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Current Directions in Psychological Science 2002 11: 7

DOI: 10.1111/1467-8721.00157

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Friendship Quality and Social Development

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Abstract

A high-quality friendship is characterized by high levels of prosocial behavior, intimacy, and other positive features, and low levels of conflicts, rivalry, and other negative features. Friendship quality has been assumed to have direct effects on many aspects of children's social development, including their self-esteem and social adjustment. Recent research suggests, however, that friendship quality affects primarily children's success in the social world of peers. Friendship quality could also have indirect effects, by magnifying or diminishing the influence of friends on each other's attitudes and behaviors. Having high-quality friendships may lessen children's tendencies to imitate the behavior of shy and withdrawn friends, but little evidence supports the hypothesis that high-quality friendships magnify friends' influence.

Keywords

friendship; social development; peer influence; self-esteem

Do good friendships enhance children's social development? What if those good friendships are with bad friends, friends who often misbehave in school or show other signs of poor social or psychological adjustment? Do good friendships with friends like those have a positive or a negative influence on children?

Similar questions about the effects of friends and friendships have been discussed in theoretical writings for decades. Only in recent years, however, have answers to the questions begun to emerge from empirical research. The recent advances have resulted in part from researchers' success in defining, conceptually and operationally, what a good friendship is. In much of the literature, good friendships are now defined as friendships high in quality (e.g., Berndt, 1996).

High-quality friendships may enhance children's development regardless of the characteristics of those friends. Research on this hypothesis can be described as examining the direct effects of friendship quality. But another possibility is that friendship quality most often has indirect effects on children, effects that depend on the friends' characteristics. For example, when friendships are high in quality, the influence of the friends' characteristics may be magnified. I review evidence for both types of effects in this article, but it is necessary to begin by defining the construct of friendship quality more precisely.

A DEFINITION OF FRIENDSHIP QUALITY

The old proverb says, "A friend in need is a friend indeed." That is, friends help and share with each other. Children agree with adults that these types of prosocial behavior are expected among friends. Children also agree with adults that good friends praise each other's

successes and encourage each other after failures, thereby bolstering each other's self-esteem.

Some features of high-quality friendships are recognized by adolescents but not by young children. Adolescents often say that best friends tell each other everything, or disclose their most personal thoughts and feelings. These personal self-disclosures are the hallmark of an intimate friendship. Adolescents also say that friends will stick up for one another in a fight, demonstrating their loyalty.

A few researchers have described various positive features of good friendships, including prosocial behavior, self-esteem support, intimacy, loyalty, plus others, and investigated the associations between these features by asking questions assessing them. For example, to assess intimacy, researchers have asked children how often they tell a particular friend things about themselves that they would not tell most other people (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). Such research has found that children who say that their friendship has a high level of one positive feature, such as intimacy, typically say that their friendship is high in all other positive features. These results suggest that all positive features are linked to a single dimension of friendship quality.

Even best friendships can have negative features. Most children admit that best friends sometimes have conflicts with each other. In addition, children typically think of themselves as equal to their friends, but equality can be more an ideal than a reality. Children sometimes say that their friends try to boss them around, or dominate them. Children say that their friends "try to prove they're better than me," or engage in rivalry. When asked about actual friendships, children usually report the co-occurrence of conflicts, dominance attempts, and rivalry. Thus, all negative features

seem to be linked to a single dimension of friendship quality. Scores on this negative dimension are only weakly correlated with those on the positive dimension (Berndt, 1996), so both dimensions must be considered when defining the quality of a friendship.

DIRECT EFFECTS OF FRIENDSHIP QUALITY

Most writers on friendship have assumed that high-quality friendships have positive effects on children: fostering their self-esteem, improving their social adjustment, and increasing their ability to cope with stressors (see Hartup & Stevens, 1999). Moreover, the correlations of friendship quality with indicators of social adjustment are consistent with that assumption. For example, among early adolescents, having friendships with more positive features correlates with greater involvement in school, higher self-perceived social acceptance, and higher general self-esteem (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Keefe & Berndt, 1996).

Still, a significant correlation between two variables is only weak evidence that one affects the other. To test hypotheses about the effects of friendship quality more conclusively, researchers have assessed children's friendships and their adjustment on two or more occasions months or years apart (e.g., Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996). Then the researchers have examined whether the quality of children's friendships on the first occasion predicted the changes over time in their adjustment. If so, the researchers tentatively have concluded that friendship quality affected the changes in children's adjustment.

