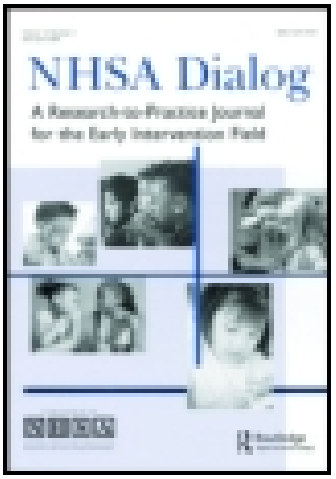

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The Selection of Friends by Preschool Children

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The friendships of 59 ethnically diverse (African American, European American, Latino, Middle Eastern, and West African) children enrolled in Head Start classes were assessed in the spring of the school year via a peer nomination technique and a roster rating method. Two types of behavior that earlier researchers found to be predictive of how well liked a child would be were also assessed. Items from the Behar Problem Behavior Questionnaire and the Baumrind Preschool Behavior Q-Sorts were made into a checklist and prosocial behavior and assertiveness, both of which had positive and negative components, were measured twice. Children showed marked preferences for children of their own gender when selecting friends and a general preference for children who were assertive in positive ways. For boys there were some interactions of behavioral characteristics with gender. In contrast to earlier research with older children, these Head Start children did not show any preference for their own ethnic group in choosing friends.

Keywords: childcare/daycare, ethnic minorities, discrimination

There are many determinants of the friendships that children form. Among these are social behavior and similarities. The latter include perceived similarities to oneself and similarities in behavior, interests, appearance, ethnicity, and gender. All of these determinants of friendships have been studied by child psychologists.

Studies limited to European American children indicate that social behavior is a criterion for selection of friends. Helping and sharing behaviors with peers increase in the early toddler and early preschool years (Benenson, Markovits, Roy, & Denko, 2003; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998), whereas instrumental aggression (i.e., taking another child's toy) shows an age-related decrease (Coie & Dodge, 1998). This is probably due to increasing social-cognitive abilities, which tend to influence children's willingness to consider conflicting perspectives.

The prosocial behavior of peers, which can be measured through behavioral indexes of friendliness and aggression, predicts preschoolers' choice of peers as friends (Ladd & Mars, 1986). An individual with a "prosocial" orientation (i.e., cooperation) displays more concern for the good of others than do individualists and competitors (Van Lange, De Bruin, Otten, & Joireman, 1997). The prosocial type of social behavior in children is expressed through acts of friendliness and cooperation and through tractability. Prosocial behavior was positively related to likability (Denham & Holt, 1993; Denham, McKinley, Couchoud, & Holt, 1990).

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Denham et al. (1990) used a roster rating task and researcher and teacher observations of children's emotional and prosocial behavior to assess the relations between age, gender, prosocial behavior, and likability. They found that how well a child was liked corresponded both to the child's understanding of emotions and to the child's prosocial behavior. The correlation between prosocial behavior and a child's popularity, which is probably what roster rating tasks measure best, was evident even when gender effects were eliminated statistically. Denham and Holt (1993) used teacher ratings of prosocial behavior and aggression, along with an improved version of Asher, Singleton, Tinsley, and Hymel's sociometric measure (1979) to assess the relationship between these behaviors and friendships. They found that children who were friendly and cooperative (prosocial) were better liked by peers. Aggression was not an important contributor to being well liked or disliked in this study.

Another important factor in preschoolers' formation of friendships is positive assertiveness (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenbert, & Reis, 1988). Children who are active in their social environment are seen as socially competent by their peers and by teachers. Positive assertiveness and self-expression are desirable in social interactions in some individualistic cultures, such as North America (Chen & French, 2008). Positive assertiveness, defined as being extroverted, outgoing, and dominant, is important in the formation of new and maintenance of close friendships. It helps in obtaining social status in the peer group and in being successful in social relationships (Buhrmester et al., 1988). However, Denham and Holt (1993) found that being a purposeful, dominant leader who was able to initiate new activities was not a salient determinant of peer likability. Hence, the role of assertiveness in the formation of friendships by young children should be further examined.

Apart from the effects of prosocial behavior and assertiveness per se are the effects of behavioral similarities. Children are attracted to peers whose behavioral tendencies are similar to their own (Rubin, Lynch, Coplan, Rose-Krasnor, & Booth, 1994). Greater behavioral similarities exist among friends than nonfriends, and children share friendships with other children who resemble themselves in terms of prosocial and antisocial behaviors (Haselager, Hartup, van Lieshout, & Riksen-Walraven, 1998).

