

Exploration of the Impact and Mechanisms of Socioeconomic Status on Adolescent Health Behaviors

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Abstract: Adolescence is a crucial stage for the development of values and health behaviors, during which individuals are susceptible to external environmental influences that can significantly impact their physical and mental well-being, with far-reaching implications for their future development. Socioeconomic status (SES) serves as a macro-level factor influencing adolescent health behaviors, directly linked to habits such as healthy eating, physical exercise, and risky behaviors like alcohol consumption and smoking. Consequently, socioeconomic status has increasingly become one of the primary indicators for assessing adolescent health behaviors. This article delves into the impact and mechanisms of socioeconomic status on adolescent health behaviors, summarizing the corresponding mechanisms of action based on an understanding of specific impact manifestations, with the aim of providing a basis for formulating intervention policies targeting adolescent health behaviors.

Keywords: Impact; Mechanisms; Adolescents; Health behaviors; Socioeconomic status

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1. Introduction

During adolescence, individuals experience accelerated physiological development and gradual transformation in their psychosocial roles. The cultivation of healthy behaviors is directly related to the future physical and mental health growth of adolescents. Health behaviors are primarily manifested as active choices made by individuals to ensure physical and mental well-being, including regular exercise, a balanced diet, and avoidance of risky behaviors. Significant disparities in health behaviors exist among adolescents across different regions, with clear polarization observed not only between regions with varying levels of economic development but also among adolescents from families with different income levels. A decline in family socioeconomic status often correlates with an increased likelihood of adolescents engaging in health-risk behaviors, such as reduced physical exercise, purchasing unhealthy foods, or adopting even more detrimental habits like alcohol consumption and smoking.

It is precisely this disparity in socioeconomic status that leads to corresponding changes in the health behaviors of adolescents. How to thoroughly analyze the underlying mechanisms between the two and seek reasonable intervention measures has become a hot topic in today's society.

2. Overview of socioeconomic status and adolescent health behaviors

2.1. Definition of socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status refers to the position of an individual or family within the social structure, objectively reflecting their ability to possess social material and cultural resources. Differences in resource possession among individuals or families can influence an individual's future quality of life and growth trajectory. Socioeconomic status is a macroscopic and comprehensive concept. Although different disciplines may define it differently, the essence revolves around resource possession and social stratification ^[1].

2.2. Classification of adolescent health behaviors

Adolescent health behaviors refer to behavioral patterns observed in real life that impact an individual's physical and mental well-being, as well as their ability to develop socially. The essential characteristics of these behaviors are their continuity and susceptibility to intervention. Under scientific and systematic guidance, adolescents can dynamically adjust their inappropriate behavioral patterns, positively influencing their individual health in the future. Typically, adolescent health behaviors can be categorized into two types: health-promoting behaviors and health-risk behaviors. Adolescent health-promoting behaviors encompass healthy dietary habits, regular and reasonable physical exercise, and healthy lifestyle routines. These behaviors are proactive measures taken by adolescents to maintain their physical and mental well-being. Health-risk behaviors include poor dietary habits, limited physical activity, substance abuse, and psychological issues. These behaviors often arise from the physical and mental development of adolescents or external environmental influences. Improper intervention may lead to short-term or long-term health risks ^[2].

3. Manifestations of the impact of socioeconomic status on adolescent health behaviors

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a comprehensive concept, and differences in SES among individuals or families are directly reflected in the choices of healthy behavioral habits in the daily lives of adolescents. Typically, as SES levels decline, the likelihood of adolescents engaging in unhealthy behaviors inversely increases. This impact is directly evident in daily material consumption, physical activity, and psychological behaviors, among other aspects.

3.1. Material health behaviors

Health behaviors are most directly influenced by SES. On the one hand, in terms of daily dietary choices, SES differences lead to distinct nutritional patterns among adolescents. For families with low SES, constrained by daily living expenses, they often prioritize inexpensive, filling foods, with little attention given to the green health and nutritional balance of the food. Consequently, the dietary structure in such families tends to favor high-fat, high-sugar, and low-cost processed foods, posing numerous adverse effects on the physical health and development of adolescents. In contrast, families with high SES typically have more generous budgets, allowing for a wider

range of food choices, with a focus on purchasing healthy options such as high-quality proteins, fresh fruits, and vegetables. Moreover, members of such families often possess higher levels of health literacy, paying greater attention to the nutritional balance and green health of their food. As a result of these differences, adolescents from low SES backgrounds face a higher risk of obesity, overweight, and chronic diseases. On the other hand, regarding the development of unhealthy habits such as alcohol consumption and smoking, SES also exhibits a negative correlation ^[3]. Numerous studies have demonstrated that adolescents from low SES backgrounds tend to start smoking at an earlier age and, due to greater daily life stress, smoke more frequently. The underlying factors for this phenomenon include the role model effect of family and social members, as well as the adolescents' own need to cope with psychological stress and negative emotions through smoking. In terms of alcohol consumption, it is more prevalent among low SES adolescents. Even though high SES adolescents may also encounter alcohol in their daily lives, their drinking behavior is mostly confined to specific social gatherings or major holidays, with a lower level of alcohol dependency.

