



## Article

# Age- and Sex-Based Differences in Young Adolescents' Perceptions of Their Moral Character Development in Latvia

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## Abstract

Early adolescence represents a critical period for moral development, in the investigation of which adolescents' perspectives are underrepresented. This study addresses the question "What are the differences by sex and age groups regarding young adolescents' perceptions of their moral character development in Latvia?" In 2022, 1462 10–15-year-old pupils from 56 schools completed a questionnaire with 35 rating statements capturing four components of moral development. Age- and sex-based differences were found regarding the role of friendships, family support, moral reasoning, and moral emotions. This study can be useful for providing personalised support to early adolescents' moral development.

**Keywords:** age- and sex-based differences; early adolescents; moral character; friendship; Latvia

## 1. Introduction

Moral development is crucial for a meaningful life. The 2023 UN "World Happiness Report", in its world happiness agenda for the next 10 years, states that the research priority number one should be on how to cultivate and promote virtuous character (Helliwell et al., 2023). Young people today demonstrate a profound appreciation for both individual and social freedom, recognising the importance of responsibility in shaping a better world. Their capacity for commitment and solidarity was recently exemplified when hundreds of Spanish young people, regardless of faith, united to aid flood victims in Valencia. However, despite their immense potential to drive positive change, there is an increasing concern among scholars and educators about teenagers' peer violence (Skrzypiec et al., 2019), mental health and sleep deprivation (Kansagra, 2020), fear of taking responsibility (Faranda, 2020), and individualism and superficiality (Carr, 2020), among other issues. These problems are partly due to a lack of moral character and virtue. Given that young people do not develop moral virtues by themselves, they have a right to be given support for this by society. Moral education at school has become more urgent (e.g., ICFE, 2021; OECD, 2021), because it is actually the adult society's responsibility to support young people to explore and become aware of the virtues that help them live a meaningful life, including the cultivation of practical wisdom and critical thinking which will enable them to discern complexities beyond superficial digital interactions and engage meaningfully with others and with the world around them.

Early adolescence represents a critical developmental stage for cultivating moral attitudes and forming a moral identity (Doering, 2013; Sengsavang, 2018). During the ages of 10 to 15, young adolescents experience significant and rapid changes across various



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aspects of their development and essential learning opportunities arise, including greater awareness of social influences, the shaping of identity, and the development of social-emotional competencies (Hansen et al., 2021, preface).

The existence of age-based differences in moral development from early adolescence to late adulthood is well established in academic research (for a recent meta-analysis, see Heintz & Ruch, 2022). Much research also supports the existence of gender differences in moral development, even if there is not unanimity (for tenants of the opposite view, see, e.g., Caravita et al., 2012; Proios et al., 2012; Zulfiqar, 2020). In this paper, the words ‘sex differences’ and ‘gender differences’, and the pairs male/female and boys/girls, were used interchangeably depending on the wording originally used in the literature discussed. Longitudinal studies found pronounced gender differences in the trajectories of development of morality in adolescence, females reporting higher morality than males due to differences in socialisation and developmental processes (Crocetti et al., 2019). Some studies have explored the cognitive aspects of these differences in morality development. For instance, studies exploring adolescents’ moral judgement found that, for 14–15-year-old adolescents, average results were significantly and positively associated with being female, having (and practising) a religion and doing specific extra-curricular activities (Walker et al., 2017), and highlighted quantitative and qualitative gender differences, favouring girls for slightly more mature moral judgments than boys (Zulfiqar, 2023). Harrison et al. (2020) found that 11–14-year-old female students scored higher than their male counterparts in virtue perception and virtue reasoning through the curriculum, and recent research has discovered age- and sex-based differences in the moral intuitions of American early adolescents (Bretl & Goering, 2022).

Research has also explored gender and age differences in adolescents’ morality regarding other not directly cognitive aspects, including the influence of gender in predicting affective morality judgments in adolescence (Fragkaki et al., 2016), gender differences in prosocial behaviour (Van der Graaff et al., 2018) and in loneliness profiles in adolescence (Ribeiro et al., 2023), and gender as predictor of moral courage in late adolescence (Bronstein et al., 2007). Hardy et al. (2014) explored how the moral ideal self may differ across adolescent age and gender, and Lee et al. (2019) also found gender and age differences in spiritual development among early adolescents (11–15 years of age) in Czech Republic. However, early adolescents’ perspectives are underrepresented in this body of research, particularly regarding age- and sex-based differences in their perceptions of their moral character development.

### 1.1. The Context of This Study

Moral education research is most topical in Latvia, which, like many other countries which have endured Soviet occupation, has experienced cardinal transformations of moral value systems in the last 30 years. Latvia is undergoing a renewal of moral education since 2015, when amendments to the Education Law (Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, 1998) reinvigorated moral teaching at school (Maslo et al., 2024). The new competence-based curriculum Skola2030 (2017) integrates moral education and uses the language of virtues and values, but there is still an ongoing ideological and pedagogical debate surrounding moral education, particularly virtue education, within its educational system. Responding to the high expectations in the educational sector regarding moral education, a multidisciplinary collaboration between researchers and educational specialists was started in 2017 at the University of Latvia, facilitating the initiation and implementation of multiple research projects in the field of moral education, including the development of a new moral curriculum.

In this context, in the spring of 2022, a team of researchers from the University of Latvia launched a 3-year-long longitudinal study examining school pupils’ perspectives about their moral development, which strengthened the scientific foundation of the new moral

curriculum and added to the discussion on character education in Latvian sociopolitical context. The specificity of the present study will be better understood by contextualising it in relation to other publications derived from this ongoing research project. The initial focus of the project was not on gender differences: two previous project publications used both qualitative and quantitative data to report early adolescents' general beliefs about moral growth at the beginning of the study (Fernández González & Surikova, 2023), and the dynamics of those beliefs one year after (Fernández González & Surikova, 2024). However, during the literature review implemented for the preparation of these reports, the importance of gender differences in early adolescents' moral development, as reported above, became apparent, and a new crucial research question, which was addressed in this study, emerged as follows: what are the differences by sex and age regarding young adolescents' perceptions of their moral character development in Latvia?

Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore age- and sex-based differences in the way young adolescents in Latvia perceive the different aspects of the development of their moral character. The previously mentioned publications offered valuable insights into moral development across various age groups but did not focus explicitly on sex-based and age-based differences among young adolescents. This omission limited the understanding of how moral development may vary significantly between boys and girls, as well as across different age cohorts during adolescence in Latvia. By examining whether boys and girls experience moral growth differently at different ages, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of young adolescents' perceptions of the development of their moral character.

