Friendship

Chapter · January 2018

DOI: 10.4135/9781506307633.n339

2 authors:

Kenneth H Rubin
University of Maryland, College Park
481 PUBLICATIONS **36,066** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

Julie C Bowker
University at Buffalo, The State University of New York
125 PUBLICATIONS **9,411** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

FRIENDSHIP

Kenneth H. Rubin & Julie Bowker

In 1935, the United States Congress proclaimed the first Sunday in August to be National Friendship Day. And in 1997, the United Nations named Winnie the Pooh as the world's Ambassador of Friendship. If both the United States Congress and the United Nations have made formal declarations about the significance of friendship, the phenomenon must be of some importance.

Friendship experiences are universal. Although the *nature* of friendship does change across the lifespan (e.g., from a relationship based on companionship and play in early childhood to one focused on intimacy in older ages), most individuals, of all ages, in Western (e.g., United States, the Netherlands) and non-Western (e.g., China, India) societies, have at least one person whom they consider a friend. The benefits of having at least one friend and the "costs" or risks of not having a friend or having difficulties with friends are also evident at all periods of development and in all cultures. In this entry, we first define the phenomenon. Then, past and recent theory and scholarship on the benefits of friendship across the lifespan will be described, followed by the literature on the risks associated with friendship experiences. Although the benefits and risks associated with friendship experiences will be described separately, it should be emphasized that there are many instances when a friendship can be *both* helpful and harmful to the individual. For example, some adolescent friends engage in the sharing of ruminative thought; their conversations are laden with repetitive talk about their negative emotions and problems. The conversations have been found to foster feelings of intimacy and closeness as well as increase symptoms of anxiety and depression within each member of the friendship dyad.

What is a Friendship?

Friendships may be defined as voluntary, reciprocal, egalitarian relationships in which both partners acknowledge the relationship and treat each other as equals. Friendship is typically characterized, by companionship, a shared history, and mutual affection. Also, throughout the life course, individuals typically choose, as their friends, those who are similar to themselves in such characteristics as gender, age, and behavioral styles. Such similarities allows for most friendships to be relatively equal in power and control; this is in contrast to parent-child relationships that tend to be relatively asymmetrical in power. These characteristics of friendships can be seen in the friendships of the very young and the very old. But, there are some notable developmental differences in the characteristics of friendships. For instance, research on children's and adolescents' conceptions about (or their understanding of) friendship suggest that young children tend to seek out peers who are readily available (e.g., they live nearby) and who have similar play interests; older children and adolescents place more importance on mutuality (or reciprocity) and intimacy in their friendships.

Due to the unique characteristic of friendships, developmental psychology theorists, including Harry Stack Sullivan, have long posited that friendships can provide a unique developmental context in which children and adolescents learn about conflict, negotiation, and comprise, develop perspective-taking skills and empathy, and have social needs (for companionship and intimacy) fulfilled. Implicit in the extant theories is that youth who struggle, for whatever reason, to form friendships may "miss out" on important learning and psychologically-fulfilling opportunities. Beyond the adolescent years, friendships are thought to function as important extra-familial sources of social and emotional support that can help individuals navigate life challenges and stressors.

The Benefits of Friendship

Research findings on the benefits of friendship are remarkably clear (and largely consistent with extant theories): friendships do promote positive developmental outcomes, including perspective-taking and social-cognitive skills. They also appear to lead to positive feelings about the self and others, and positive psychological health and well-being (e.g., lower levels of anxiety and depression, higher levels of self-esteem), in children and adolescents, and also in younger and older adults, in Western and non-Western societies. Most of the research in this area has focused on the benefits of *having* at least one friendship, with that friendship being either perceived (e.g., Zoe thinks of Harper as a friend but Harper may or may not think of Zoe as a friend) or mutual (e.g., both Zoe and Harper view each other as friends), with the strongest evidence that having at least one *mutual* friendship helps to facilitate positive developmental outcomes. For example, during childhood and adolescence, there is growing evidence that having at least one mutual friend can protect youth from peer victimization and its associated internalizing (e.g., anxiety) and externalizing (e.g., aggression) problems. Researchers have also indicated that the actual presence of a friend (e.g., having a friend in the same room) can diminish the negative physiological effects (e.g., increased heart rate) of stressful peer experiences, such as peer rejection and peer exclusion. However, there is also some evidence suggesting that the *quality* and *stability* of the friendship also matters such that individuals with high quality (e.g., high in positive qualities such as intimacy and help and low in conflict) and stable (or lasting) friendships fare the best psychologically. Several longitudinal investigations have suggested that the benefits of having friendships during childhood and adolescence may be long-lasting and persist into adulthood.

