

# Friendships and Adaptation Across the Life Span

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## Abstract

Friends foster self-esteem and a sense of well-being, socialize one another, and support one another in coping with developmental transitions and life stress. Friends engage in different activities with one another across the life span, but friendship is conceived similarly by children and adults. Friends and friendships, however, are not all alike. The developmental significance of having friends depends on the characteristics of the friends, especially whether the friends are antisocial or socially withdrawn. Outcomes also depend on whether friendships are supportive and intimate or fractious and unstable. Among both children and adults, friendships have clear-cut developmental benefits at times but are mixed blessings at other times.

## Keywords

friendships; life-span development; relationships

Friendships are important to the well-being of both children and adults. Parents worry if their children do not have friends; adolescents are anxious and upset when they lose their friends; and older adults go to considerable lengths to maintain old friendships and establish new ones. People who have friends generally feel better about themselves and others than do people who do not have friends.

Recent studies, however, show that over the life span, the dynamics of friendship are complicated. These relationships sometimes contain a "dark side," and in these instances, developmental benefits are mixed.

In this report, we begin by showing that understanding friendships across the life span requires thinking about these relationships from two perspectives: It is necessary to consider, first, what friendships mean to both children and adults and, second, what distinctive patterns of social interaction characterize friendships. We then suggest that, in order to appreciate the significance of friends over the life span, one must take into account (a) whether a person does or does not have friends, (b) characteristics of the person's friends, and (c) the quality of these relationships.

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT FRIENDSHIPS IN LIFE-SPAN PERSPECTIVE

The significance of friendship across the life span can be established only by examining what children and adults believe to be the social meaning (essence) of these relationships, as well as the social exchanges they actually have with their friends. When researchers examine what people believe friendships to be, or what elements constitute a friendship, reciprocity is always involved. Friends may or may not share likes and dislikes, but there is always the sense that one supports and sus-

tains one's friends and receives support in return. Most people do not describe the relation between friends narrowly as *quid pro quo*, but rather describe the relationship broadly as *mutuality*—that is, friendship involves social giving and taking, and returning in kind or degree. Children, adolescents, newlyweds, middle-aged adults, and soon-to-be retirees differ relatively little from one another in their emphasis on these reciprocities when asked to describe an ideal friend (Weiss & Lowenthal, 1975). Older people describe their friendships more elaborately and with greater subtlety than children do, but then older people generally describe other persons in more complex terms than younger persons do. Consequently, we can assert that the meaning structure specifying friendships changes relatively little from the preschool years through old age; social reciprocities are emphasized throughout the life span (Hartup & Stevens, 1997).

The actual exchanges that occur between friends change greatly with age. Social reciprocities between toddlers are reflected in the time they spend together and the connectedness of their interaction; reciprocities between kindergartners are more elaborated but remain basically concrete ("We play"). Among adolescents, friends engage in common activities (mainly socializing) and social disclosure; among young adults, friendships become "fused" or "blended" with work and parenting. Among older persons, friendships are separated from work once again and centered on support and companionship. The behavioral structures associated with friendship thus change greatly across the life span, generally in accordance with the distinctive tasks or challenges that confront persons at different ages.

## HAVING FRIENDS

### Occurrence

As early as age 3 or 4, children show preferences for interacting with particular children, and the word "friend" enters their vocabularies. About 75% of preschool-aged children are involved in mutual friendships as identified by mothers or nursery school teachers or measured in terms of the time the children spend together. Mutual friends among school-aged children and older persons are usually identified by asking individuals to name their "best friends," "good friends," or "casual friends," categories differentiated in terms of time spent together and intimacy. Among teenagers, 80% to 90% report having mutual friends, usually including one or two best friends and several good friends. The proportion of people who have friends remains high through adulthood, then declines in old age. More older persons, however, have friends than do not. Small numbers of individuals, about 7%, have no friends in adulthood; after age 65, this friendless group increases to 12% for women and 24% for men.

Friendship networks vary in size according to age and sex. During the nursery school years, boys have an average of two friends, whereas girls have one; during the school years, the number of best friends varies from three to five. Girls' networks are usually smaller and more exclusive than boys' during childhood; this situation reverses, however, in adolescence. Number of friends remains fairly constant through adolescence and early adulthood. Newlyweds have the largest numbers of friends, with fewer friendships being maintained during middle age. Friendship networks increase again before retirement, but a decline oc-

curs following retirement, owing primarily to the loss of casual friends. Close friendships, however, are frequently retained into old, old age (Hartup & Stevens, 1997).

The amount of time spent with friends is greatest during middle childhood and adolescence; in fact, teenagers spend almost a third of their waking time in the company of friends. The percentage of time spent with friends declines until middle age, when adults spend less than 10% of their time with friends. A slight increase occurs at retirement, although it is not as great as one might expect (Larson, Zuzanek, & Mannell, 1985).

### Behavior With Friends and Nonfriends

More positive engagement (i.e., more talk, smiling, and laughter) is observed among friends than among nonfriends in childhood and adolescence. Friends also have more effective conflict management and a more mutual orientation when working together (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Differences in behavior between friends and mere acquaintances are similar in adulthood: Self-disclosure occurs more frequently and involves more depth of disclosure among friends than nonfriends; friends are more directive and authoritative with one another than nonfriends.