### 1.2. Theoretical Framework

Moral growth is a multifaceted construct which includes the development of subjective aspects (e.g., moral identity, moral emotions and desires, moral motivation and freedom, and moral understanding), factual aspects (e.g., moral habituation and moral life), and social aspects (e.g., moral relationships, moral inspiration from others, and moral care for others), which are complementary. To investigate moral growth, this study relies on the theory of the "person of moral growth" (Fernández González, 2019a, 2019b; Fernández González & Akrivou, 2024), a model of moral development based on personalist virtue ethics. A key feature of contemporary personalism, as developed by various scholars, is its holistic understanding of the person, characterised by four core dimensions: interiority (Marías, 1996), openness (Merleau-Ponty, 1964), dynamicity (Biesta, 2021; Pérez Guerrero, 2022), and a dialogical dimension (Buber, 1970; Spaemann, 2006).

The theory of the "person of moral growth" operationalises these four dimensions (interiority, openness, dynamism, and dialogical dimension) into a moral growth model, which synthesises the multiple facets of moral growth (see Fernández González and Akrivou (2024) for more detail about how the dimensions of the person relate to the components of the model). The model includes four key processual components, which provided the basic structure of the research instrument, namely the following:

1. Moral growth beliefs (opinions about, and emotional attitudes towards, moral growth). This component is closely related to Dweck's (2000) growth mindset theory, which was used for formulating Section A of the questionnaire (see Section 2.4).
2. Moral growth status (level of free and conscious commitment to moral growth). This component was captured using Marcia's (2002) identity status theory, which is the basis for the formulations used in Section B of the questionnaire (see Section 2.4).
3. Moral growth practices (phronesis-driven practical engagement with virtue development). Section C of the questionnaire addresses this component using formulations drawn from an adapted version of Duckworth's (2016) Virtue Grit Scale, and from Smith et al.'s (2008) Brief Moral Resilience Scale (see Section 2.4).

4. Moral growth selfhood (self-awareness, self-satisfaction, and external support perceived for moral growth). This component is related to Vroom's (1964) expectancy motivation theory, and it is captured in Section D of the questionnaire (see Section 2.4).

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Research Design

This study is part of a three-year longitudinal study that was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a virtue education curriculum for students in grades 1 through 9. This effectiveness research employed a randomised controlled trial methodology, utilising an experimental design that incorporated baseline pre-test, intermediate test, and post-tests. The study featured both experimental and control groups, clustered at the class level within three distinct strata: Years 2–4, Years 5–7, and Years 7–9.

This study is based on the analysis of baseline results obtained within the last two strata in May 2022. The focus on the baseline data explains why there is a narrow age difference among both age groups (young adolescents aged 11–12 years versus older adolescents aged 13–14 years). This focus seems reasonable, taking into account the phases of adolescent development (hormonal changes marking the beginning of early adolescence happen for girls around the age of 11, and for boys around the age of 13). In addition, there is scarcely any research comparing gender differences in the perception of moral development between those age groups. A greater age gap would perhaps made the overall gender differences more visible, but less nuanced.

### 2.2. Participants

In January–February 2022, class teachers received an invitation to take part in the study through their local educational municipalities and employment institutions (i.e., general education institutions) as well as via social media (e.g., Facebook). Information published online and small leaflets were used to introduce the longitudinal study, and, in March–April 2022, 104 class teachers applied to participate in the study on the voluntary basis (i.e., 45 class teachers in Year 5 and 59 class teachers in Year 7). However, in May 2022 only 90 class teachers with their 1465 pupils from 56 schools took part in the baseline measurement (dropout rate of 14%). Participants were asked to voluntarily identify themselves according to their social role as schoolboys or schoolgirls (in Latvian: skolnieks/skolniece), which is a frequent ethical practice for school research in Latvia. This social role name in Latvian is masculine or feminine, does not include the word 'boy/girl', and there are not alternative non-binary categories for it. Three pupils from Year 5 were not retained in the final research sample due to their preferences not to disclose their gendered social role information (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the research sample.

	Year 5	Year 7	Total
Number of respondents	641	821	1462
Number of classes	39	51	90
Class size $\leq$ 15 pupils	9	12	21
Class size $\geq$ 16 pupils	30	39	69
Number of schools	31	37	56 *

Note. \* Number of unique schools (12 schools participated with classes from both Year 5 and Year 7).

The schools included in the sample differ (1) by number of pupils ( $M = 561.9$ ,  $SD = 390.926$ , ranged from 64 to 1689), (2) by location (73.6% located in the countryside, 26.4% in state cities), (3) by subordination (94.3% were state schools, 5.7% private schools), and (4) by school type (56.6% secondary schools, 35.9% basic education schools,

7.5% state gymnasiums). The classes represented in the research sample varied in size (i.e., number of pupils) in Year 5 ( $M_{Class\ size} = 20.15$ , ranged from 6 to 31) and in Year 7 ( $M_{Class\ size} = 19.88$ , ranged from 4 to 32). Participants in Year 5 were mostly between the ages of 11 and 12 (95%,  $M = 11.51$ ,  $SD = 0.573$ ), while those in Year 7 were 13–14 years old (97%,  $M = 13.36$ ,  $SD = 0.557$ ). The distribution by sex was balanced in both age groups: there were 307 boys and 334 girls in Year 5, and 409 boys and 412 girls in Year 7. A total of 51% of the participants were female ( $n = 743$ ). Although most respondents came from the Riga and Pieriga regions, the study included representation from all regions across Latvia (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Participants’ distribution by regions of Latvia.

Region of Latvia	Year 5		Year 7		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Riga and Pieriga	215	33.5	299	36.4	514	35.2
Vidzeme	108	16.8	47	5.7	155	10.6
Kurzeme	100	15.6	110	13.4	210	14.4
Zemgale	169	26.4	238	29.0	407	27.8
Latgale	49	7.6	127	15.5	176	12.0

This study reflects a representative sample of the Latvian education system. In the 2021–2022 academic year, a total of 18,402 students were enrolled in Year 5, and 21,174 students were in Year 7, across 675 educational institutions in Latvia that provide both basic and secondary education programs (Ministry of Education, 2022). The sample allows us to generalise the results to the 39,576 pupils in Years 5 and 7 with a margin of error of 2.6% at a 95% confidence level, to the 18,402 pupils in Year 5 with the margin of error of 3.9% at a 95% confidence level, and to the 21,174 pupils in Year 7 with the margin of error of 3.5% at a 95% confidence level (Fisher et al., 1995).