Perceiving potential friends as similar to a child's self-perception is probably more important in older children than in preschool children (Altermatt, Pomerantz, & Ruble, 2002; Cassidy, Aikins, & Chernoff, 2003) because young children experience "limitations of cognitions about the self" (Cassidy et al. 2003, p. 501). Cassidy et al. found that third-grade children tended to select friends based on similarity of self-perception. That is, children who had a positive perception of themselves chose friends who also had positive self-perceptions (and vice-versa with children with negative self-perceptions). However, this tendency diminished by age 12 years It could be that other factors are more salient than having similar self-perceptions when selecting friends.

Similarity of interests may have an influence on the selection of friends. McGlothlin, Killen, and Edmonds (2005) reported this for European Americans and Margie, Killen, Sinno, and McGlothlin (2005) also reported it for African Americans, Latin Americans, Asian Americans, and others. However, not all research supports the idea that similarity influences the selection of friends. Rozin, Riklis, and Margolis (2003) looked at similarity of such interests as food, music, and television programs for young adults (between the ages of 17 and 20) and in third-grade children. For the young adult study, Rozin et al. looked at the relation between the satisfaction of roommates who were paired up by choice and the similarity of their interests. There was no association between the two. Of course, the situation may be different for young adults

and children. But for the study of third-grade children, Rozin et al. examined music, television program, and color preferences for friends and nonfriends. There were no differences in the similarity of interests between the friends and nonfriends. At least we know that music, television shows, food, and color are not the interests that determine the selection of friends. Other interests need to be studied.

Alexander and Hines (1994) found that boys of all ages preferred playing with someone of similar interests or "play styles" rather than someone of similar physical appearance or "gender label." In other words, boys would rather play with a girl who is into masculine activities than with a boy who is into feminine activities. For girls, preferences changed with age. When younger girls (ages 4 to 5) were given the choice of playing with a girl who had a masculine play style or a boy who had a feminine play style, they chose the girl playmate, whereas older girls (ages 6 to 8) chose the boy with a feminine play style. This study suggests that as children get older, the reasoning for preference of friends shifts from similarity of physical appearance to the similarity of interest.

Research on the selection of friends by elementary school children has also consistently shown that from Grade 1 onward, both gender and ethnicity are important determinants of friendships. Graham and Cohen (1997), Graham, Cohen, Zbikowski, and Secrist (1998), Lederberg, Chapin, Rosenblatt, and Vandell (1986), and Clark and Ayers (1992) all found that gender plays a significant role in the selection of friends. Children prefer friends of similar gender. Gender is a more prominent factor than ethnicity (Graham & Cohen, 1997; Graham et al., 1998), and same-sex friendships tend to be closer than opposite-sex friendships (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003). The preference for same-gender friends increases into adolescence (Clark & Ayers, 1992).

Preschool children show the preference for same-gender friends that older children do (Abel & Rezan, 1962), and this holds true for preschool children from other cultures (De Guzman, Carlo, & Ontai, 2004; LaFreniere, Strayer, & Gauthier, 1984). De Guzman et al. found preferences for same-gender friendship in Brazilian children as young as 3 years of age and also that same-sex friendship became more predominant as children got older, at least up to age 10.5 years. LaFreniere et al. obtained similar results from French-speaking preschool children from Montreal in a 3-year longitudinal study of Quebecois children ages 1 to 6 years. This study also confirmed that the preference for same-gender friends only gets stronger over time.

Gender also appears to be a determinant of the likelihood that a child will form cross-ethnicity friendships. However, the interaction is complex. In the sample of predominantly middle-class African American and European American Whites studied by Graham and Cohen (1997), girls showed a stronger tendency than boys to form friendships with children of their own ethnicities, a difference that increased with age (Graham et al., 1998). Aboud et al. (2003) got a different result for lower to lower middle socioeconomic (SES) children: boys (but only European American White boys) showed a significant preference for friends of the same ethnicity. Both sets of researchers found that cross-sex or cross-ethnicity friendships tended to be short-lived and tended to be replaced by same-sex, same-ethnicity friendships as children aged.

Much of the literature showing that same-race friendship is more predominant than cross-race friendships focuses primarily on friendships between African Americans and European Americans (Clark & Ayers, 1992; Graham & Cohen, 1997; Graham et al., 1998). Some researchers have expanded their investigations to an array of races and ethnicities, increasing the generalizability of their studies (Aboud et al., 2003; Lederberg et al., 1986) and providing evidence that European

