



Encyclopedia of Human Relationships

Friendships in Childhood

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Human Relationships

Chapter Title: "Friendships in Childhood"

Pub. Date: 2009

Access Date: December 11, 2015

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412958462

Online ISBN: 9781412958479

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412958479.n231>

Print pages: 722-726

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This entry describes friendships in childhood and examines their developmental significance. Most children succeed in forming these relationships, although about 10 percent fail to do so. Enormous differences exist in the number of these relationships that children have, the traits that characterize friends, and the texture of these relationships. Friendships also change in important ways from their earliest manifestations on through childhood and into adolescence even though certain features remain constant.

Social reciprocity and mutuality are central to the meaning of friendships for almost everyone. Sometimes these reciprocities consist of equivalence in resource exchanges; mostly, however, “giving-and-taking” in a broader sense undergirds the attraction that exists between friends both in childhood and adulthood. The most significant age changes observed in childhood occur in the individual's awareness and understanding of these reciprocities and their implications. Cognitive and affective representations of friendship change considerably, but the underlying meaning structure, based in reciprocity, remains constant.

Aspects of Friendship in Childhood Incidence

Infants and toddlers sometimes show preferences for one another, seeking out other youngsters who have been more-or-less regularly responsive to them. These preferences are revealed in the time that children spend with particular playmates and are not especially nuanced linguistically or affectively. Young children are known to be less fearful of strange situations in the company of a familiar peer rather than an unfamiliar one, but familiarity is not equivalent to friendship.

The word *friend* usually appears in the third or fourth year, and sometimes preschool-aged children miss their friends when they are absent or talked about. Usually, friendship is defined by the young child in terms of concrete reciprocities (“We play”) and, during the preschool years, approximately 75 percent have preferred playmates. Play, indeed, is the main content of the interaction between friends at this age, and the proportion of the child's time spent with specific partners is a good index to use in identifying these relationships. The number of children possessing these relationships rises during middle childhood when about 85 percent have a best friend and several good friends.

Friendship networks consisting of children and their friends are relatively small during early childhood (approximately 1.7 and .9 for boys and girls, respectively) becoming somewhat larger in middle childhood (3.0 to 5.0, depending on whether unreciprocated choices are included). Amount of time spent with friends increases until adolescence, when about 30 percent of time awake is spent with these associates.

Gender

Children's friendships are gender concordant. About 30 percent of preschool children's friends are other-sex, but this percentage declines through middle childhood reaching 5 percent and rising again in adolescence when about 25 percent of teenagers' friendship networks become mixed-sex. Other-sex friends are likely to be “secondary” rather than “best friends” throughout childhood. Girls have a higher proportion of other-

sex friends than boys do, and the other-sex friends of girls are likely to be older than themselves whereas the opposite is the case for boys.

Boys and girls do not differ in the proportion of children who have friends. Every observer knows, however, that the activities of boys with their friends are different from the activities of girls with theirs. During middle childhood, intimacy is a much greater concern in girls' talk about their friends than in boys' talk. Self-ratings of their friendships by girls are more intimate than are those of boys and self-disclosure is more common. At the same time, girls employ relational aggression (including threats to terminate these relationships) more frequently than boys do. Children of both sexes understand these differences. Little is known, however, about intimacy in friendship interaction that is based in camaraderie and shared mastery.

Friendship Expectations

Friendship expectations differ from expectations about other relationships: Preschool-aged children recognize differences in social power between themselves and their parents, for example, but do not expect power differences to exist between themselves and their friends. Friends are not expected to be the help-givers that parents are, or to provoke conflict as frequently as siblings do. Companionship and intimacy are expected of one's friends, rather than compliance and conflict. Refinements in these basic differentiations among relationships occur through middle childhood into adolescence.

Friendships are understood by children to be based in symmetric reciprocity at all ages although differences emerge in the amount, complexity, and organization of information and ideas about these relationships. Among young children, friendship expectations emphasize common interests and concrete reciprocities that occur mostly in play. Older children describe friends as sharing values and rules about loyalty and trust; friends also expect to spend time with one another and to engage in constructive conflict resolution. Adolescent friends expect shared interests, understanding, empathy, and intimacy with friends; similarity between oneself and one's friends is increasingly important.

These changes in friendship expectations during childhood are correlated with certain aspects of cognitive development, including the number of constructs children can apply to a relationship and their complexity; some writers have also linked changes in friendship expectations to changes in perspective taking that occur during childhood. Whatever the case, older children and adolescents perceive and think about these relationships in nuanced ways even though symmetrical reciprocities remain their major basis.

Behavior with Friends

In most instances, children have to be in the same place at the same time to become friends. However, propinquity does not guarantee the formation of a relationship, and initial encounters between children are largely devoted to establishing common ground or its absence. "Hitting it off" may require short or longer periods, but once this happens, communication is more connected, conflicts are managed more successfully, attention is drawn to similarities between the nascent friends, and, especially among girls, self-disclosure increases. Should common interests not be maintained after this "build up" period, relevant information must be exchanged again, much as in first

encounters. Continued consensual validation and commitment are required for friendships to be maintained over the long haul.