In one study of this type (Ladd et al., 1996), kindergarten children who had high-quality friendships in January of the school year im-

proved by the following May in their liking for school and in their perceptions of their classmates' support. In another study (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999), classmates rated students' sociability and leadership in sixth grade and again in seventh grade. Students whose sixth-grade friendships were high in positive features improved between sixth and seventh grade in peer-rated sociability and leadership, but only if their sixth-grade friendships were stable over time. These findings are consistent with hypotheses about the direct effects of high-quality friendships, but other data are not. In one study (Berndt et al., 1999), my colleagues and I found that friendship quality did not significantly affect the changes over time in students' general self-esteem. In three earlier longitudinal studies (see Keefe & Berndt, 1996), friendship quality also was not significantly related to changes in general self-esteem. These data cast doubt on the hypothesis that good friendships enhance children's self-esteem. Stated more strongly, the repeated failures to confirm the hypothesis that high-quality friendships increase children's self-esteem suggest a need for less sweeping and more specific hypotheses about the benefits of good friendships.

One possibility is that friendships high in positive features affect primarily children's success in the social world of peers. Thus, good friendships can improve children's views of their classmates and improve their classmates' views of them. A speculative explanation for these effects can also be offered. Having a few good friendships may help children make positive contacts with several other classmates. Those positive contacts may then lead to positive relationships that are not as close as best friendships but that affect the children's attitudes toward their classmates and vice versa.

The effects of negative friendship features have also been examined. In one study (Ladd et al., 1996), kindergarten boys who had many conflicts with friends in the middle of a school year exhibited a decrease by the end of the year in liking for school and engagement in classroom activities, but an increase in loneliness. In another study (Berndt & Keefe, 1995), seventh graders whose friendships were high in negative features in the fall of a year reported increased disruptive behavior at school the following spring. Moreover, those students whose friendships were also high in positive features reported the greatest increase in disruptive behavior.

One possible explanation of these findings focuses on the likely effects of negative interactions between friends. Friends who frequently get into conflicts with each other, or who often try to dominate or assert their superiority over one another, are practicing a repertoire of negative social behaviors that may generalize to interactions with other peers and adults. Moreover, the closer a friendship is, the more the friends interact and the more frequently they practice their negative social repertoire. Naturally, the students' negative behaviors provoke negative reactions from classmates and teachers. Those negative reactions encourage the students to disengage from classmates and classroom activities, to feel more lonely, and to like school less.

These explanations are only possibilities because the recent longitudinal studies do not provide evidence on the processes responsible for the effects of friendship quality. Examining these processes must be a major goal of future research (Hartup, 1999). Information about processes would be especially valuable as researchers seek to replace theories about the general effects of friendship quality with the-

ories that explain the effects of each dimension of friendship quality on specific aspects of social development.

INDIRECT EFFECTS OF FRIENDSHIP QUALITY

For decades, researchers from a variety of disciplines have tested the hypothesis that children and adolescents are influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of their peers. Not all studies have provided support for the hypothesis, but the available data convincingly show that close friends influence many facets of children's and adolescents' social behavior and adjustment (Collins & Laursen, 1999). In most studies, researchers have not assessed the quality of the friendships among the peers who were influencing one another. But when the issue has been raised, researchers have often suggested that the magnitude of friends' influence should be affected by the quality of their friendships. In this way, friendship quality can have an indirect effect on children's social development—affecting how much children are influenced by their friends' characteristics.

For example, according to the differential-association theory of delinquent behavior, adolescents who spend time with delinquent friends are expected to commit delinquent acts themselves (see Agnew, 1991). Moreover, delinquent friends are assumed to have more influence the more positive the relationships with those friends are. That is, having high-quality friendships with delinquent friends is assumed to increase the influence of those friends, thereby increasing the degree to which adolescents become like their friends over time.

Many other theories include the hypothesis that friends' influence is magnified when friendships are

higher in quality (see Berndt, 1999). For example, social learning theory suggests that observational learning from friends is enhanced when friends have more positive relationships. Other theories suggest that friends' influence should be greater the more friends trust each other, and trust is another facet of the positive dimension of friendship quality.

