vulnerability and resilience within transferable occupational contexts. Adolescents from military families often demonstrate enhanced coping abilities alongside heightened emotional strain, including separation anxiety [14]. Qualitative studies further reveal that while relocation and parental demands generate emotional challenges, they also foster resilience, pride, and identity meanings linked to military culture [15]. Such findings suggest that mobility may simultaneously broaden identity perspectives and disrupt continuity in belongingness. Within this context, attachment processes provide a critical developmental foundation. Attachment theory posits that secure relationships support exploration and self-development [16,17]. Empirical evidence indicates that parental attachment plays a central role in identity synthesis and psychological security, while also facilitating healthier peer relationships [18].

Identity development is also closely linked to psychological well-being. Longitudinal evidence demonstrates a reciprocal relationship between identity achievement and well-being, suggesting that a stable sense of identity functions as both an outcome and a protective factor [19]. At the same time, supportive family environments and structured parenting may buffer the impact of relocation, contributing to adaptive developmental outcomes [20].

Overall, existing literature underscores that adolescent development is shaped by the dynamic interplay of peer attachment, family relationships, and contextual factors such as mobility. While resilience and adaptability often emerge, disruptions in peer continuity and belongingness may complicate identity consolidation.

Addressing this gap, the present study integrates Attachment Theory [16,17], Erikson's Psychosocial Theory [3], Marcia's Identity Status Model [21], and Ecological Systems Theory [22] to examine how adolescents from defence families construct belongingness and identity amidst frequent relocations.

### *Objectives of the Study*

- To explore how adolescents from defence families form and sustain peer attachments during frequent relocations.
- To examine the emotional and communicative aspects of adolescent peer relationships in the context of repeated school transitions.
- To investigate the personal identity and sense of self experienced by adolescents due to constant changes in social environments.
- To understand how repeated relocations impact adolescents' ability to explore and commit to a sense of self and personal identity.

### **1.1. Research Questions**

- How do adolescents describe their experiences of forming and maintaining peer relationships across relocations?
- What emotional and communicative aspects do adolescents identify in building peer relationship in new environments?
- How do adolescents perceive the influence of repeated relocations on their personal identity and sense of self?
- How do adolescents experience a sense of personal continuity amidst frequent changes in location, school, and peer groups?

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## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Research Design**

This qualitative study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to explore adolescents' lived experiences of peer attachment and identity development within the context of frequent relocations.

### **2.2. Sample**

The study included 15 adolescents aged 13–17 years (8 females, 7 males) from Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV) schools, which primarily serve children of defence and transferable government employees. Participants reported experiencing between two and seven relocations due to parental job transfers, often involving changes in schools and peer

environments. Thirteen participants were day scholars residing with their families, while two were hostel residents. The sample thus represented adolescents from highly transferable defence-family contexts.

### **2.3. Sampling Method**

Purposive sampling was used to select participants from defence family backgrounds who had experienced at least two relocations.

### **2.4. Inclusion Criteria**

Adolescents aged 13–17 years, belonging to defence families, with a minimum of two relocations, and willingness to participate.

### **2.5. Exclusion Criteria**

Individuals outside the age range, those unable to participate due to language barriers, severe cognitive/developmental difficulties, or acute psychological distress, and those without consent/assent were excluded.

### **2.6. Instruments**

Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview questionnaire comprising open-ended questions on relocation experiences, peer relationships, emotional adjustment, communication, and identity development. The interview schedule was expert-validated for content relevance and conceptual clarity.

Ethical documentation included a parent consent form and a participant assent form with a screening component. These ensured informed permission, voluntary participation, eligibility confirmation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw without penalty.

### **2.7. Procedure**

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Parents provided informed consent, followed by participant assent. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted via phone, guided by the validated schedule while allowing flexibility. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded.

Data were transcribed verbatim and anonymized using participant codes. Analysis was conducted using IPA, involving iterative reading, initial noting, theme development, and identification of patterns across cases while preserving individual perspectives. Ethical principles, including confidentiality and participant well-being, were maintained throughout.

### **2.8. Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) [23]. The process involved repeated reading, detailed initial noting (descriptive, linguistic, conceptual), development of emergent themes, and identification of connections within and across cases. Interpretative meaning-making was guided by the hermeneutic circle, supported by reflexive engagement to ensure analytic rigor and transparency.

### **2.9. Research Ethics**

The study adhered to the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2017). Informed consent and assent were obtained, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through de-identification and secure data handling. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw and could skip questions if uncomfortable. Interviews were conducted sensitively, with no coercion or deception. The researcher maintained professional competence, cultural sensitivity, and reflexivity throughout the research process.

