

# Leadership in Childhood: A Social and Developmental Perspective in Middle Childhood and Preadolescence

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## ABSTRACT

Existing research on leadership development focuses predominantly on adults, overlooking childhood. This impedes understanding leadership emergence and applying insights to education, parenting, and policy. Leadership is traditionally seen as innate or learned through adult interactions, discounting early childhood settings. This study addresses this gap by utilizing the Identity Leadership Model, grounded in Social Identity Theory, to explore leadership development in middle childhood (grade 4) and preadolescence (grade 7). We investigate children's leadership perceptions and identify key traits and behaviors. The Identity Leadership Model proposes leaders emerge via group members identifying certain prototypical individuals who epitomize group norms, and aligning actions accordingly. Our qualitative study surveyed children's views on leadership qualities and tracked observable leadership behaviors. Contrary to suggestions of same-gender preferences, we find no notable sex differences in leadership perceptions. While older children provide richer descriptions, both age groups prioritize character traits like fairness, responsibility, and kindness. Children occupying central peer network roles exhibit more leadership behaviors. Results demonstrate the Identity Leadership Model's "prototypicality" dimension shows leaders viewed as embodying group norms with more in-group social ties. These findings verify the Identity Leadership Model's applicability to childhood leadership perceptions. Outcomes highlight middle childhood and preadolescence as critical for leadership development, necessitating further research given the lack of focus on youth. Fostering early leadership opportunities can cultivate future leaders benefiting communities and organizations.

**Keywords:** Identity Leadership Model; Leadership Development; Middle Childhood; Preadolescence; Qualitative Research; Social Identity Theory