Both preschool- and school-aged children spend more time with their friends than with other associates. Social exchanges of friends and nonfriends differ in four ways: *positive engagement* (friends talk, smile, and laugh together more than non-friends do); *task-related activity* (friends orient to the task at hand more extensively and spend more time on-task than nonfriends); *mutuality* (friends affirm one another more and exhibit greater mutuality and attention to reciprocity in their partners than nonfriends); and *conflict management* (while exhibiting as many conflicts with one another as nonfriends do, friends use disengagement and negotiation more frequently and use power assertion to a lesser extent). The mutuality and symmetry existing in the social exchanges between friends are reasons for suggesting that reciprocity is the sine qua non for these relationships during the first two decades of life.

Similarities between Friends

Given the common ground that brings friends together, one would expect friends to be similar to one another in a variety of ways. Not surprisingly, then, the probability that two young children will be attracted to one another has been shown to vary according to the number of behavioral attributes they share. Also, children who are strangers initially are attracted to one another when their cognitive and play styles are similar rather than different. Actually, children are likely to dislike other children who are different from themselves. Similarities, not “opposites,” attract.

Children and their friends resemble one another closely in age, gender, ethnicity, and sociometric status (how well other children like them). Behavioral concordances can be detected among preschool-aged friends, and these grow more extensive through middle childhood. School-aged friends, compared with nonfriends, are more like one another in prosocial behavior, antisocial behavior, shyness-dependency, depression, popularity, and achievement. Friends also share biases in their perceptions of people and relationships: For example, when friends rate their classmates on aggression or shyness, their ratings are more alike than classmate ratings made by nonfriends. Considerable variability occurs, however, in the similarities existing across these behavioral domains as well as within them.

Children are similar to their friends for a variety of reasons. First, children from the same neighborhood are likely to be more similar to one another than are children from different neighborhoods; socialization histories are also likely to be more similar. Second, children are attracted to others like themselves because of the reinforcing properties that similarity seems to encompass. Children then sort themselves out by a somewhat disorganized process that is informally called “shopping” and formally called “selection.”

Friendship similarities also derive from mutual socialization; that is, children become more alike because of their interaction over time. The extent to which selection and socialization, respectively, contribute to friendship similarity depends, however, on characteristics of the children themselves (which derive from their genetic makeup as well as their social histories), their interaction with one another, and which behavioral characteristics are being measured. For example, the genetically mediated expression of physical aggression, but not social aggression, is stronger among children who have

physically aggressive friends compared with children whose friends are not physically aggressive.

Friendship Variations

Having Friends

Correlational studies show that children who have friends, in contrast to those who are without friends, enjoy better psychosocial adjustment; they are more sociable, more cooperative, more altruistic, less aggressive and impulsive, and less lonely. In most studies, “having friends” means having “good” friends or “compatible” friends even though not all friendships are harmonious. It is thus somewhat difficult to argue that merely having a friend, disregarding the nature of the relationship, facilitates good adjustment. Nevertheless, merely having friends is an indicator in longitudinal studies of good later outcomes: having positive feelings about oneself and one's family as well as having a romantic partner in adolescence and being relatively free of depression. Most investigators interpret these findings to mean that the complex reciprocities experienced with a friend during childhood promote the kinds of social competence that make one a desirable companion later on. Disharmony between friends attenuates these benefits but, overall, childhood friendships appear to facilitate good adjustment—both at the moment and later.

Friendship Stability

Children change friends with some regularity, although childhood friendships last longer than is commonly believed. Nursery school children often maintain friendships for many months and stability increases through adolescence, at which time about 70 percent of individuals report that their friendships last a year or more. By the end of middle childhood, it is not uncommon to find children reporting friendships that have lasted between 1 and 5 years. Friendship stability, however, depends on a number of conditions. For example, relationships between aggressive, antisocial children are more unstable than are relationships between nonaggressive children. Other psychosocial difficulties are associated with friendship instability, too, probably resulting from the children's limited capacities to regulate emotion and other deficits in social skill.

Friendship stability also has implications for the child's social adaptation. For example, school-age children who have friendships that last through a school year show greater improvement in attitudes toward school and greater improvement in other school-related behaviors than do children with less stable friendships. Other implications of friendship stability vary according to the children involved. Stable friendships among children who have conduct problems increases children's own behavior problems. In contrast, friendships with shy or withdrawn children seem not to affect a child's own social withdrawal. The developmental implications of friendship stability thus differ according to the behavior being measured and aspects of the children's relationships with one another.

Who the Partner Is

Childhood friends enhance social adaptation when one's partners are socially competent but are developmental risks when partners evince poor adaptation. Examples: When friends are aggressive and antisocial, children become more aggressive over time, especially those who are disposed toward aggression and who

perceive themselves as socially rejected. When children have friends and these friends are socially well-adjusted, marital disruption has fewer effects than otherwise. Finally, social adjustment improves after school transitions when friends are well-adjusted, but otherwise not.

