



## Adolescents and their role models

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### ABSTRACT

*A role model may fascinate us, inspire us, lead us, help us to dream big and aim high, and may actually facilitate our self-realization. But all this may or may not be true depending upon the selection of our role model/s. Adolescence is an impressionable age and a wrong choice of role model can turn a teenager's life into a disaster. Right from understanding the question as to 'why one needs a role model?' to the question as to 'how to select a role model?' one really has to be cautious. This study tries to understand whether our adolescents feel the need of a role model, and if yes, then do they have their role models? The study is descriptive in nature and conclusions are based on the responses of 100 adolescents.*

**KEYWORDS :** Adolescents; role model; imitation/modelling; importance of role model; adolescents' need for a role model

### Introduction:

**"Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them."**

- James Baldwin

Learning is crucial for the survival. We learn all the time – we may learn good things or we may learn bad things; we may learn, unlearn or relearn; we may learn intentionally or we may learn unintentionally – but the fact remains we learn all the time. Of all the different ways and mechanisms of learning, one of the most powerful mechanisms is imitation. Imitation, or modelling, occurs when a person not only observes but actually copies the behaviour of a model (Taylor, Peplau and Sears, 2011). Through observational learning, individuals often learn attitudes and behaviours simply by watching other people, known technically as 'models'. A role model is the person that an individual admires or looks up to. This could be someone s/he knows personally, or someone s/ha has read about or seen on TV or in the movies or knows about some other way – the person or individual that s/he really wants to be like.

The roles we play, therefore, reflect our position in our particular context. For example, girls learn the role of an adult woman, initially at least, from their own mother, and then in turn act as role models for their own daughters. In this way, patterns of behaviour are perpetuated (MacCallum and Beltman, 2002) and role models pass on system traditions, values, and culture from one to the next generation (Verdugo, 1995). Adolescence is an important stage – adolescents are cognitively developed. Their opinions and judgements based on their observations influence their thought processes and behaviour. It is a time of rapid growth and change, of new found freedom or of intense struggle for freedom and independence, of experimenting in and with life, and most importantly, it is an impressionable age. Also, this is the stage, when most of the teens idolize and/or have a role model. Celebrity idolization is powerfully present in the lives of an average teenager – every single move of the idolized celebrity is not only observed but also emulated (webfluenz), to the dismay, fear and concern of the parents. Many of these celebrity idols present a negative role model and may influence children negatively. It is important to understand that if an adolescent is so impressed by his/her role model that s/he bears the same attitude, clothing style, and the rest; then there is every reason to believe that s/he may copy the role model's negative influences as well, such as drug abuse, law-breaking, etc. But that's not the case always; there are innumerable role models who provide all the right kind of influences. It has been seen that people who constantly strive to improve themselves certainly have role model/s in their lives from whom they continue to draw inspiration and strength. Research show that majority of the adolescents do identify a role model. And adolescents who knew their role model performed better and had better self-esteem than those with no role model (Yancey, A.K.; Siegel, J.M. and Mcdaniel, K.L., 2002).

Right from understanding the question as to 'why one needs a role model?' to the question as to 'how to select a role model?' one really has to be cautious. This study tries to understand whether our adolescents feel the need of a role model, and if yes, then do they have their role models? And how do they go about selecting their role model/s?

### Objectives:

1. To study the crisis of role models from adolescent students' point of view.
2. To understand the need and relevance of role model/s as viewed by the adolescent students.
3. To study adolescent students' search for their role model/s.

### Delimitations:

1. The sample for study comprised of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders only studying in government run schools.
2. Only one questionnaire was used to collect data. No interviews (group/individual) were conducted, neither any probing questions were included in the questionnaire.
3. The questionnaire given to the students was in English language only.

### Design:

This study is descriptive in nature. Data was collected to explore whether adolescents realize the importance of role model/s in their lives and who their role models are?

### Sample and Sampling:

A sample of 100 adolescent students – including both boys and girls – was randomly selected from the government run schools located in Punjab.

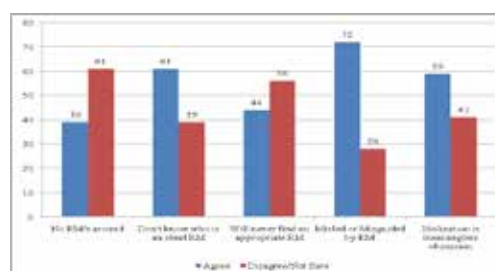
### Tool used and statistical analysis:

Data was collected from the students using a self-prepared (content validated) questionnaire. It comprised of 22 close-ended questions. The responses obtained on the questionnaire were converted into percentages so as to arrive at conclusions.