Given the plausibility of the hypothesis about the magnifying effect of friendship quality, the scarcity of evidence for it is surprising. Some evidence consistent with the hypothesis was obtained in one longitudinal study of adolescents' delinquent behavior (Agnew, 1991). Among all the adolescents whose friends engaged in serious delinquent acts, only those who were closely attached to those friends became more seriously delinquent themselves. However, the comparable effect of attachment to friends who engaged in minor delinquency was nonsignificant. Other studies have yielded equally equivocal support for the hypothesis (Berndt et al., 1999), or no support at all (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Poulin, Dishion, & Haas, 1999). In short, the general hypothesis that high friendship quality magnifies friends' influence must currently be viewed as doubtful.

Under certain conditions, having high-quality friendships may lessen rather than magnify friends' influence on each other. Consider, in particular, children who have good friendships with peers who are shy and withdrawn. Would those friendships increase the children's tendencies to imitate their friends' shy and withdrawn behavior? Alternatively, would those friendships enhance children's confidence in social situations and make them less prone to social withdrawal?

These questions were addressed in a longitudinal study of early adolescents whose shyness

and social withdrawal were judged by their classmates (Berndt et al., 1999). Adolescents whose friends showed above-average shyness and withdrawal became more shy and withdrawn themselves over time only if those friendships were average or low in quality. Having shy and withdrawn friends did not influence changes in students' shyness and withdrawal when those friendships were high in quality. Apparently, the support that the students received from their friends offset any tendencies to imitate the friends' patterns of social behavior.

The hypothesis that variations in friendship quality affect the magnitude of friends' influence on each other can be evaluated only in studies that include measures of friends' characteristics and of friendship quality. Unfortunately, researchers interested in exploring the benefits of friendships have seldom examined what those friends are like, and researchers interested in exploring friends' influence have seldom examined the types of relationships those friends have. Consequently, the evidence necessary for answering questions about indirect effects is very limited. This gap in the literature creates serious problems, because researchers may misjudge either the effects of friendship quality or the influence of friends by not exploring how friends' influence is moderated by friendship quality.

Understanding of indirect effects would increase if researchers more often probed the processes responsible for those effects (Hartup, 1999). Typically, researchers use interviews or questionnaires to assess friendship quality and the characteristics of children and their friends, without ever seeing how the friends behave toward each other. But a few researchers have shown that rich and compelling data can be obtained by observing the social interactions between

friends (e.g., Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995). These observations can reveal both the features of children's friendships and the relations of those features to the friends' influence on each other. Such observational studies can be a valuable complement to interview-questionnaire studies. When used in combination, the two research strategies should greatly expand knowledge about the indirect effects of friendship quality and the processes responsible for those effects.

CONCLUSIONS

Children prize friendships that are high in prosocial behavior, intimacy, and other positive features. Children are troubled by friendships that are high in conflicts, dominance, rivalry, and other negative features. Friendships are high in quality when they have high levels of positive features and low levels of negative features.

High-quality friendships have often been assumed to have positive effects on many aspects of children's social development. However, the direct effects of friendship quality appear to be quite specific. Having friendships high in negative features increases disagreeable and disruptive behaviors, probably because the interactional style that children practice with friends generalizes to interactions with other peers and adults. Having friendships high in positive features enhances children's success in the social world of peers, but it apparently does not affect children's general self-esteem. These findings are surprising because numerous studies with adults suggest that friendships and other supportive relationships enhance many aspects of adults' physical and mental health, including their self-esteem (e.g., Uchino,

Uno, & Holt-Lunstad, 1999). If future research confirms that friendship quality has only narrow and specific effects in childhood but has broad and general effects in adulthood, the reasons for this difference should be thoroughly explored.

High-quality friendships may also have indirect effects on children's social development. Most theories of social influence include some form of the hypothesis that children are more strongly influenced by their friends' characteristics the higher the quality of those friendships. An alarming corollary of this hypothesis is that good friendships with bad friends (e.g., friends with poor social or psychological adjustment) should have especially negative effects on children's behavior and development. However, recent research provides equivocal support for this hypothesis. Often, the influence of friends' characteristics has varied little with the quality of these friendships.

More extensive tests of this hypothesis are necessary, for both theoretical and practical reasons. If the hypothesis is not supported in future research, most theories of social influence in childhood will need to be reevaluated. By contrast, if future studies do support the hypothesis, interventions to improve children's friendships will need to be carefully designed to ensure that they do not inadvertently magnify the negative influence of poorly adjusted friends. More generally, a fuller understanding of the joint effects of friendship quality and friends' characteristics will be crucial for enhancing the positive contributions of friendships to children's social development.

Recommended Reading

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