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# Self-Control Education as a Preventive Measure against Toxic Relationships among Students

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore adolescents' experiences in dealing with toxic relationships within their circle of friends and to identify self-control strategies used to maintain mental health. The research was conducted at MTs Berkah Palangka Raya using a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, observation, and written statements. The interview instrument consisted of five questions that highlighted the respondents' feelings, causes of anxiety, the impact of toxic relationships, and the forms of self-control applied. The results showed that toxic relationships led to decreased self-confidence, stress, anxiety, and destructive behavior. However, some adolescents were able to respond adaptively through the application of self-control, such as keeping their distance, limiting communication, managing emotions, and choosing a healthier social environment. Self-control helps adolescents prevent the impact of toxic friendships, maintain mental health, and build strong psychological resilience. These strategies contribute to helping them escape from harmful friendships. These findings emphasize the importance of self-control education as a preventive measure in building psychological resilience in adolescents.

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a dynamic stage of development, during which individuals undergo biological, emotional, and social transitions simultaneously. At this stage, friendships play an important role as a means of exploring identity, developing social skills, and forming personal identity (Sanjaya, 2024). Through friendships, adolescents learn to interact, build trust, and discover social values that they will

carry into adulthood. Unfortunately, not all friendships develop in a healthy and constructive manner. Behind seemingly harmonious bonds of togetherness, there are a number of relationships that are actually slowly destructive—known as toxic relationships.

The phenomenon of toxic relationships among adolescents has become a social issue that cannot be ignored. Relationships that should provide emotional support and a sense of security instead become a

source of pressure, manipulation, and even verbal and psychological abuse. Ironically, many students do not realize that they are trapped in these unhealthy relationships. This is due to toxic behaviours that are often disguised as “jokes,” “familiarity,” or “group solidarity” (Nufiar, 2022). Real examples such as repeated teasing, pressure to follow the group, or exclusion wrapped up as “friendship traditions” are often considered normal.

Research by Fadhilla and Siregar (2024) shows that toxic relationships in friendships have a direct impact on the mental health of adolescents, such as decreased self-esteem, impaired concentration in learning, and the emergence of symptoms of anxiety and depression. This condition is exacerbated by students' low awareness of the importance of personal boundaries and their weak ability to manage emotions in social relationships. According to Sarifah et al. (2025), friendships should involve sensitivity to the emotional situations of others so that within a group, members can share and encourage each other, thereby building one's self-efficacy to solve problems. In a competitive social environment full of peer pressure, many students are willing to sacrifice their personal comfort in order to be recognized or accepted in a group.

The role of social media further exacerbates this dynamic. Digital platforms provide a space for interaction that triggers social pressure, unrealistic self-comparisons, and rapidly changing pseudo-relationships. Fitrialis et al. (2024) highlight that high intensity of social media use is associated with an increased risk of mental fatigue, social anxiety, and an excessive need for external validation—all factors that reinforce attachment to toxic relationships.

Emotional instability, a lack of psychological education in schools, and the influence of a permissive social environment on deviant behaviour are factors that increase students' vulnerability to unhealthy relationships. Hafifah et al. (2023) reveal that most adolescents do not yet have good self-control, especially when dealing with conflict or social pressure. As a result, they tend to be reactive, impulsive, and easily provoked by the social dynamics around them.

In situations like this, self-control emerges as a very important psychological ability. Self-control is an individual's ability to regulate impulses, emotions, and behaviour in order to align with personal values and social norms (Nugraha et al., 2023). Therefore, self-control is essential for every individual so that they can direct themselves when they want to do something (Norhidayani et al., 2025).

Wahyuni & Mutmainnah (2022) show that self-control plays a major role in shaping adolescents' ability to deal with complex social relationships. Those with good self-control are able to set

boundaries, reject negative influences, and deal with conflict wisely. This finding is reinforced by Surawan and Norvia (2022), who state that moral guidance that emphasizes self-control can change adolescents' mindsets, behaviours, and lifestyles to be more positive and independent.

Furthermore, several international studies provide additional insight into the important role of self-control in the context of adolescent social relationships. A study by Franken et al. (2016) shows that self-control has a direct effect on deviant behaviour in adolescents, but does not necessarily moderate the negative influence of peers. Another study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* also found that self-control mediates the relationship between the quality of parent-adolescent relationships and risky behaviour, showing that adolescents with high self-control are more resistant to family conflict or lack of emotional support (Li et al., 2024).

The study by Dryburgh et al. (2025) introduced the Friendship Victimization Scale (FVS-A), an instrument that measures victimization behaviours in friendships such as control, verbal intimidation, and exclusion. This scale shows a strong correlation between victimization behaviours in friendships and increased symptoms of depression in adolescents.