### 2.3. Procedure

In Spring 2022, thanks to the involvement of 90 teachers across 56 schools, 1462 pupils representing all regions of Latvia participated in the survey, filling 234 paper and 1228 online questionnaires. The data were analysed using IBM SPSS 22 for descriptive statistics (frequencies, crosstabs, etc.). The test of the correspondence of the empirical distribution of the data to the theoretical distribution was performed by applying the Kolmogorov–Smirnov Test. The data did not have a normal distribution. Mann–Whitney *U* Test was employed to determine statically significant differences between two respondent groups depending on sex and age, and then a measure of effect size (Eta squared— $\eta^2$ ) for statically significant differences was calculated (Lenhard & Lenhard, 2016).

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study. First, we collected the informed consent of teachers willing to participate through the participant online form. For the participation of adolescents aged 11–14 years, their parents’/guardians’ consent was obtained through the school: each participant teacher sent all parents of children involved in the research the relevant information and a parental consent form. This research has received the ethical approval of the Ethics Committee for Research in Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Latvia, Ethical approval number 30-95/5, 12 April 2022.

### 2.4. Measures

A multicomponent questionnaire was used to collect data. It contained 35 statements to be rated on a Likert scale, grouped in four sections that captured the four components of the moral growth process (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Questionnaire items and codes.

Code	Items	Item Short Name
Section A ‘Beliefs’: items (in positive form) (7-point rating scale)		
A1_1	You can improve your character during all your life.	Possibility
A1_2	When your character grows, your inner freedom also grows.	Freedom
A1_3	Educating moral emotions is part of character building.	Emotions
A1_4	Improving moral reasoning is part of character building.	Reasoning
A1_5	Character development implies training, repetition of good moral behaviour.	Training
A1_6	Inner joy of getting good habits facilitates the character development process.	Joy
Section B ‘Status’ item (5 levels)		
	Not interested; never thought about it; have doubts about engaging; engaged since childhood; engaged after overcoming a moral crisis	
Section C ‘Practices’		
Section set C1 ‘Goal-orientation to moral growth’: items (5-point rating scale)		
C1_1	My interest in character growth is quite stable.	Stability
C1_2	Setbacks in acquiring good moral habits don’t discourage me to develop my character.	Not discouraged
C1_3	I have determination in developing my moral character.	Determination
C1_4	I am really trying hard to develop my moral character.	Effort
C1_5	It is easy for me to focus on getting into good habits for more than a month.	Sustainability
C1_6	Once I have decided to acquire a good habit, I never give up until I get it.	Stickability
C1_7	My interest in developing moral character is strong.	Strength
C1_8	I am constantly improving my moral character and never give up.	Perseverance
C1_9	I was passionate about getting into good habits, and my interest stayed alive.	Passion
C1_10	I have overcome difficulties to develop my moral character.	Resilience
Section set C2 ‘Moral growth engagement’		
Section sub-set C2.1 ‘Engagement plan’: items (5-point rating scale)		
C2.1_1	I have a clear plan for my free time.	Free time
C2.1_2	I avoid places, people and events that encourage immoral behaviour.	Life environment
C2.1_3	I avoid websites, social networks, etc. that encourage immoral behaviour.	Online environment
C2.1_4	I take an interest in people of good moral character (e.g., by reading or watching videos about them).	Moral exemplars
C2.1_5	I meet friends who motivate me to develop my moral character by their example.	Friends
C2.1_6	I ask for advice on developing moral character (from friends, parents, teachers. . .).	Advisers
Section sub-set C2.2 ‘Engagement areas’: items (5-point rating scale)		
C2.2_1	I do my homework with order and intensity.	Homework
C2.2_2	I work hard at school.	School
C2.2_3	I involve in family chores actively.	Family
C2.2_4	I involve in voluntary activities.	Volunteering
C2.2_5	I involve in sport and/or open-air activities.	Sport
C2.2_6	I involve in artistic and/or cultural activities.	Culture
C2.2_7	I involve in religious and/or spiritual activities.	Religion
Section D ‘Selfhood’: items (5-point rating scale)		
D1_1	How much are you doing to develop your moral character?	Perceived involvement
D1_2	What feelings does the process of developing moral character arouse in you?	Perceived emotions
D2_1	Perceived support from family (parents, siblings, grandparents, etc.).	Family support
D2_2	Perceived support at school (teachers, school leaders and other staff).	School support
D2_3	Perceived support and recognition from your closest friends.	Friends’ support



Section A, titled “Beliefs” (see Table 3), utilised a scale designed to explore students’ perceptions regarding character development. Participants responded to six different statements, which were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = I complete disagree to 7 = I completely agree). These statements were crafted in both affirming and opposing formats to mitigate any bias stemming from social desirability. The statements explored various aspects of character growth, including the potential for lifelong improvement (e.g., You can/cannot improve your character during all your life), the connection with personal autonomy, the emotional aspects, the influence of moral reasoning, the necessity of consistent practice, and the role of joy in fostering virtue development.

In Section B, titled “Status” (see Table 3), participants were presented with a series of statements reflecting five distinct stages of maturity related to the decision to improve oneself (e.g., I was not really satisfied with my behaviour, so I decided to improve my moral character). They were instructed to select the statement that resonated most with their current mindset. The five levels included having made a commitment after resolving a significant moral dilemma (achievement), being committed since early childhood (foreclosure), being uncertain about committing to it (moratorium), never having considered it (diffusion), and lacking interest in self-improvement.

Section C, titled “Practices” (see Table 3), requested students to rate two sets of statements about their engagement with moral development in daily life on a 5-point scale. The first one (C1), labelled “Goal-orientation to moral growth”, featured 10 grit-related items, with several presented in reverse order for control purposes, e.g., I am constantly improving my moral character and never give up (in Table 3 reversed items are presented in positive form for facilitating comparison during data analysis). The response options ranged from 1 = I am not at all like this to 5 = I am exactly like this. The second one (C2), labelled “Moral growth engagement”, was divided into two sections. The first one (C2.1.), named “Engagement plan”, included 6 statements concerning such issues as time management, avoiding harmful environments, and connecting with morally positive friends (e.g., I avoid places, people and events that encourage immoral behaviour). The second one (C2.2.), named “Engagement areas”, involved 7 statements referring to the school, family, voluntary work, sports etc. (e.g., I involve in family chores actively). The response options for Section C ranged from 1 = No, never to 5 = Yes, very often.