### Results and Discussions:

#### Objective 1: To study the crisis of role models from adolescent students' point of view.

Figure 1: Crisis of role models for adolescents

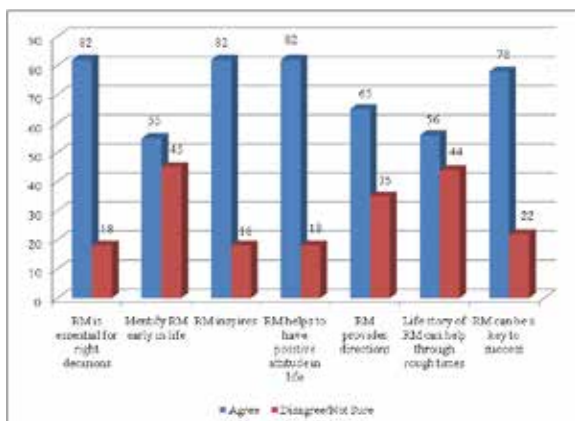


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results (Figure 1) revealed that some of the sampled adolescent students (39%) feel that there are not any role models (RMs) available with 44% expressing their doubt if ever they will find a role model who is compatible with their feelings and aspirations. They (61%) believe that the present day youth does not know who an ideal role model for them is. Majority of them (72%) believe that today's youth has been misled/misguided by the public figures that they admire. They (59%) see idolization as just an obsession and not as a meaningful exercise.

**Objective 2: To understand the need and relevance of role model/s as viewed by the adolescent students.**

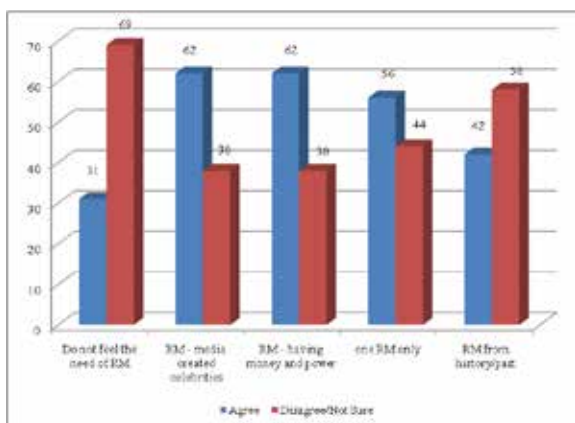
Figure 2: Need and relevance of role model for adolescents



The results (as depicted in the Figure 2) are encouraging in the sense that most of the adolescents (82%) believe that it is essential to have a role model (RM) who may guide them to make right decisions in their lives, and, for majority of them (82%), a role model provides the inspiration to do something in life. They (82%) believe that a role model helps to develop a positive attitude in and towards life, with 78% of them holding this belief that a role model can actually be the key to their success. They (65%) feel that a good role model not only provides direction to their decisions and lives, but they (56%) also feel that the life stories of their role models can support or encourage them through failure and rough times, therefore, they (55%) believe that one should identify a role model early in the life.

**Objective 3: To study adolescent students' search for their role model/s.**

Figure 3: Adolescents' search for role model/s



It is surprising to note that though majority of the sampled students realize the importance of a role model, still 31% of them reported that they personally never felt the need of having a role model. They (62%) believe that today's youth is drawn to the media created celebrities and they look up to those personalities who have money and power without much consideration to the moral/ethical aspects of those personalities. Also, they (58%) consider a living role model to be much more meaningful as compared to a role model from past/history and further, they (44%) feel that it is not practical to have just one role model.

**Conclusion:**

As the results indicate that though the adolescent students realize that having a role model, that too early in life, is important, but their saying that they personally do not feel the need of a role model, or that the present day young generation do not really care, is actually a reflection on the failure of society at large and the families in particular to provide the young ones good role models. One may point out that our history is replete with personalities who may prove to be excellent role models, but – as majority of the students have reported – they believe in a living role model as compared to a role model out of the history pages. A role model can make or mar the young lives. Therefore, as teachers, parents, public figures it becomes very important that we feel the pulse of the young hearts so as to shape their minds. Adolescence is a very impressionable age; providing and proving to be good role model/s is the responsibility of each one of us.

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