### 3. Results

**Table 1** Themes and Subthemes Derived using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Study Construct	Theme	Subtheme	Representative Excerpts	
Peer Attachment	Repeated Experiences of Loss and Disrupted Belonging	Grief	"When I was in Chennai, there was a girl named Pari... I loved her... I will not forget it in my entire life." (P2) "I feel bad seeing old photos... them having fun." (P3)	
		Alienation	"They were just avoiding me... I was from a different state." (P5) "Teacher cracks a joke... whole class laughs except me." (P3)	
		Loneliness	"When I came to this school, there were no friends... I really felt lonely." (P2) "I couldn't sit with anyone during lunch." (P10)	
		Emotional Adjustment Processes	"First time I moved, I felt a lot of emotion... second time it didn't feel very intense." (P10) "Now I get adapted very easily." (P11)	
		Trust	"I don't trust people really easily." (P7) "We can't trust our new friends... for a month or two." (P13)	
	Rebuilding Bonds: Peer Attachment in the Context of Frequent Relocations	Selective Friendships	"I don't have a lot of friends... one best friend Vaishnavi... others are fake." (P1) "I am in contact with only 3 friends right now." (P7)	
		Sustaining Ties	"I still talk with her in phone and text message." (P2) "We have created a group... we call every Sunday." (P2)	
		Emotional and Communicative Adaptation	Language Barriers	"In Tamil Nadu... people mocking me in Tamil." (P3) "I was not able to connect... because of the languages." (P5)
	Social Calibration		"Observe people first and then introduce your personality." (P7) "I just know their interests... then I talk." (P5)	
	Adaptive Social Strategies		"I crack jokes... I cope with loneliness." (P3) "We got closer by playing football." (P8)	
	Identity Formation	Negotiating Identity Across Changing Social Contexts	Fluid Self	"I was a pure extrovert... now I became an ambivert." (P7) "I change the way I behave based on the place I am in." (P15)
			Contextual Identity	"We have to change... where you are and who you are with." (P8) "Our interest will partially change according to environment." (P8)
Emerging Commitments			"Friends who are loyal, kind, honest." (P2) "I have already decided who I will be." (P10)	
Resilience and Meaning-Making in Mobility		Growth Narratives	"It was actually very good because I made new friends... explored new places." (P2) "Moving has really enhanced me." (P3)	
		Acceptance	"That's how every school is going to run." (P6) "Now I get adapted very easily." (P10)	
		Agency	"Don't be a puppet... go in your aim." (P1) "I can become friends with anyone now." (P10)	

## **4. Discussion**

The present study explored how adolescents from defence backgrounds experience peer attachment and identity formation within the context of frequent relocations. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] approach, the findings indicate that relocation operates not merely as a logistical transition but as a developmental context shaping belongingness, attachment processes, communication, and identity construction. The results align with the integrated theoretical framework and extend existing literature by providing lived experiential insights.

### **4.1. Repeated Experiences of Loss and Disrupted Belonging**

Consistent with Attachment Theory, participants reported repeated experiences of loss, loneliness, and difficulty re-establishing emotional security following relocations [16]. These findings reinforce the view that attachment needs persist into adolescence and are increasingly negotiated through peer relationships [5]. Frequent disruptions in peer continuity led to cycles of emotional withdrawal and cautious reinvestment, reflecting dimensions of alienation and reduced trust [17].

These patterns align with research indicating that mobility disrupts peer relationships and increases adjustment demands [11], as well as findings within Indian defence contexts linking relocation to loneliness and reduced well-being [23]. Thus, peer relationships were experienced as emotionally significant yet structurally unstable.

### **4.2. Rebuilding Bonds: Peer Attachment in the Context of Frequent Relocations**

Despite disruptions, adolescents actively reconstructed peer connections through selective and cautious friendships. This reflects adaptive reorganization of attachment expectations [16], where individuals modify relational strategies based on prior experiences. Peers continued to serve as key sources of validation and support, consistent with their developmental significance during adolescence [24].

The preference for emotionally secure, smaller networks over broad social circles suggests a shift from relational quantity to quality, supporting findings that meaningful peer relationships facilitate identity exploration and psychosocial adjustment [8]. These patterns indicate resilience, with adolescents demonstrating intentional relational calibration rather than withdrawal.

### **4.3. Emotional and Communicative Adaptation**

Frequent transitions required adolescents to continuously adapt communication styles, emotional expression, and social behavior, reflecting the influence of changing microsystems within Ecological Systems Theory [22]. Participants described heightened social awareness, often observing social norms before engaging in new environments.