In Section D, titled “Selfhood” (see Table 3), participants evaluated five statements using a 5-point rating scale, which measured two aspects of moral selfhood development. The first aspect (D1), labelled “Self-perception”, involved the respondent’s personal reflection on two questions: How much are you doing to develop your moral character? (the response options ranged from 1 = I do not do nothing to 5 = I do all I can); and: How do you feel about your moral growth process? (the response options ranged from 1 = I do not experience joy about it to 5 = I experience a lot of joy about it). The second aspect (D2), “Perceived encouragements”, focused on the respondent’s perception of the help received from their social circles (e.g., Perceived support and recognition from your closest friends). The response options ranged from 1 = I do not perceive any support to 5 = I perceive a lot of support).

The survey, originally created in English in 2018, was adapted into Latvian, ensuring that the language used fitted to respondents’ age. A pilot test was conducted in 2021 to refine the questionnaire. The internal consistency of both within individual sections and across the entire survey was strong, with high reliability of the data (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.830$ , see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Reliability test results for scale items.

Section—Moral Growth Category	Cronbach's Alpha		
	Year 5	Year 7	Total
Section A—Beliefs	0.752 (6 items)	0.742 (6 items)	0.746 (6 items, 7-point Likert scale)
Section B—Status	N/A (1 item)	N/A (1 item)	N/A (1 item, 5-point Likert scale)
Section C—Practices	0.808 (23 items)	0.757 (23 items)	0.782 (23 items, 5-point Likert scale)
Section D—Selfhood	0.683 (5 items)	0.611 (5 items)	0.646 (5 items, 5-point Likert scale)
Sections A, B, C, and D	0.852 (35 items)	0.809 (35 items)	0.830 (35 items)

### 2.5. Data Analysis

Six participants' groups depending on sex and age were created as follows: all boys, all girls, younger boys (in Year 5), younger girls (in Year 5), older boys (in Year 7), and older girls (in Year 7). During the analysis, differences were sought between these groups using the Mann–Whitney *U* Test in 7 comparison pairs: 'all boys vs. all girls', 'younger boys vs. younger girls', 'older boys vs. older girls', 'younger boys vs. older boys', 'younger girls vs. older girls', 'younger boys vs. older girls', and 'older boys vs. younger girls'. Seven comparison criteria (35 items) were used, corresponding to the four components of the moral growth process (and their sub-components) included in the questionnaire, namely, 'Beliefs' (6 items), 'Status' (1 item), 'Practices' (with three sub-components: 'Goal-orientation to moral growth' (10 items), 'Engagement plan' (6 items) and 'Engagement areas' (7 items)), and 'Selfhood' (with two sub-components: 'Self-perception' (2 items) and 'Perceived encouragements' (3 items)).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Overall Age- and Sex-Based Differences

In total, 75 statistically significant differences within the comparison pairs were identified (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Number of statistically significant differences (Mann–Whitney *U* Test).

Differences Between Comparison Pairs (Group 1 vs. Group 2)	Count of Differences Within the Sections							Total Count	Group 1 Rated Higher	Group 2 Rated Higher
	A	B	C			D				
			C1	C2.1	C2.2	D1	D2			
All boys vs. all girls	1	-	2	2	4	-	2	11	4	7
Younger boys vs. younger girls	1	-	-	1	5	-	1	8	2	6
Older boys vs. older girls	3	-	6	2	3	-	2	16	8	8
Younger boys vs. older girls	2	1	4	2	4	-	3	16	8	8
Older boys vs. younger girls		-	1	2	5	-	1	9	3	6
Younger boys vs. older boys	1	-	-	-	2	-	-	3	3	-
Younger girls vs. older girls	1	1	5	-	3	-	2	12	9	3
Total count	9	2	18	9	26	0	11	75	37	38

Overall, the highest number of differences across all the items was within the comparison pairs 'older boys vs. older girls' and 'younger boys vs. older girls' (in both cases,  $n = 16$  differences out of the 35 comparison items). The smallest number of differences ( $n = 3$ ) was within the comparison pair 'younger boys vs. older boys'. Regarding the differences found within each criterion across the comparison pairs, the highest number of differences ( $n = 26$ ) was within the sub-set C2.2 'Engagement areas', and the smallest number of differences ( $n = 2$ ) was within the Section B 'Status'. There was no difference across the comparison pairs within the criterion D1 'Self-perception'.



### 3.2. Age- and Sex-Based Differences Identified Within Each Section

#### 3.2.1. Section A ‘Beliefs’

As regards the differences identified within each section, in the Section A ‘Beliefs’ (see Table 6), statistically significant differences with a large effect were found within the comparison pair ‘all boys vs. all girls’ regarding the item A1\_4 (Improving moral reasoning is part of character building): girls rated higher than boys ( $U = 285.758$ ,  $p = 0.018$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.748$ , with a mean rank of 756.55 for girls and 705.40 for boys). Furthermore, statistically significant differences (min. 1, max. 3) were identified within the other comparison pairs, excepting ‘older boys vs. younger girls’. It should be noted that younger boys rated higher regarding the item A1\_5 (Character development implies training, repetition of good moral behaviour) than younger girls, older girls, and older boys, but older girls rated higher regarding the item A1\_3 (Educating moral emotions is part of character building) than older boys, younger boys, and younger girls.

**Table 6.** Statistically significant differences within the Section A ‘Beliefs’.

Differences (Group 1 vs. Group 2)	Item Code	Item Short Name	Mann–Whitney $U$ Test Statistics				Effect Size
			$U$	$p$	Mean Rank for Group 1	Mean Rank for Group 2	$\eta^2$
All boys vs. all girls	A1_4	Reasoning	285.758	0.018	705.40	756.55	0.748 (large)
Younger boys vs. younger girls	A1_5	Training	44.376	0.003	343.45	300.36	0.746 (large)
Older boys vs. older girls	A1_2	Freedom	77.579	0.045	427.32	394.80	0.748 (large)
	A1_3	Emotions	94.585	0.002	385.74	436.08	0.747 (large)
	A1_4	Reasoning	92.321	0.015	391.28	430.58	0.747 (large)
Younger boys vs. older girls	A1_3	Emotions	69.254	0.025	340.42	374.59	0.731 (large)
	A1_5	Training	54.727	0.002	387.74	339.33	0.732 (large)
Younger boys vs. older boys	A1_5	Training	51.421	0.000	395.50	330.72	0.733 (large)
Younger girls vs. older girls	A1_3	Emotions	77.341	0.003	347.94	394.22	0.739 (large)

#### 3.2.2. Section B ‘Status’

The Table 7 reports the differences found within the Section B ‘Status’. Statistically significant difference with a large effect were found within the comparison pairs ‘younger boys vs. older girls’ and ‘younger girls vs. older girls’. In both comparison pairs, older girls rated higher than younger boys and younger girls.