Although it is clear that friendships can foster positive development and well-being at all stages of development, relatively little is known about *why* this is the case. Indeed, the empirical

literature on friendship *processes* is remarkably limited, with only a handful of studies focusing mostly on what friends can do that causes harm (e.g., co-ruminate, ignore, be jealous). There is some indication that friends, relative to non-friends, engage in more positive and intimate interaction with one another, and that while they are *more* likely than mere acquaintances to engage in conflict, they are also more likely to resolve the conflicts effectively and positively. Such interactions likely create positive relationship contexts (which, in turn, facilitate development) but there have been few attempts to link these positive interactions to adjustment outcomes. It is also well-known that individuals' thoughts about friendship change with age; as mentioned previously, friendship intimacy becomes increasingly important during the later childhood and adolescent years.

As it happens, most research on friendship derives from studies in Western societies. However, it is also well-known that Western and non-Western societies tend to differ in cultural norms and expectations (such as the degree to which independence and group harmony are emphasized). These different social expectations and norms can have an impact social behaviors as well as relationship experiences. Thus, more research is clearly needed to understand whether friends interact similarly with increased age, in Western and non-Western societies, and whether the friendship processes that "matter" for positive psychosocial adjustment vary with age and by culture.

A related issue is that very little is known about why boys and girls indicate that they are similarly satisfied with their friendships, despite the consistent finding that girls' friendships are marked by higher levels of intimacy. Does intimacy not matter for boys' friendship satisfaction? If not, what processes help to facilitate satisfaction in their friendships? Or, do researchers define and assess intimacy in ways that are more applicable to girls' than boys' friendships?

Additional knowledge in these areas could prove useful for prevention and intervention efforts, with individuals or groups, aimed at facilitating more positive peer relationships and friendships across the lifespan.

The Risks Associated with Friendship

While friendships can be positive forces in the lives of individuals, they can also do harm. For instance, those who are unable to form friendships typically suffer psychologically (e.g., friendless youth report high levels of loneliness). This appears to be especially true during the adolescent years (10-19 years) when friendships not only become increasingly intimate but also increasingly influential on psychological adjustment outcomes. Friendless children and adolescents appear to be more vulnerable to peer victimization and abuse, likely because they are viewed as "easy targets" without friends who could help retaliate and defend. Those who struggle to form friendships, perhaps due to their poor social skills or social anxiety, might be forced to select peers to be friends from a "pool of left overs," or peers whom others do not want as friends. This, in turn, might not allow individuals to choose who they would really want as a friend, and may create a "misery loves company" scenario in which two similarly rejected individuals become friends and share in and facilitate distress in each other. Losing a friendship, without forming a new or "replacement" friendship, has also been shown to be a significant relationship stressor that increases risk for loneliness and depression, particularly for girls, during early adolescence (10-14 years).

