Friendships: A Cornerstone of Development

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Introduction

Friendships are often considered integral to a child’s socio-emotional development and profoundly significant in shaping their lives. From playful interactions to shared experiences and interests in and out of the classroom, these early connections lay the groundwork for understanding empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution (Streelasky, 2022). However, the dynamics of childhood friendships are complex and can be strengthened or weakened by many factors (Daniels et al., 2010). The friendships created amongst childhood peers offer various social and psychological benefits as they teach crucial skills such as cooperation or developing prosocial behaviours (Jambon & Malti, 2022). Parents and educators often overlook the negative aspects of childhood friendships. Despite their benefits, friendships can present challenges that hinder rather than enhance social development and well-being (Daniels et al., 2010). When children become victims of peer aggression within their seemingly close friendships, they can feel powerless, and in turn, their ability to emotionally regulate is affected (Daniels et al., 2010). This research paper will reveal the many factors that positively and negatively affect the quality of childhood friendships and discuss how these friendships contribute to a child’s overall socio-emotional development.

Prosocial Behaviours and Trust

Before a child even begins socializing with peers, the parenting they receive can affect their subsequent development. A secure attachment materializes from warm parenting, or in other words, when children receive positive affection and responsiveness from their caregiver (Yavuz et al., 2022). Therefore, parents need to know how exuding warmth can affect their children’s development. Yavuz et al. (2022) wanted to determine how parental warmth can foster prosocial behaviours, which are voluntary acts that benefit another person, depending on the child’s level of emotional regulation, which is the ability to control your emotions. Findings reveal that parental warmth increases prosocial behaviours in children with lower levels of emotional regulation, but
even more so if the child possesses a higher level of emotional regulation (Yavuz et al., 2022).

Continuing into middle childhood, when children’s social lives increase in complexity, sustained parental warmth can significantly help all children with adaptive coping mechanisms (Yavuz et al., 2022). Parents should be aware of the effectiveness of certain rearing practices to support their children’s prosociality, which is necessary for forming later friendships.

Preschool presents a unique opportunity for children to interact with new peers and encounter new social contexts. During this time, children partake in cooperative play, sharing, and collaboration, all of which contribute to their overall social development (Jambon & Malti, 2022). Positive peer interactions help children develop the prosocial behaviours essential to forming and maintaining childhood friendships (Jambon & Malti, 2022). However, many theorize exactly how these behaviours foster childhood friendships. Jambon and Malti (2022) hypothesized that a child’s ability to trust others is the link between prosocial behaviours and high-quality friendships. Researchers employed a longitudinal design and measured children’s levels of prosocial behaviours, trust, and peer relationship quality at ages four, five, and six. One finding suggests that healthy peer interactions reinforce children’s views of others as reliable and honest (Jambon & Malti, 2022). Additionally, they indicated that high-quality peer friendships at age four indirectly predicted prosocial behaviours at age six through trust at age five (Jambon & Malti, 2022). This association suggests that the positive impact of high-quality friendships at age four on prosocial behaviours at age six is not solely due to the relationship itself but rather the level of trust a child develops in others at age five. These findings are significant, as they suggest the mechanism through which early peer experiences shape children’s perceptions of trust and further affect their subsequent social behaviours (Jambon & Malti, 2022). It is essential to understand that the ability to trust in early childhood heavily contributes to children’s social development, and positive peer interactions strengthen that ability, resulting in children creating and maintaining friendships.