3.2. Health behaviors related to physical activity

In terms of the connection between socioeconomic status (SES) and health behaviors related to physical activity, the main manifestations are at the level of resources and opportunities. Adolescents from high-SES families often have more opportunities to participate in high-quality, paid sports activities such as tennis, swimming, and dancing. Additionally, their families have sufficient financial means to support the purchase of various sports equipment, cover competition expenses, and provide daily transportation. Moreover, the schools these adolescents attend are usually equipped with highly qualified teachers and comprehensive sports facilities. In contrast, adolescents from low-SES families face multiple layers of restrictions in participating in physical exercise. Their families often cannot afford the costs of daily learning and training, and the communities they live in lack free and safe sports venues. The sports resources provided by their schools are also relatively scarce. Under such circumstances, low-SES adolescents tend to have reduced physical activity levels, spending more time watching TV and playing with mobile phones, which exacerbates the health risks associated with a sedentary lifestyle. Regarding sleep, the impact of SES is often overlooked. Low-SES adolescents are prone to being affected by various factors, leading to insufficient sleep duration and poor sleep quality. This is attributed to the lack of independent and quiet resting spaces, as well as noisy and crowded living environments ^[4]. In some families facing significant economic pressure, adolescents often need to share household chores or take on part-time jobs, inevitably increasing physical fatigue and squeezing their time for studying and sleeping. An unstable living environment can also lead to various psychological problems in adolescents, negatively affecting their future learning and development.

3.3. Mental health behaviors

Health behaviors are not only manifested at the physiological level but also at the behavioral level of maintaining mental health and seeking help. When some adolescents experience negative psychological issues such as depression and anxiety, high-SES adolescents and their family members often have a more comprehensive and scientific understanding of mental health problems and possess sufficient financial resources to seek professional psychological counseling services. Conversely, adolescents from low-SES backgrounds and their accompanying family members often lack knowledge about mental health, habitually attributing psychological problems to individual factors. Moreover, due to the high costs associated with psychological counseling and treatment, even when serious psychological issues are identified, they rarely seek professional help proactively. Instead, they tend

to cope through avoidance or aggression. Over time, these psychological problems gradually worsen, negatively impacting the physical and mental health development of adolescents ^[5].

4. The mechanism of socioeconomic status on adolescent health behaviors

4.1. Family mechanism

The family environment is the most direct microenvironment influencing the growth of adolescents, and the distribution of various types of capital within the family system directly relates to adolescents' choices and development in terms of healthy behaviors.

Firstly, the mechanism of economic capital. Economic capital, as a core dimension of SES, directly determines whether adolescents can receive sufficient economic support from their families to afford a higher standard of living. In reality, regular exercise requires the support of sports equipment such as swimming goggles, basketball shoes, and dance attire. The cost of swimming lessons often hovers around 200 yuan, not to mention the transportation expenses incurred for commuting. A balanced diet necessitates a steady supply of fresh fruits and vegetables as well as high-quality protein. Families with low SES face significant financial pressures, and their limited incomes are typically prioritized for meeting basic survival needs, leading to a natural reduction in health-related expenditures. Economic pressures also indirectly affect adolescents' healthy behaviors. Members of low-SES families often work in strenuous, low-paying jobs, leaving them with little time to engage in outdoor activities with their children. In contrast, parents from high-SES families often plan to exercise with their children or provide sufficient financial support for their children to participate in sports training ^[6].

The educational level of parents also influences, to a certain extent, adolescents' cognitive abilities and choices regarding healthy behaviors. Many highly educated and high-income parents possess a wealth of scientific nutritional knowledge and consciously impart healthy concepts to their children in daily life, such as the benefits of exercise for improving memory and the importance of a balanced diet rich in vegetables. Parents with low socioeconomic status (SES) are influenced by traditional beliefs. Due to their own unhealthy behavioral habits, they directly contribute to the emergence of unhealthy behaviors in their children. Additionally, life stressors can easily trigger conflicts, leading to psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and autism in adolescents, thereby exacerbating the divergence in healthy behaviors among them.

4.2. School and community environmental mechanisms

Adolescent activities often take place in school and community settings, where the school and community environmental mechanisms serve as the macro-context for adolescent behavioral choices. School quality is closely related to the SES of the community in which it is located. Schools in high-SES communities typically have sufficient funding, well-equipped sports facilities, and can offer a variety of physical education courses in their daily teaching, along with providing healthy and nutritionally balanced meals for students ^[7]. In contrast, schools in low-SES communities face financial constraints and resource scarcity, particularly with outdated and severely damaged sports facilities, making it difficult to offer diverse physical education courses and healthy meal options. These schools are often surrounded by convenience stores and fast-food restaurants, further increasing the opportunities for adolescents to engage in unhealthy behaviors. The SES level of a community is also reflected in whether it has sufficient green spaces, parks, and free public sports facilities. In some low-SES communities, due to insufficient public space, poor community environment, and high crime rates, adolescents lack safe and

convenient sports venues, severely limiting their outdoor activities. As a result, they spend more time indoors, increasing their static screen time from playing online games ^[8].

4.3. Individual psychological mechanisms

Low SES often brings about issues such as financial strain, family conflicts, and low social status, which become common sources of stress for adolescents. Over time, this stress can lead to severe psychological problems. To alleviate negative emotions, adolescents may resort to drinking, smoking, or overeating for temporary relief. Although these methods may be effective in the short term, they compromise the long-term health of adolescents ^[9]. Adolescents from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds experience numerous social constraints during their upbringing, leading to negative emotions toward the current social state. Their expectations that personal effort can change their fate gradually decline, and they may even experience a sense of confusion ^[10]. This pessimistic outlook subtly weakens adolescents' self-control, further exacerbating unhealthy behaviors such as substance attraction, drinking, and improper diet.

5. Conclusion

In summary, socioeconomic status exerts a profound influence on adolescents' health behaviors, permeating various micro-habits in their development. To effectively address inequalities in adolescents' health behaviors, it is essential to focus on the social ecosystem, emphasizing long-term tracking studies and causal judgments regarding socioeconomic status. Protective measures such as positive mentorship, enhancing psychological resilience, and providing family support should be implemented to mitigate the negative impacts of socioeconomic status, thereby safeguarding the development of healthy behaviors among adolescents.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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