Unfortunately, there is still a lack of research that explicitly examines the relationship between self-control education and the prevention of toxic relationships in the context of student friendships. The majority of existing studies focus more on violence in dating or romantic relationships. In fact, toxic relationships in everyday friendships can also have a long-term impact on the psychosocial development of adolescents.

This is where the novelty of this study lies. First, the research focuses on toxic relationships in adolescent friendships—a topic that is rarely discussed in depth. Second, the approach used is preventive, through self-control education as an effort to build mental and social resilience from an early age. Third, this study integrates personal aspects (self-regulation skills) with social dynamics (peer interactions) into a single conceptual framework.

This research is important in responding to the need for educational strategies that can help students recognize, avoid, and escape toxic relationships. By strengthening self-control education, students are expected to be able to recognize the early signs of toxic relationships, understand healthy boundaries in friendships, and make decisions that are conducive to their mental and social health. This education can also be integrated into the character education curriculum in schools, counselling programs, and mental health literacy campaigns based on the realities of today's youth.

The main objective of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how self-control education can be a preventive measure in dealing with toxic relationships among students. This study is also expected to raise awareness of the importance of self-control in forming healthy social relationships and emphasize that mental health is as important as physical health in shaping a well-rounded, balanced, and meaningful teenage life.

**2. Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative approach by combining survey and semi-structured interview methods (Striepe, 2021). This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of adolescents' experiences in dealing with toxic relationships among friends, as well as how they apply self-control as a strategy to avoid or manage harmful relationships. The location of this research was MTs Terpadu Berkah Palangka Raya, with the research subjects being eighth and ninth grade students who were in the phase of self-discovery and vulnerable to social environmental influences.

The main data collection was conducted through an open questionnaire, which was designed to explore students' understanding of toxic relationships, their personal experiences or those of others, the psychological impact of unhealthy relationships, and how they manage their emotions and maintain self-control (Taherdoost, 2021). The questions in the questionnaire were written in easy-to-understand language and encouraged students to write down their experiences or reflections narratively. The questionnaires were filled out independently in writing in a conducive atmosphere so that students felt comfortable and honest in their responses (Cahyono et al., 2023).

To deepen the findings from the questionnaire, the researchers also conducted semi-structured interviews with several selected respondents who were considered representative or had interesting experiences. These interviews were conducted in person, lasted approximately 15–25 minutes, and used flexible questions that remained focused on the aspects of toxic relationships and self-control strategies. The interviews aimed to explore the subjective meaning of their experiences, including how they responded to social pressure and maintained emotional balance in their friendships.

In addition, the researchers also conducted limited participatory observation to reinforce the data obtained. Observations were carried out in school environments such as classrooms, canteens, or during group activities, in order to capture patterns of student social interaction, signs of unhealthy relationship dynamics, and self-control practices seen in everyday behaviour (Aslan, 2021).

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis. Researchers read all responses from questionnaires and interview transcripts, then coded them to identify main themes such as forms of toxic relationships, emotional impacts, self-control strategies, and personal values (Peel, 2020). Furthermore, these themes were compiled to produce a research narrative that reflects the social reality of students in a comprehensive and meaningful way.

Data validity was maintained through triangulation of methods (surveys, interviews, and observations), member checking, and peer debriefing. The research process was systematically documented through an audit trail to maintain transparency and traceability of results (Carcary, 2020).

Through this combination of methods, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of how adolescents experience, understand, and cope with toxic relationships through self-control, while contributing to character education and mental health efforts in schools.

**3. Results and Discussion**

**3.1 The Impact of Toxic Relationships and Self-Control on Students**

Based on the results of a survey of 50 students at MTs Terpadu Berkah Palangka Raya, it was found that toxic relationships among friends have a significant impact on the psychological condition of students aged 13–16 years. An unhealthy friendship environment is often characterized by behaviours such as ridicule, exclusion, peer pressure, intimidation, or manipulative attitudes disguised as “jokes” or “false intimacy.” This creates strong emotional pressure and has a direct impact on students' mental stability. Therefore, friendships should be a form of self-reflection to rearrange one's perspective on problems, calm the mind, and maintain emotional stability amid social demands (Thoyibah & Surawan, 2025).