Companionship and talk continue to distinguish interactions between friends in middle and old age. Sharing, exchange of resources, and emotional support remain salient, especially during crises, such as divorce. Problem solving involves more symmetrical interaction between friends than between nonfriends; conflicts are more effectively managed. Adults' conflicts with friends center on differences in values and beliefs, as well as lifestyle. Conflicts between older friends mainly concern ex-

pectations related to age and resource inequities.

### Developmental Significance

From early childhood through old age, people with friends have a greater sense of well-being than people without friends. Friendlessness is more common among people who seek clinical assistance for emotional and behavioral problems than among better adjusted persons (Rutter & Garmezy, 1983). But these results mean relatively little: They do not clarify whether friends contribute to well-being or whether people who feel good about themselves have an easier time making friends than those who do not.

Longitudinal studies show that children entering first grade have better school attitudes if they already have friends and are successful both in keeping old ones and making new ones (Ladd, 1990). Similarly, among adolescents, psychological disturbances are fewer when school changes (e.g., from grade to grade or from primary school to middle school) occur in the company of friends than when they do not (Berndt & Keefe, 1992). Once again, the direction of influence is not clear: Does merely having friends support successful coping with these transitions, or are those people who are better able to cope with these transitions also able to make friends more easily?

Despite these difficulties in interpretation, well-controlled longer term studies extending from childhood into adulthood show similar patterns, thereby strengthening the conclusion that friendships are in some way responsible for the outcome. Self-esteem is greater among young adults who had friends while they were children than among those who did not, when differences in childhood self-esteem are controlled for statistically.

Social adjustment in adulthood, however, is more closely related to having been generally liked or disliked by classmates than to having had mutual friends (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998).

### CHARACTERISTICS OF ONE'S FRIENDS

Although friends may support positive developmental outcomes through companionship and social support, these outcomes depend on who one's friends are. Friendships with socially well-adjusted persons are like money in the bank, "social capital" that can be drawn upon to meet challenges and crises arising every day. In contrast, poorly adjusted friends may be a drain on resources, increasing one's risk of poor developmental outcomes.

Children of divorce illustrate these dynamics: Preadolescents, adolescents, and young adults whose parents have divorced are at roughly three times the risk for psychosocial problems as their peers whose parents are not divorced. Preadolescents who have positive relationships with both custodial and noncustodial parents have a significantly reduced risk if the parents are well-adjusted; friends do not provide the same protection. In contrast, resilience among adolescents whose parents are divorced is influenced by friends as well as family. Specifically, adolescent children of divorce are more resilient (better adapted) if they have both family and friends who have few behavior problems and who are socially mature. Friends continue to promote resilience among the offspring of divorce during early adulthood, but again friends provide this benefit only if they are well-adjusted themselves (Hetherington, in press). Two conclusions can be

drawn: First, social capital does not reside merely in having friends, but rather resides in having socially competent friends; and second, whether friends are a protective factor in social development depends on one's age.

Research indicates that the role of friendships as a risk factor also depends on one's age. Friendship risks are especially evident among antisocial children and adolescents. First, antisocial children are more likely to have antisocial friends than other children. Second, antisocial behavior increases as a consequence of associating with antisocial friends. Antisocial children have poor social skills and thus are not good models. Relationships between antisocial children are also problematic: Interactions are more contentious and conflict-ridden, more marked by talk about deviance and talk that is deviant in its social context (e.g., swearing), and more lacking in intimacy than exchanges between nonaggressive children (Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995). Other studies show that behavior problems increase across the transition from childhood to adolescence when children have stable relationships with friends who have behavior problems themselves (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, in press).

### FRIENDSHIP QUALITY

Friendships are not all alike. Some are marked by intimacy and social support, others by conflict and contention. Some friends engage in many different activities, others share narrower interests. Some friendships are relatively stable, others are not. These features of friendship differentiate relationships among both children and adolescents, and define some of the ways that relationships differ from one another among adults.

Friendship quality is related to the psychological well-being of children and adolescents and to the manner in which they manage stressful life events. During the transition from elementary to secondary school, for example, sociability and leadership increase among adolescents who have stable, supportive, and intimate friendships, but decline or do not change among other adolescents. Similarly, social withdrawal increases among students with unstable, poor-quality friendships, but not among students who have supportive and intimate friendships (Berndt et al., in press).

Friendship quality contributes to antisocial behavior and its development. Conflict-ridden and contentious relationships are associated with increases in delinquent behavior during adolescence, especially among young people with histories of troublesome behavior; increases in delinquent behavior are smaller for youngsters who have supportive and intimate friends (Poulin, Dishion, & Haas, in press). Friendship quality is also important to the adaptation of young women from divorced families: Those who have supportive and intimate friendships tend to be resilient, but those who have non-supportive friendships tend not to be resilient (Hetherington, in press).

Among older adults, support from friends also compensates for missing relationships (e.g., partners). Emotional support and receiving assistance from friends are among the most important protections against loneliness for persons without partners (Dykstra, 1995). There may be two sides to this coin, however: Older widows with "problematic" social ties (e.g., widows with friends who break promises, invade their privacy, and take advantage of them) have lower psychological well-being than widows whose social ties are not prob-

lematic (Rook, 1984). In other words, the absence of problematic qualities in these relationships may be as important as the presence of positive qualities.

## CONCLUSION

Friendships are developmentally significant across the life span. The meaning assigned to these relationships changes relatively little with age, although the behavioral exchanges between friends reflect the ages of the individuals involved. Whether friendships are developmental assets or liabilities depends on several conditions, especially the characteristics of one's friends and the quality of one's relationships with them.

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## Note

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