These findings are consistent with research linking mobility to delayed peer bonding and increased adjustment demands [11], while also supporting evidence that such experiences foster adaptability and coping skills [14]. Communication adjustments appear to function as mechanisms for re-establishing relational security, aligning with the role of communication in peer attachment [17].

### **4.4. Negotiating Identity Across Changing Social Contexts**

Identity formation emerged as dynamic and context-dependent, consistent with Erikson's conceptualization of identity development [3]. Adolescents described modifying aspects of themselves across contexts, indicating ongoing renegotiation of self.

From Marcia's perspective, frequent relocation appeared to prolong identity exploration, resembling extended moratorium states where commitments remain flexible [21]. These findings support evidence that peer relationships influence identity development [7] and that mobility can complicate identity consolidation. However, rather than reflecting developmental delay, participants demonstrated adaptive identity flexibility, echoing findings that exposure to diverse environments broadens identity perspectives [15].

### **4.5. Resilience and Meaning-Making in Mobility**

Alongside challenges, participants reframed relocation as an opportunity for growth, independence, and expanded worldview. This reflects the coexistence of vulnerability and resilience described in developmental frameworks [22].

Consistent with prior research, adolescents demonstrated both emotional strain and enhanced coping capacities [14]. Resilience emerged through meaning-making processes, where repeated transitions were integrated into narratives of personal growth. Such integration is associated with stronger identity coherence and psychological well-being, consistent with identity development theories [3].

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## 5. Implications

A key strength of this study is the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which enabled an in-depth exploration of adolescents' lived experiences and the emotional meanings associated with relocation. The idiographic approach captured both shared patterns and individual variations.

The study contributes to an underexplored area within the Indian context by integrating peer attachment and identity formation, addressing a gap where these constructs are often studied separately. Inclusion of participants with varied relocation histories further enriched the findings.

The results extend Attachment Theory by suggesting that secure relationships may develop through adaptive selectivity rather than stability. They also support Erikson's and Marcia's frameworks by indicating that mobility may prolong identity exploration while fostering self-awareness, and align with ecological perspectives emphasizing the role of changing environments.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for psychosocial support for mobile adolescents. Schools may implement peer integration initiatives, while counsellors should address adjustment as context-driven and focus on emotional and social adaptation. Psychoeducational support for families may further strengthen coping and resilience.

### 5.1. Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and a small, context-specific sample limits the transferability of findings beyond similar populations. The results should therefore be viewed as contextually grounded rather than generalizable.

The study relied on retrospective self-reports, which may be influenced by memory reconstruction and current emotional states. Additionally, participants were drawn from structured school environments that may provide stability, potentially moderating relocation-related challenges.

The cross-sectional design further limits the ability to examine changes in peer attachment and identity over time. Finally, as with all qualitative research, findings reflect the researcher's interpretative lens, and alternative interpretations remain possible despite efforts to ensure rigor and reflexivity.

### 5.2. Suggestions for future studies

Future research may adopt longitudinal designs to examine how peer attachment and identity development evolve across multiple relocation phases and into adulthood.

Comparative studies involving non-mobile adolescents could further clarify the unique developmental impact of mobility. Expanding research to include parental, teacher, or counsellor perspectives may provide a broader ecological understanding of adjustment processes. Further qualitative investigations may also explore the role of digital communication in sustaining friendships across relocations and examine cultural variations within different defence communities across India.

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## 6. Conclusion

The study concludes that frequent relocations function as a powerful developmental context shaping peer attachment and identity formation among adolescents from defence families. While repeated transitions disrupt continuity in relationships and belongingness, adolescents do not remain passive recipients of these changes. Instead, they actively negotiate friendships, adapt communicative strategies, and reconstruct their sense of self across environments.

The research objectives were achieved by demonstrating that peer attachment under mobility becomes more selective and intentional, emotional adjustment involves adaptive coping processes, and identity formation evolves through continuous negotiation rather than stability. The findings suggest that identity development within mobile contexts

follows a dynamic and context-responsive trajectory rather than a fixed developmental pathway. Along with disruption, participants demonstrated resilience and meaning-making. The adolescents reframed their experience of frequent relocation as contributing to personal growth, adaptability, and broader social understanding. The findings indicate that relocation is associated with developmental challenges and opportunities, influencing both peer attachment and identity formation.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Acknowledgments*

We extend our sincere appreciation to all those who have supported and encouraged us during our research endeavors. We are grateful for the unwavering support of our well-wishers and supporters, as well as the invaluable contributions of the participants who made this study possible.

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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