**Table 1. Survey Results on Toxic Relationships and Self-Control among Students at MTs Terpadu Berkah**

No	Statements	Percentage
1	Ever experienced pressure from peers	68%
2	Felt anxious after interacting with certain groups of friends	74%
3	Experienced a decline in motivation to study due to friendship conflicts	48%
4	Felt unappreciated within the circle of friends	72%
5	Experienced difficulty setting boundaries in friendships	59%
6	Able to refuse invitations from friends to do negative things	52%

7	Assessing the importance of self-control in social relationships	91%
8	Consciously avoiding harmful friendships	65%
9	Receiving education about self-control at school	38%

This data shows that 74% of students feel anxious after interacting with certain groups, 72% feel unappreciated, and 48% experience a decline in motivation to learn due to friendship conflicts. This phenomenon is in line with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1954), which places safety, love, and appreciation as important foundations in psychological development. When these needs are not met, adolescents tend to experience anxiety, withdrawal, and loss of motivation (Rojas et al., 2023). Thus, according to Sarifah & Surawan (2025), a person can demonstrate honesty so that friendships are free from toxic friendship, so that friendships based on positive emotions will build increasing self-efficacy.

This is supported by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979, 1989), which emphasizes that individual development is greatly influenced by the surrounding social system, including the school environment and peers. When this system acts as a source of pressure, individuals will experience disturbances in the process of emotional regulation and identity formation.

This phenomenon can also be explained through Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1957), in which individuals tend to compare themselves with their peers. In a toxic environment, these comparisons are often negative and trigger a decline in self-esteem. In-depth interviews with several students revealed that they tend to avoid class activities, withdraw, and fear expressing their opinions for fear of being humiliated—an indication of passive and unhealthy coping mechanisms.

These findings are in line with research by Fadhilla & Siregar (2024), which found that toxic relationships among adolescent friends lead to increased social anxiety, decreased self-esteem, and impaired concentration in learning. This condition can become chronic if not accompanied by appropriate intervention.

On the other hand, self-control emerges as a significant protective factor. According to Self-Regulation Theory (Baumeister et al., 2007), self-control is the ability to control impulses, emotions, and behaviour in order to align with personal values and long-term goals. The regulation process involves an individual's activity in generating thoughts, feelings, and actions, planning and continuously adapting them to achieve goals (Lutfi et al., 2024). In the context of toxic relationships, students with high self-control are

better able to resist negative invitations, keep their distance from bad influences, and focus on self-development.

Survey results show that 91% of students recognize the importance of self-control in maintaining healthy social relationships. However, only 38% feel they have received education about self-control at school. This gap indicates that educational institutions have not fully provided the psychosocial support students need to cope with social pressures. According to Surawan & Mustika Pertiwi (2023), self-control is important for everyone to have, based on various cultural changes and lifestyles caused by globalization, which require individuals to behave and position themselves in harmony with their existence in society with cultural differences.

Wahyuni & Mutmainnah (2022) show that adolescents with high levels of self-control tend to be stronger in setting interpersonal boundaries, resisting peer pressure, and avoiding impulsive behaviour. Similarly, Hafifah et al. (2023) highlight the low level of psychological literacy among adolescents due to the lack of education about emotions and self-regulation. Without these skills, students are at high risk of using maladaptive responses such as extreme withdrawal, uncontrolled emotional outbursts, or even self-harm.

Thus, self-control not only functions as a coping mechanism in a stressful social environment, but also as a preventive strategy to avoid involvement in toxic relationships from the outset. When students are systematically equipped with self-control skills through education, they tend to have better psychological resilience, are able to set personal boundaries, and choose healthy relationships.

Therefore, integrating self-control strengthening into the school curriculum is crucial. This effort not only impacts individual character development but also creates a more supportive and emotionally inclusive school culture. Education on self-control can be developed through emotional regulation training, counselling guidance, and collaborative learning that fosters empathy and social awareness. Without this kind of approach, students are at risk of being constantly exposed to harmful peer dynamics, which will ultimately have a long-term impact on their psychosocial development.

### 3.2 Education and Prevention Strategies through Self-Control

Self-control has been proven to be an important mechanism in helping adolescents deal with, avoid, and overcome toxic friendships. Survey data shows that 65% of students have consciously tried to distance themselves from harmful friendships, indicating that most students have begun to internalize self-control in the face of social pressure. This phenomenon is in line with Baumeister et al.'s (2007)

Self-Regulation Theory, which emphasizes that self-control is the capacity to regulate thoughts, emotions, and actions to remain in line with social standards, long-term goals, and moral values that individuals believe in. In the context of teenage friendships, this ability becomes crucial when they are faced with temptations, pressures, or relationships that endanger their self-esteem and psychological well-being. Meanwhile, according to Stone, self-regulation is influenced by three main factors, namely self-efficacy, motivation, and goals (Hamdanah et al., 2024). This study identifies two main strategies for strengthening self-control in students, namely:

a. Setting Self-Boundaries

The ability to set self-boundaries is an essential aspect of self-control, especially in the context of adolescent social relationships, which are full of emotional dynamics and peer pressure. A survey of 50 students at MTs Terpadu Berkah showed that 59% of students admitted to having difficulty setting boundaries in friendships. This fact reflects weak self-regulation abilities and a lack of interpersonal skills in dealing with social pressure.