Partner effects are not well understood. Modeling and reinforcement during interaction with friends may be responsible for some of these effects; poorly adjusted partners do not model “competence” as consistently as do better adjusted ones and may not provide social rewards for competence behaviors as regularly. In many instances, conversations also seem to be powerful mechanisms for behavior change within friendships, especially when these conversations are persuasive. Aggressive children and their friends, for example, entice one another into “deviant talk,” in which rule-breaking and other aggressive activities are discussed much more frequently than nonaggressive friends discuss them. Conversations between aggressive friends also contain more conflict and aggression than the conversations of less aggressive friends. Other observations show that increased depression is sometimes an outcome when childhood friends spend inordinate amounts of time “co-ruminating,” that is, talking endlessly and intensely about issues rather than letting them drop after a reasonable period. Developmental contexts thus differ for children according to who their partners are, and these differences are related to behavior change.

Friendship Quality

Friendships in childhood vary in their structural and affective qualities, and these variations are significant for adaptation. Some friendships are warm, intimate, and supportive; others are rife with conflict, relational aggression, and other disharmonies. The outcomes of friendship experience are now known to vary according to these differences, not merely according to whether a child has friends. Supportive, intimate friendship relations—at least in middle childhood—are associated with sociability, good social reputations, popularity, and avoidance of aggression. “Prosocial friendships” are linked to school achievement as well as to popularity, whereas “antisocial friendships” are linked to peer rejection and delinquency, and “socially withdrawn” friendships are associated with low self-esteem, peer rejection, and depression.

Linkages such as these are moderated by other conditions—sometimes according to other aspects of the friendship experience and sometimes according to characteristics of the child himself or herself. For example, the positive outcomes of supportive friendships (mentioned earlier) occur mainly when friendships are stable rather than unstable. In addition, disharmony in friendship relations increases aggression in children over time, but mainly when friendships are not harmonious to begin with. Although the affective and behavioral qualities of children's friendships may be clearly related to behavior changes over time, the magnitude of these effects is often moderated by other conditions.

Developmental Implications

Family relationships in earliest childhood set the stage and carry forward to relationships that children have with their peers. The sensitivity of early caregiving and the security of early attachments are both antecedents of harmony, responsiveness, and competence in peer interaction during childhood and beyond. Linkages between

family relationships and friendship, however, are less direct: Good family relations in the earliest years do not ordinarily predict friendship functioning in either early or middle childhood. Rather, the peer competence that is linked to early family relationships predicts having friends and friendship functioning in childhood. Friendships, in turn, predict individual differences in romantic relations in adolescence. These mediated trajectories have been observed in several studies and illustrate the complexity with which family relationships, friendships, and even romantic relationships are intertwined in human development. The development of antisocial behavior in children shows a similar progression. Coercive mother-child relations lead to aggressive behavior during childhood, both at home and outside; aggressive children, in turn, affiliate with other aggressive children, including those who may be regarded as friends; having aggressive friends, in turn, predicts increases in aggression and antisocial behavior as well as delinquency in early adolescence.

One exception to these developmental scenarios concerns sibling relationships. Although these relationships are sometimes thought to presage peer functioning, the evidence suggests otherwise. Although “only” children are more likely to conjure imaginary friends than are those who have siblings (suggesting some strong need for companionship in early childhood), no consistent pattern has been found in either social or cognitive development that differentiates children with siblings from those who do not have them. Sibling relationships and friendships are, rather, quite different social contexts—especially as related to conflict. Conflicts with siblings are more intense and aggressive than are those between friends and less likely to be resolved with negotiation and conciliation. Children themselves recognize these differences.

Finally, friendships in childhood “buffer” children from family vulnerabilities and stress. For example, well-functioning friendships, as contrasted to poorly functioning ones, are linked to better social outcomes for children from dysfunctional families; few benefits are evinced, however, for children from good family environments. Once again, the developmental significance of childhood friendships is revealed in interaction effects rather than direct linkages.

Conclusion

Friendships in childhood are commonplace, and what children think and expect of them, as well as certain social interactions that distinguish them, have been identified. Yet these relationships are not all alike; considerable variation exists in how many friends children have, what partners are like, and what social and affective qualities characterize the relationships themselves. Although general conclusions can be drawn about children's friendships and their dynamics, developmental significance can only be inferred by considering these variations as they occur over relatively long periods.

- friendship
- friendships in childhood
- friends
- children
- reciprocity
- childhood
- aggression

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412958479.n231>

See also

- [Children's Peer Groups](#)
- [Friendship, Conflict and Dissolution](#)
- [Friendship Formation and Development](#)
- [Friendships, Sex Differences and Similarities](#)
- [Friendships in Adolescence](#)
- [Life-Span Development and Relationships](#)
- [Sibling Relationships](#)

Further Readings

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