**Table 7.** Statistically significant differences within the Section B ‘Status’.

Differences (Group 1 vs. Group 2)	Rated Higher	Mann–Whitney $U$ Test Statistics				Effect Size
		$U$	$p$	Mean Rank for Group 1	Mean Rank for Group 2	$\eta^2$
Younger boys vs. older girls	Older girls	49.172	0.006	277.42	315.20	0.732 (large)
Younger girls vs. older girls	Older girls	52.655	0.027	294.62	325.41	0.740 (large)

#### 3.2.3. Section C ‘Practices’

As regards the Section C ‘Practices’, in the first set C1 ‘Goal-orientation to moral growth’ (see Table 8), there were statistically significant differences with a large effect within the comparison pair ‘all boys vs. all girls’ regarding the item C1\_4 (I am really trying hard to develop my moral character): girls rated higher than boys ( $U = 244.939$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.747$ , with a mean rank of 700.42 for girls and 639.07 for boys); and also regarding the item C1\_9 (I was passionate about getting into good habits, and my interest stayed alive): boys rated higher than girls ( $U = 204.149$ ,  $p = 0.049$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.747$ , with a mean rank of 641.23 for girls and 681.48 for boys). Furthermore, statistically significant differences

(min. 1, max. 6) were identified also within the other comparison pairs, excepting ‘younger boys vs. younger girls’ and ‘younger boys vs. older boys’.

**Table 8.** Statistically significant differences within the set C1 ‘Goal-orientation to moral growth’.

Differences (Group 1 vs. Group 2)	Item Code	Item Short Name	Mann–Whitney <i>U</i> Test Statistics				Effect Size
			<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Rank for Group 1	Mean Rank for Group 2	$\eta^2$
All boys vs. all girls	C1_4	Effort	244.939	0.003	639.07	700.42	0.747 (large)
	C1_9	Passion	204.149	0.049	681.48	641.23	0.747 (large)
Older boys vs. older girls	C1_3	Determination	60.269	0.010	388.01	348.58	0.747 (large)
	C1_4	Effort	76.149	0.019	355.06	390.79	0.747 (large)
	C1_5	Sustainability	62.332	0.028	388.37	354.67	0.747 (large)
	C1_6	Stickability	62.637	0.030	388.52	355.54	0.747 (large)
	C1_9	Passion	58.716	0.003	389.57	344.66	0.747 (large)
	C1_10	Resilience	69.740	0.016	338.24	374.15	0.747 (large)
Younger boys vs. older girls	C1_3	Determination	45.778	0.013	345.64	309.73	0.731 (large)
	C1_4	Effort	60.415	0.010	312.26	349.92	0.729 (large)
	C1_9	Passion	47.192	0.043	343.51	314.01	0.730 (large)
	C1_10	Resilience	54.827	0.002	288.11	332.96	0.729 (large)
Older boys vs. younger girls	C1_10	Resilience	46.612	0.020	339.32	305.94	0.742 (large)
Younger girls vs. older girls	C1_3	Determination	49.341	0.002	365.25	319.28	0.740 (large)
	C1_5	Sustainability	53.277	0.041	361.39	330.97	0.738 (large)
	C1_7	Strength	45.452	0.000	348.68	307.06	0.738 (large)
	C1_9	Passion	52.690	0.019	363.62	328.63	0.741 (large)
	C1_10	Resilience	64.232	0.000	294.73	358.94	0.740 (large)

In the set C2 ‘Moral growth engagement’ of the Section C ‘Practices’, statistically significant differences were found within the sub-set C2.1 ‘Engagement plan’ (Table 9). There were statistically significant differences with a large effect within the comparison pair ‘all boys vs. all girls’ regarding the item C2.1\_1 (I have a clear plan for my free time): boys rated higher than girls ( $U = 228.794$ ,  $p = 0.030$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.747$ , with a mean rank of 678.58 for girls and 724.05 for boys); and also regarding the item C2.1\_5 (I meet friends who motivate me to develop my moral character by their example): girls rated higher than boys ( $U = 252.528$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.747$ , with a mean rank of 711.78 for girls and 619.00 for boys). In addition, statistically significant differences (min. 1, max. 2) were identified also within other comparison pairs, excepting ‘younger boys vs. older boys’ and ‘younger girls vs. older girls’.

**Table 9.** Statistically significant differences within the sub-set C2.1 ‘Engagement plan’.

Differences (Group 1 vs. Group 2)	Item Code	Item Short Name	Mann–Whitney <i>U</i> Test Statistics				Effect Size
			<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Rank for Group 1	Mean Rank for Group 2	$\eta^2$
All boys vs. all girls	C2.1_1	Free time	228.794	0.030	724.05	678.58	0.747 (large)
	C2.1_5	Friends	252.528	0.000	619.00	711.78	0.747 (large)
Younger boys vs. younger girls	C2.1_5	Friends	49.487	0.006	277.76	315.29	0.747 (large)
Older boys vs. older girls	C2.1_1	Free time	67.995	0.005	414.50	370.56	0.747 (large)
	C2.1_5	Friends	78.527	0.000	341.47	397.24	0.747 (large)
Younger boys vs. older girls	C2.1_2	Life environment	56.838	0.040	309.81	339.66	0.730 (large)
	C2.1_5	Friends	61.863	0.003	308.94	353.16	0.734 (large)
Older boys vs. younger girls	C2.1_1	Free time	56.679	0.047	367.12	337.44	0.743 (large)
	C2.1_5	Friends	62.650	0.001	311.45	358.59	0.742 (large)

Table 10 reports the statistically significant differences within the sub-set C2.2 ‘Engagement areas’. There were four statistically significant differences with a large effect

within the comparison pair ‘all boys vs. all girls’: girls rated higher on C2.2\_1 (I do my homework with order and intensity), C2.2\_2 (I work hard at school), and C2.2\_6 (I involve in artistic and/or cultural activities); but boys rated higher on C2.2\_5 (I involve in sport and/or open-air activities). Furthermore, statistically significant differences (min. 2, max. 5) were identified also within all other pairs of two respondent groups. For example, there were statistically significant differences with a large effect by age and gender regarding the criteria C2.2\_7 (I involve in religious and/or spiritual activities): younger girls scored higher than younger boys, who scored higher than older girls, who in their turn scored higher than older boys.