A foundational component of trust is honesty. Nevertheless, in preschool, children begin telling lies, which erodes trust and undermines genuine interpersonal connections (Dykstra et al., 2020). The act of lie-telling can occur for several reasons, so it is crucial to understand its effect on a child’s social development to employ proper interventions. Dykstra and colleagues (2020) used a longitudinal design to understand the interplay between lying, relationship quality, and symptoms of depression over time. The findings are complex, revealing many bidirectional associations between each variable. First, lies about one’s mental health and material possessions predicted poorer-quality friendships over time, resulting in more lying (Dykstra et al., 2020). Since friendships offer social support, being unable to disclose one’s true feelings reflects a child’s level of trust in that individual. Additionally, a child who attempts to enhance their friend’s perception of them must continue lying to manage that perception (Dykstra et al., 2020). Second, children lacking close and positive friendships early in life often fail to acquire the necessary social skills (i.e., honesty) to develop these friendships as they age (Dykstra et al., 2020). As a result, individuals enter their middle childhood years with poorer-quality friendships and thus engage in more lie-telling (Dykstra et al., 2020). Finally, telling more lies was associated with experiencing more symptoms of depression, and vice versa (Dykstra et al., 2020). This finding suggests that dishonesty and mental health may exacerbate one another, emphasizing the need for parents and professionals to remain vigilant and attentive to both lying behaviour and symptoms of depression, as addressing one may necessitate intervention for the other. Overall, it is evident that positive
friendships rely on individuals telling each other the truth, which makes lying a factor that can prevent children from forming these important bonds (Dykstra et al., 2020).

**Effect of Culture and Status on Forging New Friendships**

Once children transition into kindergarten, they socialize in a new environment with new friends. Streelasky (2022) identified how classrooms are becoming more diverse because of increased global movement and aimed to understand if this diversity affects peer relationships. Due to the limited vocabulary of a five-year-old, Streelasky (2022) asked children to draw what they enjoy doing at school with their friends and then describe what they drew. Allowing children to create a visual representation and then explain their work allowed them two mediums to express their perceptions of friendships, enhancing the results. Supporting the work of many developmental psychologists, many children described developing friendships through play (Streelasky, 2022). Furthermore, the findings supported Streeasky’s (2022) hypothesis, revealing that friendships crossed cultural, linguistic, and economic lines with little conflict or racialization. While this is a significant finding, the sample used was small and cannot be generalized to a broader society. Nonetheless, this is an important finding that should be replicated in different parts of the world to understand how cultural diversity plays into a child’s development of friends.

Although school is one of the main places children socialize and develop friends, it is not the only place they create these peer relationships. Children who build and experience friendships in multiple contexts have stronger bonds than those built and experienced in a singular context (Larivière et al., 2022). Extracurricular activities are an excellent place for children with shared interests to meet and socialize, as participating in such activities aids socialization while decreasing problematic behaviour (Archbell et al., 2020). One study attempted to record how children aged six to eight utilize their free time outside school. Archbell et al. (2020) found that children who do not engage in structured activities outside the classroom spend more time on their devices or by themselves, decreasing their social interactions and, in turn, their social development. However, more structured activities are a privilege, and in this study’s sample, children who participated in them were of a higher socio-economic status (SES) than those who did not. This finding is significant as it suggests that the friendships created outside of school relate to a child’s SES; however, research has not yet isolated SES and focused on this specific association.

**Friendships During COVID-19**

Still, children make friends and socialize primarily at school or social gatherings typically orchestrated by adults (Larivière et al., 2022). At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, various isolation measures inhibited children from truly socializing with their peers, creating a unique opportunity to discover the effect of limited socialization on children’s social development and well-being. Through videotaped semi-structured interviews of children aged five to fourteen, Larivière and colleagues (2022) examined children’s perspectives on friendships during this time of national isolation, ultimately revealing novel insights into the unique nature of these peer
relationships. Although children experienced isolation at home alongside their siblings, parents, pets, and virtual devices, no relationship could replace their friendships (Larivière et al., 2022). Unanimously, participants expressed missing their friends over anything else, indicating their awareness of how meaningful and memorable friendships are in their lives. Furthermore, this study identified age-related shifts in how children view friendship, further emphasizing children’s evolving socio-emotional needs. For younger children, friends serve as companions; they play together, share common interests, and are predominantly of the same gender and a similar age (Larivière et al., 2022). For older children, friendships provide a sense of intimacy, in which they can share secrets, feel understood, and talk on the phone (Larivière et al., 2022). Perhaps the most notable discovery is children’s need for physical closeness with their friends (Larivière et al., 2022). Past research has defined closeness in terms of acceptance and validation, but Larivière and colleagues (2022) point to a more literal demonstration of closeness when their participants expressed the importance of cuddling with their friends.