Setting self-boundaries is not just about saying “no,” but more about the ability to recognize personal emotional needs, maintain personal integrity, and distinguish between healthy and destructive relationships. When personal boundaries are weak, adolescents become vulnerable to toxic friendship dynamics such as peer pressure, emotional manipulation, or relationships that make them feel guilty when refusing invitations that are not in line with their personal principles.

Higgins' (2012) Regulatory Focus theory explains that there are two motivational regulation systems within individuals, namely promotion focus and prevention focus. Adolescents with a promotion focus are more driven to gain social acceptance and often sacrifice personal boundaries in order to maintain relationships (Luqman et al. 2021; Tandon et al., 2022). Conversely, prevention focus helps individuals protect themselves from social risks through healthy boundaries. In the identity development phase according to Erikson (1968), the need to be accepted by the group becomes very dominant. However, without the skills to set boundaries, adolescents tend to be drawn into unhealthy relationships in order to maintain their social position (Applebaum, 2001; Brass, 2023).

This is reinforced by Wahyuni & Mutmainnah (2022), who found that adolescents with high self-control showed better ability to resist peer pressure and set interpersonal boundaries assertively. In interviews, students mentioned their strategies, such as remaining silent during conflicts, keeping communication to a minimum, and distancing themselves from friends who spread gossip. These

strategies demonstrate adaptive coping that arises from reflective awareness and the ability to manage social relationships in a healthy manner.

Hafifah et al. (2023) also noted that the inability to set social boundaries contributes to increased stress, chronic feelings of guilt, and low self-esteem. In fact, in Linehan's (2020) Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) approach, interpersonal skills such as setting boundaries are an important part of effective relationships that must be practiced from adolescence. This is because in the school environment, close friendships between students not only strengthen social bonds but also influence the formation of religious character (Husniah et al., 2025). *Integration in Learning: The Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Approach*

To address this challenge, schools need a systematic strategy that develops boundary-setting skills through the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) approach. SEL aims to develop five key competencies, namely self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Black, 2021). Two of these five competencies directly contribute to strengthening self-boundaries.

In practice, SEL learning can be integrated into civics education, counselling programs, or extracurricular activities. Through methods such as class discussions, conflict simulations, role-playing, and reflective journals, students can learn to assertively express boundaries and build confidence to uphold personal values amid social dynamics.

Research by Cahil & Dadvand (2020) proves that schools that adopt the SEL approach show significant improvements in empathy, resilience, and impulse control in students. In Indonesia, a similar approach has begun to be adopted through the “Child-Friendly School” program, although its implementation is not yet uniform nationwide (Mulya et al., 2025).

*Cultural Context: “It's Not Nice to Refuse” in a Collectivist Culture*

The biggest challenge in setting boundaries for Indonesian adolescents lies in the social norms that are deeply ingrained in collectivist culture. Indonesian culture highly values togetherness, social harmony, and avoiding conflict—which is often translated as “it's not nice to refuse.” Many adolescents feel embarrassed or afraid of being ostracized if they refuse a friend's request or try to distance themselves from a harmful group of friends. This is in line with Hofstede's (1980) theory of Individualism vs. Collectivism, which explains that in a collective culture, individuals tend to prioritize group harmony over personal needs. As a consequence, personal boundaries are often sacrificed in order to maintain relationships (Kim, 2021).

However, according to Kim & Markus, in Candra (2025), the ability to set personal boundaries can still be developed in a collective culture as long as it is communicated in an empathetic and non-confrontational manner. This means that assertive but polite communication strategies must be taught as part of teenagers' social skills. In interviews, several students expressed their fear of being labelled negatively as “arrogant,” “unfaithful,” or “antisocial” if they tried to distance themselves from toxic groups. This reinforces the importance of shifting the cultural narrative through education: that maintaining personal boundaries is not a form of rejection of the group, but rather a form of self-care and emotional responsibility.

Schools and educational communities need to build a shared understanding of the importance of healthy social boundaries. This can be done through classroom campaigns, teacher and parent training, discussion forums, or the development of culturally-based learning media that emphasizes that protecting oneself is not selfish, but healthy and important.