**Table 10.** Statistically significant differences within the sub-set C2.2 ‘Engagement areas’.

Differences (Group 1 vs. Group 2)	Item Code	Item Short Name	Mann–Whitney <i>U</i> Test Statistics				Effect Size
			<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Rank for Group 1	Mean Rank for Group 2	$\eta^2$
All boys vs. all girls	C2.2_1	Homework	269.245	0.000	659.84	734.39	0.747 (large)
	C2.2_2	School	270.309	0.001	664.81	735.86	0.747 (large)
	C2.2_5	Sport	201.671	0.000	771.05	641.64	0.747 (large)
	C2.2_6	Culture	323.096	0.000	585.34	808.54	0.746 (large)
Younger boys vs. younger girls	C2.2_1	Homework	52.210	0.043	295.91	323.65	0.745 (large)
	C2.2_2	School	54.527	0.002	288.74	330.51	0.746 (large)
	C2.2_5	Sport	38.336	0.000	345.05	281.24	0.746 (large)
	C2.2_6	Culture	62.848	0.000	259.73	356.29	0.745 (large)
	C2.2_7	Religion	47.436	0.010	274.29	308.60	0.746 (large)
Older boys vs. older girls	C2.2_1	Homework	83.502	0.006	366.59	409.31	0.747 (large)
	C2.2_5	Sport	63.872	0.000	427.23	360.39	0.747 (large)
	C2.2_6	Culture	100.985	0.000	325.95	452.96	0.747 (large)
Younger boys vs. older girls	C2.2_1	Homework	53.298	0.038	364.21	333.42	0.731 (large)
	C2.2_5	Sport	44.323	0.000	399.75	311.76	0.730 (large)
	C2.2_6	Culture	74.149	0.000	295.29	385.87	0.730 (large)
	C2.2_7	Religion	50.819	0.044	355.29	326.48	0.727 (large)
Older boys vs. younger girls	C2.2_1	Homework	80.233	0.000	303.24	409.62	0.743 (large)
	C2.2_2	School	73.790	0.000	320.33	390.45	0.742 (large)
	C2.2_5	Sport	55.139	0.005	375.03	332.62	0.743 (large)
	C2.2_6	Culture	85.113	0.000	293.61	424.58	0.742 (large)
	C2.2_7	Religion	65.504	0.000	310.44	368.62	0.739 (large)
Younger boys vs. older boys	C2.2_1	Homework	44.379	0.000	374.55	306.90	0.736 (large)
	C2.2_5	Sport	51.619	0.044	356.02	326.78	0.735 (large)
Younger girls vs. older girls	C2.2_1	Homework	52.876	0.000	399.30	332.36	0.740 (large)
	C2.2_2	School	56.637	0.002	387.65	342.24	0.739 (large)
	C2.2_7	Religion	47.401	0.000	387.52	317.81	0.734 (large)

### 3.2.4. Section D ‘Selfhood’

In the last Section D ‘Selfhood’, as indicated above, there were no differences across the comparison pairs within the section D1 ‘Self-perception’. As per the section D2 ‘Perceived encouragements’ (see Table 11), there were statistically significant differences with a large effect within the comparison pair ‘all boys vs. all girls’ regarding the item D2\_1 (Perceived support and recognition from your family (parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, etc.)): boys rated higher than girls ( $U = 218.668$ ,  $p = 0.042$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.747$ , with a mean rank of 663.23 for girls and 704.18 for boys); and older girls rated significantly less than younger girls, younger boys, and older boys; and regarding the item D2\_3 (Perceived support and recognition from your closest friends): girls rated higher than boys ( $U = 257.017$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.747$ , with a mean rank of 717.62 for girls and 638.71 for boys). Other statistically significant differences (min. 1, max. 3) were also identified within other comparison pairs, excepting within ‘younger boys vs. older boys’.

**Table 11.** Statistically significant differences within external dimension D2 ‘Perceived encouragements’.

Differences (Group 1 vs. Group 2)	Item Code	Item Short Name	Mann–Whitney <i>U</i> Test Statistics				Effect Size
			<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>	Mean Rank for Group 1	Mean Rank for Group 2	$\eta^2$
All boys vs. all girls	D2_1	Family support	218.668	0.042	704.18	663.23	0.747 (large)
	D2_3	Friends’ support	257.017	0.000	638.71	717.62	0.747 (large)
Younger boys vs. younger girls	D2_3	Friends’ support	51.223	0.004	281.40	320.59	0.745 (large)
Older boys vs. older girls	D2_1	Family support	65.684	0.020	398.87	363.73	0.747 (large)
	D2_3	Friends’ support	78.623	0.010	358.00	397.22	0.747 (large)
Younger boys vs. older girls	D2_1	Family support	48.209	0.003	360.84	318.57	0.730 (large)
	D2_2	School support	49.598	0.018	356.08	321.99	0.731 (large)
	D2_3	Friends’ support	60.680	0.018	316.33	350.61	0.731 (large)
Older boys vs. younger girls	D2_3	Friends’ support	66.490	0.002	322.80	368.75	0.743 (large)
Younger girls vs. older girls	D2_1	Family support	55.333	0.012	373.54	336.98	0.741 (large)
	D2_2	School support	53.330	0.003	375.73	331.66	0.740 (large)

### 3.3. Summary of Age- and Sex-Based Differences

For summarising the results, the main differences and tendencies identified were grouped in three thematic blocks: the support participants perceived, the context where they thrive morally, and the mechanisms they use for moral growth.

#### 3.3.1. Differences Regarding the Support for Moral Growth Perceived by Early Adolescents

- Boys felt more support from their family (D2\_1: all boys more than all girls; older boys and younger boys more than older girls).
- In their turn, girls believed that friends are most important both as a strategy for moral growth (C2.1\_5: all girls more than all boys; younger girls and older girls more than younger boys and older boys) and as a support for developing character (D2\_3: all girls more than all boys; younger girls and older girls more than younger boys and older boys).

#### 3.3.2. Differences Regarding the Context and Activities Where Early Adolescents Thrive Morally

- Girls believed they work harder both doing their homework (C2.2\_1: all girls more than all boys; younger girls more than younger boys and older boys; older girls more than older boys) and at school (C2.2\_2: all girls more than all boys; younger girls more than younger boys and older boys). Girls were also involved more often in artistic and cultural activities (C2.2\_6: all girls more than all boys; younger girls and older girls more than younger boys and older boys).
- Meanwhile, boys had clearer plans about how to use their spare time (C2.1\_1: all boys more than all girls; older boys more than older girls; younger boys more than younger girls), and they liked more to involve in sports and open-air activities (C2.2\_5: all boys more than all girls; both younger and older boys more than younger girls and older girls).

#### 3.3.3. Differences Regarding the Strategies Early Adolescents Use for Moral Growth

- Boys saw themselves as more passionate and stable about getting good habits (C1\_9: all boys more than all girls; older boys and younger boys more than older girls). Particularly younger boys had a stronger belief that training is necessary for developing character (A1\_5: younger boys more than older boys, younger girls, and older girls).