**Peer Victimization**

In examining the factors that decrease the quality of childhood friendships, victimization emerges as a significant threat. Contrary to the expectation of friendships being a source of support and companionship, some children experience bullying, peer pressure, and manipulation from their supposed friends. Targets of peer victimization experience aggressive acts from their peers and can develop poor psychological outcomes, affecting their overall well-being, ability to trust others, and academic success (Daniels et al., 2010). Daniels and colleagues (2010) studied children in grades four, five, and six to understand conflict within friendships. The children completed questionnaires about the positive and negative aspects of their relationships with their best friends. The findings highlight how children whose close friends victimize them closely resemble abusive adult relationships (Daniels et al., 2010). Just as in adults’ toxic romantic relationships, victims of peer victimization endure emotional manipulation, betrayal, and even physical harm inflicted by those they once trusted. Many parents believe conflict in childhood friendships is expected and necessary for their child’s development. Parents do not often understand how children are usually unequipped to handle intrapersonal disputes (Daniels et al., 2010). Normalizing victimizing behaviours can perpetuate cycles of abuse and further isolate victims from seeking help or support. Children victimized in peer relationships are more likely to experience victimization in romantic relationships as adults and overall experience more victimization throughout their lifetime than children who are not (Daniels et al., 2010). Therefore, understanding the dynamics of peer victimization among seemingly best friends will allow adults to foster a healthy and supportive environment to ensure friendships remain sources of positive growth and mutual respect rather than a source of harm and distress.

**Influence of the Media**

Due to technology’s evolution, online social media platforms like Instagram or TikTok have increasingly become more popular for young children, allowing consistent and constant
communication with their peers. Social media use can positively and negatively contribute to a child’s ability to form friendships. On one hand, it allows children to maintain contact with their friends regardless of geographical location (Larivière et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many children had no choice but to socialize virtually with their peers on platforms like Zoom. During this time, children still appreciated connecting with their friends but found that virtual platforms lacked the warmth and spontaneity of face-to-face meetings (Larivière et al., 2022). Some children even mentioned the difficulty of perceiving non-verbal social cues, such as body language (Larivière et al., 2022). On the other hand, if children feel like social media is the only tool available to relieve their loneliness or stress, their use can be problematic (Wong et al., 2022). Through an analysis of Canadian youth, Wong and colleagues (2022) set out to determine how intensive and problematic social media use influenced the way children perceived their social relationships. Wong et al. (2022) defined intensive social media use as online contact with others throughout an entire day and found it to strengthen social connections. Once children are considered problematic social media users, they exhibit signs of addiction, such as going through withdrawal when they do not have their devices (Wong et al., 2022). Children paradoxically feel more socially disconnected once social media use becomes problematic (Wong et al., 2022). When children use social media, they receive continuous rewards such as likes and comments, which they perceive as social acceptance (Wong et al., 2022). However, when children pursue these rewards, they encounter more relational conflicts in their social lives and become less engaged in their society (Wong et al., 2022). Social media can increase or decrease the quality of childhood friendships, and parents, educators, and older siblings need to guide children in navigating these digital spaces responsibly to foster healthy online and offline friendships.

**Conclusion**

Although intricate and multifaceted, childhood friendships are foundational to a child’s socio-emotional development. Children form and maintain positive and negative relationships with their peers from preschool onwards. Friendships shape a child’s understanding of cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution as they learn to trust and play with one another (Streelasky, 2022). This paper explores various factors that influence the quality of childhood friendships. Positive peer interactions, marked by trust and prosocial behaviours, contribute significantly to forming high-quality friendships and fostering social competence within children (Jambon & Malti, 2022). Challenges such as peer victimization, dishonesty, and problematic social media use can undermine childhood friendships and result in feeling isolated, misunderstood, and emotionally distressed (Wong et al., 2022). By empowering children with the skills and resilience to navigate these intricate dynamics, we can facilitate their socio-emotional growth and ensure their friendships continue to serve as sources of joy.
References