#### b. Filtering Your Circle of Friends

The second most prominent strategy for dealing with toxic relationships among teenagers is the ability to consciously filter your circle of friends. This selectivity does not mean withdrawing from social life, but rather becoming an adaptive form of self-defence against negative influences. By actively choosing to interact only with supportive, empathetic, and cooperative friends, students can form a social zone that is safe, productive, and conducive to their emotional growth and academic achievement.

This approach is in line with Carstensen et al.'s (1992, 2021) Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, which explains that as social experience increases, individuals become more selective in forming meaningful relationships. Although this theory was originally developed in the context of adults and the elderly, its basic principles are relevant to adolescents: the more aware a person is of their self-worth and the social risks around them, the greater their desire to maintain supportive relationships and avoid harmful ones.

Interviews with several students at MTs Terpadu Berkah revealed that some of them began to avoid friends who liked to gossip, belittle personal problems, or impose their will on the group. The strategies used included reducing interaction, limiting communication, or preferring to hang out with smaller, more supportive groups. This is a form of proactive coping mechanism, which is a preventive action against psychosocial threats before the pressure becomes greater.

Research by Hafifah et al. (2023) supports this approach by showing that adolescents who are accustomed to evaluating and choosing friendships based on emotional comfort and shared values exhibit

lower levels of social stress and have higher psychological resilience. Additionally, Fitrialis et al. (2024) note that social pressure from digital media, such as negative comments, unrealistic standards of living, or online group dynamics, also worsens the quality of friendships in the real world. In this context, filtering relationships is not only important in the physical space of school but also in digital interactions that increasingly dominate adolescents' social lives.

Moreover, the development of digital technology has brought about major changes in the patterns of communication and information consumption in society (Arinie & Surawan, 2025). This ability is crucial considering that social media also expands exposure to toxic relationships through phenomena such as fear of missing out (FOMO), cyberbullying, or false social image. Therefore, students need to be equipped with digital and emotional literacy skills to identify which relationships are healthy and which are manipulative—both in the real world and online.

From an educational perspective, this strategy can be strengthened through social-emotional learning (SEL) programs integrated into the curriculum. According to Lawson et al. (2019), the implementation of SEL can improve self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible decision-making, all of which support students' ability to form and maintain healthy relationships. They tend to look for simple and easily accessible ways to relieve anxiety (Aminaty & Surawan, 2025). Through activities such as group reflection, discussions on the value of friendship, group dynamics simulations, and case studies from social media, students can learn concrete ways to filter out negative influences in friendships.

Equally important, schools need to create a positive culture that normalizes choosing healthy friendships. In Indonesian culture, which tends to be collectivist, choosing to keep your distance is often considered “arrogant” or “unfaithful to friends.” This creates social pressure that makes it difficult for students to maintain their mental health. Therefore, character education must include the narrative that filtering friendships is not a selfish act, but a form of courage and self-care.

The involvement of teachers and school counsellors in accompanying this process is very important. Teachers not only play the role of educators, but also as models of healthy relationships and facilitators of open dialogue about friendship. Moreover, guidance counsellors have an important role in providing intervention through individual counselling, group counselling, advice, and tutoring (Akbar & Surawan, 2025). In addition, the involvement of parents in understanding the importance of quality friendships is also a supporting

factor in forming a positive social ecosystem for students.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study confirms that toxic relationships among teenage friends are a serious problem that directly impacts students' mental, emotional, and behavioural health. Unhealthy relationships, such as bullying, teasing, manipulation, and peer pressure, can lower self-esteem, trigger stress, and reduce motivation to learn. Teenagers who lack the ability to manage their emotions and set boundaries for themselves tend to be more easily trapped in these harmful relationship dynamics.

In this context, self-control has been proven to play a significant role as a preventive mechanism that can protect adolescents from the negative influences of toxic relationships. Self-control enables students to recognize unhealthy behaviours, set clear boundaries, distance themselves from toxic friends, and adhere to their personal values and principles. The results of

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surveys and interviews in this study show that students with high levels of self-control tend to be better able to cope with social pressure, reject negative invitations, and focus on positive self-development.

Through self-control education in the school environment, students can be trained to understand the importance of maintaining emotional balance, building healthy relationships, and managing conflicts constructively. Empowering this ability not only serves as a short-term solution, but also as a foundation for shaping strong and resilient teenage characters to face future social challenges. This is because the goal of self-control is to direct individual attitudes and behaviours in a positive direction and produce positive actions as well (Hamdanah & Surawan, 2022; Anshari et al., 2023).

Thus, self-control education needs to be systematically integrated into character education and counselling programs in schools so that students can build a healthy, supportive social environment that is free from toxic relationships.

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