- In their turn, girls believed more than other groups that moral reasoning is necessary for developing character (A1\_4: all girls more than all boys; older girls more than older boys), and that they try hard to develop their character (C1\_4: all girls more than all boys; older girls more than older boys and younger boys).
- Older girls' particularity was the stress they put on the importance of moral emotions and on their ability to overcome difficulties for moral development (A1\_3 and C1\_10: older girls more than younger girls, older boys, and younger boys), as well as their stronger purposefulness (B: older girls more than younger girls and younger boys).

#### 3.3.4. Differences Not Found Across Gender or Across Age

It is also worthy to note that, differences were not found across gender or across age in some respects:

- There were no differences between younger boys and older boys, nor between younger boys and younger girls in any of the 10 items regarding participants' life experience (C1).
- There were no differences between younger and older participants within the same sex (boys and girls) in any of the 6 items regarding participants' strategies for moral growth (C2\_1).
- There were no differences between younger and older boys in any of the three items regarding the support perceived for moral growth (D2).

## 4. Discussion

This study provided insights on sex-based differences in early adolescents' perceptions of their own moral development, along with some age-based differences. In this section these results are discussed in the context of international research.

As regards participants' perceived support for moral growth, previous studies conducted in the United States (Bokhorst et al., 2010; Rueger et al., 2010) and the Netherlands (de Kemp et al., 2007) have highlighted gender differences in perceived support during early adolescence. Bokhorst et al. (2010) found that girls generally perceive greater support from teachers, classmates, and friends compared to boys, while parental support perceptions were similar for both genders. Similarly, Rueger et al. (2010) reported that girls ranked close friends as their primary source of support, followed by teachers, parents, classmates, and school personnel. In contrast, boys reported the highest levels of support from teachers and parents, with friends, school personnel, and classmates following in descending order. The current study also found that boys felt significantly higher support for moral development from their family than girls. It should be noted that, while girls seem to value peer relationships more and perceive lower family support, this does not mean that girls do not receive support from families, but that they show differing perceptions of support mechanisms. These differences reflect diverse pathways in moral development rather than relative vulnerabilities.

When looking more specifically at parental support, a recent study in the USA found that meaningful interactions with parents during early adolescence have an enduring impact on life satisfaction (Park et al., 2023). Parental support plays a crucial role in both psychological and academic adjustment for both boys and girls (Rueger et al., 2010). However, parental influence appears to be more pronounced for girls in mitigating antisocial behaviour. de Kemp et al. (2007) found that high levels of parental support were linked to lower antisocial tendencies exclusively among girls, suggesting that they may depend more on parental guidance in their moral and behavioural development. It should be noted that, while the general tendencies in the findings of those studies and the present one may be similar, the comparison among them should be done cautiously, given the cultural

differences between their empirical background (USA, the Netherlands and Latvia), and the time distance between the surveys (2007 and 2010 vs. 2022).

Parental support also plays a crucial role for moral growth, as demonstrated by recent studies in several countries. For instance, in the upper Midwestern region of the United States, it was found that there was a link between family attachment and moral strengths: more securely attached children more strongly endorsed interpersonal strengths (fairness, forgiveness, humour, and kindness), temperance strengths (honesty, persistence, and prudence), and the transcendent strength of spirituality (Kerns et al., 2023). Also, in urban areas in Southern-Central Italy, family functioning was also found to be negatively associated with moral disengagement, and a low family functioning together with low conscientiousness increased the risk of bullying (Mazzone & Camodeca, 2019).

The variations in how adolescent boys and girls perceive family support for moral growth found in this study could be shaped by a combination of factors, including parenting styles, cultural values, and broader societal influences, but more research is needed to confirm this hypothesis. In any case, it seems important to strengthen family relationships in adolescence to support their moral growth. In Latvia, as in many other countries around the world, this can be challenging because of the widespread family crisis: e.g., in 2020, Latvia had the highest divorce rates in the European Union (2.7 divorces per 1000 inhabitants), in 2021 there were 414 divorces per 1000 marriages, and in 2022, 45.5% of families had a single parent with one or more minor children (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2022). In this context, establishing a sound and well-functioning family–school collaboration for character education is crucial, also because collaboration with the school can positively impact family relationships (Surikova & Fernández González, 2022).

In this study, girls more than boys perceived friends as a support for developing character and friendships as a key strategy for moral growth. This sex-based difference finding is coherent with previous meta-analysis research, which found that females place high value on loyalty and connection with peers, compared with males (Hall, 2011). Recently, a longitudinal study in the Netherlands also found that growth in prosocial behaviour starts earlier for girls than for boys, and that gender differences increase between early and mid-adolescence (Van der Graaff et al., 2018), which confirms the findings of this study. More recently, research in diverse socio-economic areas of Montreal, Canada, has revealed that girls make bonds with friends earlier than boys, and that, as teenagers, girls talk more openly with their friends than boys do (Miljkovitch et al., 2021), which is in line with the results of this study. The study also shows that older girls rated the school support significantly lower than younger boys and younger girls. This confirms older girls' perception of the dominant role of friendships in their moral development, rather than the role of the school or the family. These findings, as well as the positive association of friend communication to life satisfaction and self-esteem at the age of 13 (Park et al., 2023), suggests the convenience of promoting friendship interventions at school in Latvia, in particular for boys, such as the "FRIEND-SHIP" intervention program (Hassani et al., 2023), which consists of various interactive techniques such as role-playing and arts-based activities, or the "My FRIENDS Youth" programme (Filges et al., 2024), which uses a play-based and experiential learning approach to provide cognitive behavioural skills in a developmentally appropriate manner, using stories, games, videos, and other activities for reducing anxiety symptoms in early adolescents.

The results of this study indicate that girls believed more than boys that moral reasoning is necessary for developing character. This finding resonates with abundant research pointing to the predominance of adolescent girls over boys for making more thoughtful moral judgments (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000; Zulfiqar, 2023), to 11–14-year-old girls' higher scores in moral perception and reasoning compared to males in the UK (Arthur et al., 2015;



Harrison et al., 2020), and to girls' higher levels of their perceived habits and values in Spain's Basque country (Azkarate-Morales et al., 2019) and higher levels of perspective taking than boys (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). Another relevant finding of this study was that older girls stressed more than boys the importance of moral emotions for moral growth. This finding is not consistent with the meta-analysis by Malti and Krettenauer (2013), which did not find gender differences in moral emotions (ages 4–20). However, recent research has found that, in suburban middle schools in Kansas, USA, 13–14-year-old females were higher in empathy when compared with males (Bretl & Goering, 2022), and that, in Northeastern Lithuania, females exhibit higher empathy than males particularly in middle adolescence (Crocetti et al., 2019). In Belgium and the Netherlands, male gender was also found to be strongly related to deficits in affective morality in adolescence (Fragkaki et al., 2016), and, in the Montreal area, Scirocco and Recchia (2022) found that girls made more references to moral emotions in their narratives than boys. While the existence of gender differences in adolescents' moral reasoning and moral emotions is well established in research, this study highlights that there are also gender differences in the way early adolescents perceive the role of emotions and reasoning for their own moral growth, but more research is needed to draw practical educational conclusions based on this finding.