The friend's characteristics (e.g., the degree to which friends are aggressive or shy) and the quality of the friendship also matter when considering the risks associated with friendship experiences. Focusing first on friend characteristics, there is a large body of evidence that having friends who are delinquent (e.g., friends who engage in rule-breaking behavior) is a

strong risk factor for delinquency and other types of externalizing problems, including aggressive behavior and substance use. There are two processes that likely account for these findings (and other findings which strongly suggest that individuals form friendships with like-minded and similarly-behaved individuals and that they become more similar with time): (1) selection and (2) socialization processes. With regard to selection, it is well-known that individuals select similar individuals to be their friends, likely because individuals of all ages are attracted to similar peers. However, with regard to socialization, it is also the case that individuals become more similar to their friends over time. This likely occurs because individuals model (or imitate) the behaviors of their friends, and are positively reinforced for such behaviors, which in turn, increase the likelihood of these modeled behaviors continuing into the future. Of course, the outcome of socialization processes could be considered positive or negative, depending on the type of behavior that is being socialized within the friendship. For instance, it could certainly be considered adaptive when achievement-oriented behaviors are socialized by friends, as is often found in studies of adolescents. However, delinquent behaviors as well as unhealthy eating and sedentary behaviors, non-suicidal self-injurious behavior, depression, and anxiety also have been found to be socialized within adolescent and adult friendships, findings that clearly illustrate how friendships, with certain types of individuals, can do harm.

There are also risks associated with friendships when the quality of the friendship is poor and/or highly conflictual. For example, individuals who have unsupportive friendships tend to report higher levels of psychological distress, and the same is true for individuals with highly conflictual friendships (in which few conflicts are resolved in ways that are positive for both members of the dyad or the relationship). There is some evidence that adolescent girls and adult

women find conflict with their friends to be more stressful and worrisome than do their male counterparts, perhaps because beginning at a young age, girls are socialized to have somewhat stronger interpersonal orientations than boys. These interpersonal orientations, and the care to which they direct toward their close relationships, might explain why girls and women of all ages and across cultures report higher levels of intimacy in their friendships than do boys and men. Thus, it appears that there are positive and negative trade-offs to girls' (and also women's) friendships: their friendships tend to be highly intimate and supportive but also lead to considerable stress, anxiety, and worry.

Conclusions

In summary, most individuals have at least one friend, and many of these friendships are relatively stable. Youth and adults become friends with others who are similar to themselves in many ways – race, gender, personality, education, socioeconomic status, and status within relevant social groups. It is noteworthy that the meanings of friendship change, and become increasingly complex with increasing age and development. For example, individuals develop a more mature and sophisticated understanding of friendship that incorporates not only notions of reciprocity but also intimacy and commitment as they move from childhood into adolescence. When individuals interact with their friends, they do so in both positive and negative ways. Despite some negativity in their interactions however, it is the case that friends typically resolve their conflicts using negotiation and compromise—strategies that likely promote the maintenance of the relationship. Those who are unable to form friendships may miss out on the social-emotional benefits of interacting with friends, and also experience considerable psychological distress. Although having friends has been positively linked to psycho-social adjustment, there is growing evidence suggesting that those who befriend others who share with them, social and/or

emotional difficulties will experience increased adjustment difficulties over time. Lastly, although there have been documented differences in the forms taken by the friendships of males and females, it is nevertheless clear that friendship represents an important relational developmental context for positive development and adjustment for all individuals.

Kenneth H. Rubin and Julie C. Bowker

See also: Peers (Groups, Relationships, Socialization); Peer Rejection; Popularity; Peer Victimization; Loneliness; Self-Esteem; Social Development; Social Relationships; Social Status

Further Readings

Hartup, W.W. & Stevens, N. (1997). Friendships and adaptation in the life course. *Psychological Bulletin, 121,* 355-370. doi: http:/dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.121.355.

Newcomb, A. F., & Bagwell, C. L. (1995). Children's friendship relations: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological bulletin, 117*, 306. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.2.306

Rubin, K. H. (2002). *The friendship factor*. New York: Viking.

Rubin, K.H., Bukowski, W.M., & Bowker, J.C. (2015). Children in peer groups. In R. Lerner (Series Ed.), M.H. Bornstein & T. Leventhal (Vol. Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science, Vol. 4: Ecological settings and processes in developmental systems*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Sullivan, H.S. (1953). The interpersonal theory of psychiatry. New York: Norton.