Older girls (13–14-years) participating in this study also stressed more than boys their ability to overcome difficulties for moral development. This finding is not consistent with previous research in northern New England, USA, which found that self-esteem was substantially lower for girls than for boys in late adolescence (Bronstein et al., 2007). However, Hardy et al. (2014) found that, in the western region of the USA, girls had higher levels of moral ideal self than boys, which may be a motivator to overcome difficulties, but more research is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

The finding that girls and younger participants reported higher levels of practice of religious and/or spiritual activities for developing moral character (younger girls scored higher than younger boys, who scored higher than older girls, who scored higher than older boys), is consistent with studies reporting that child's spirituality might decline with age (Hay, 1998; Michaelson et al., 2016), and that irrespective of age, in the Czech Republic, adolescent girls score higher than boys on all spirituality scales (Lee et al., 2019). Given that spirituality is a significant health domain among children and adolescents (Michaelson et al., 2016), these results suggest the convenience of following in Latvia Eade's (2004) advice that educators should consider gendered spirituality while they develop school curriculum and class activities. It should be noted that the formulation of the item "I involve in religious and/or spiritual activities" needs some clarification. Spirituality is a wide concept embracing both religious and non-religious dimensions of people's quest for meaning and connection with the sacred. However, in Latvia, the expression 'spiritual activities' is often narrowly conflated with 'religious activities', because religious Christian values are explicitly mentioned in the preamble to the Constitution as part of the identity of Latvia (Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, 1992), and other non-religious forms of spirituality are less frequent. Therefore, we decided to use the expression 'religious activities', which is more familiar for participants and would facilitate young adolescents' personal engagement with the questionnaire. However, in order to let open the possibility of capturing a wider understanding of spirituality in this item, we decided to add 'and/or spiritual activities', given that the scientific community still often uses the term religiosity/spirituality (e.g., Jeserich et al., 2023).

Summarizing the discussion, the findings reveal distinct patterns regarding how boys and girls perceive the support they receive for moral growth, and the contexts where they thrive morally and the strategies they use for moral development. This research applied the processual model of moral growth (Fernández González & Akrivou, 2024), comprising

four components: (1) beliefs and emotions, (2) status, (3) practices (including (3a) goal-orientation to moral growth, and (3b) plans and areas for moral growth engagement), and (4) selfhood (awareness, satisfaction, and support). The findings showed that boys reported higher levels of perceived support from their families compared to girls (4th component of the model), which points to the relevance of family relationships for boys' moral development. In contrast, girls viewed friendships as essential both as a strategy for moral growth (component 3b) and as support for character development (component 4), highlighting the importance they give to peer relationships during early adolescence. Regarding the contexts in which moral development occurs (component 3b), girls reported higher engagement in academic tasks and cultural activities, which they associated with moral growth. This suggests that educational and cultural settings are critical contexts for girls' moral development. Meanwhile, boys demonstrated a preference for sports and outdoor activities, reflecting alternative developmental contexts that contribute to their moral growth. In terms of strategies for moral growth, girls placed a stronger emphasis on moral reasoning (component 1) and reported working harder on character development (component 3b). Older girls especially highlighted the importance of moral emotions (component 1) and demonstrated greater resilience in overcoming challenges related to moral growth (component 3a). On the other hand, boys appeared more confident in their ability to develop good habits and reported being more passionate about this process (component 3a).

## 5. Conclusions

This study unfolded age- and sex-based differences in young adolescents' perceptions of their moral character development in Latvia, and offers valuable insights into the diverse strategies and environments that adolescents perceive as meaningful for moral growth in Latvia, in particular regarding such relevant issues as the role of friendships and the family, the importance given to moral reasoning and to moral emotions, and the perception of religious and/or spiritual activities. It highlights the importance of tailored support that considers both age and sex differences in early adolescence, which is a critical window for moral growth: parents, as well as teachers as professional moral educators (Tirri, 2023), should be aware of these specificities when considering different possible lines of action (family-school collaboration, and friendship interventions) for providing a personalised, age- and sex-sensitive support to the moral development of early adolescents, given the importance of this key developmental stage. Researchers should also take them into account when designing and conducting research in this field. By addressing the identified limitations and pursuing the suggested future research directions, educators and policymakers can better support the moral growth of all adolescents.

## 6. Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

One of the important methodological limitations of this study is that, for analysing the scales used in the questionnaire, only the alpha coefficient was calculated for each section. A more robust factor analysis would be necessary to identify if all the items belong in each scale, followed by factor score creation and then analysis of variance by demographic characteristics. This will be a future task of this project, using the aggregated data from the three measurements, which will provide more robust data for CFA than the baseline data used in this study.

This study focuses solely on adolescents in Latvia, which may limit the generalisability of findings to other cultural or geographical contexts. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, such as social desirability bias, affecting the accuracy of reported perceptions. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study provides only a snapshot

in time, making it challenging to determine causality or track developmental changes. The study also did not extensively explore the influence of external factors such as socio-economic status, school environment, or community support on moral development. Another limitation of the research is that conflating the terms ‘religious’ and ‘spiritual’ in a single item about youngsters’ involvement does not allow nuancedly capturing on which specific kind of spiritual activity they involved in (religious or non-religious). Finally, as noted above, one of the limits of the discussion is that the existing body of findings from Eastern countries of the cultural–spatial Central Europe (as defined in Jordan, 2005) like Latvia is very scarce (only studies from Lithuania and the Czech Republic were found). It can be expected that future studies in this region would allow for a more tailored contextualisation of the results.

Future research should address these limitations. Longitudinal studies would help explore how perceptions of moral development evolve over time and the long-term impacts of perceived support mechanisms. Expanding the study to include adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds would provide comparative insights and enhance the generalisability of findings. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could offer deeper insights into the reasons behind the observed differences in moral development perceptions. Research should also investigate how socio-economic status, educational environment, and community involvement impact moral development in adolescents. Additionally, designing and testing interventions aimed at strengthening family and peer support systems could provide practical insights into effective strategies for fostering moral development.

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