Americans are more likely to select friends of the same racial and ethnic group than members of other racial and ethnic groups (Aboud et al., 2003; Clark & Ayers, 1992; Howes & Wu, 1990; Levy, 2000). This may reflect Margie et al.'s finding (2005) that minority children's perception of similarity was mainly based on shared interests such as sports activities rather than on the physical features of race and ethnicity and that this perception of similarity was a determinant of cross-ethnicity friendships. There was, however, evidence that in spite of being more likely to form friendships with peers of their own ethnicity, the European Americans were like the other racial and ethnic groups in perceiving similarity of interest to be more important than similarity of race and ethnicity (Margie et al., 2005; McGlothlin et al., 2005). Nearly all of these studies of ethnicity as a determinant of friendships have involved children age 6 or older. However, preschool is usually the time when children start to form friendships. Their understanding of friendships and the formation of friendships is limited. It is an especially difficult concept for a child to articulate what they mean by "friendship." Friendship conceptions of young children are driven by social context and are based on what is transpiring at the present time (Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Buskirk, & Wojslawowicz, 2005). But, they begin to use the term "friend." and to form friendships by age 3. Friendships tend to be reciprocal. Once mutual friendships are formed, friendships at all ages show considerable stability. During the preschool years, two thirds of children who identify one another as friends do so again 4 to 6 months later (Gershman & Hayes, 1983). Hence, according to Rubin et al. (2005), friendship reflects a closer, mutual, and dyadic relationship and is distinguished from popularity, which is the experience of being liked or accepted by one's peers. From a developmental perspective, Parker and Gottman (1989) argued that friendship serves different functions for children at different developmental points. For the young child, friendship serves to maximize excitement and amusement levels in play and helps organize behavior in the face of arousal.

There has been little recent research on the relationship between ethnicity or race and the friendships of *preschool* children, even though there is evidence that racial concept and racial awareness is present in children as young as 3 years of age (Duckitt, Wall, & Pokroy, 1999; Levy, 2000; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996). Braha and Rutter (1980) found that children as young as 4 nominated children of the same racial background to be their best friend, and Lederberg et al. (1986) showed that sex and ethnicity had an effect on African American, Hispanic, and European American Head Start children's friendships, but these studies are somewhat dated. Levy's findings (2000) were similar for a sample of children ages 36 to 75 months. The preference for friends of similar race and ethnicity started at an early age and became more salient over time.

The uniqueness of the present study is that it looks simultaneously at several of the factors discussed earlier, specifically ethnicity, gender, and some aspects of behavior, in the selection of friends. A sample of preschool-age children from a background that is very diverse and economically disadvantaged was studied. Two demographic variables, ethnicity and gender, and two composite measures of social behavior introduced by Denham and Holt (1993), prosocial behavior and assertiveness, were explored. We hypothesized, in keeping with previous studies, that preschoolers would be more likely to select as friends children of the same gender and those who engaged in more prosocial behavior and were more assertive. Because most of the children in our sample were from several different minority ethnic groups, rather being members of one or two minorities embedded in a European American majority, we hypothesized that they would not be biased to restricting their choices of friends to their own ethnicity.

METHOD

Participants

The children who participated in the study attended a Head Start program in Alexandria, Virginia. Written parental permission from the parents of 63 children was obtained and the children were treated in accordance with the principles of the American Psychological Association (1992). After attrition due to moves or withdrawals from the Head Start program, the final sample was 31 boys and 28 girls whose ages ranged from 42 months to 68 months (mean age = 58.7 months). This sample size is more than sufficient for the detection of medium effects via Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and large effects via r or X^2 (Cohen, 1992). The children's ethnic backgrounds were Middle Eastern ($n = 8$), West African ($n = 22$), Hispanic ($n = 12$), European American ($n = 8$), and African American ($n = 9$). These children were in four classrooms—17, 15, 14, and 13, respectively—in a freestanding center. There were no statistically significant differences in the ethnic compositions of the classrooms. (Given the small N, the most numerous ethnicity—West African in each class—was compared with all others for each class; X^2 with one degree of freedom ranged from .00 to .09, far short of the critical value of 3.84 for a $p < .05$.) Although the children were of diverse ethnic backgrounds, they had the same low-income SES required for eligibility for Head Start, lived in the same neighborhoods, and shared a significant portion of their day in the same classroom environment. The children were familiar with their classmates because the study was conducted 7 months into the school year. Some may have been acquainted with each other in contexts outside the classroom environment, but this was not assessed.

Measures and Procedures

Two different methods were used to assess peer preferences. It has been noted in previous research that roster rating techniques assess interpersonal acceptance, a less intimate form of relationship, and peer nominations reveal friendships (Asher & Hymel, 1981). Both methods were used in the present study to assess differences in peer preferences and validate friendships. These measures were collected on different days before lunch, during free time, and/or before dismissal. The nomination task was completed first.

Peer Nomination. This task was completed outside the classroom or in a quiet area away from the classroom activity. The researcher first read the classroom roster to make sure the child knew the name of each peer in their classroom. Formal definitions of friendships were not attempted. Instead, a Peer Nomination script was used that asked which classmates the child would pick in seven different contexts chosen by the researchers. The researcher asked the child to name at least three friends they liked to "play on the playground with," "sit next to during breakfast," "sit next to during reading times," "play cars with," "play house with," and "invite to their birthday party." They were finally asked to name their "three best friends in the class." The questions were always asked in the order given, starting with the activities the children engaged in daily, in an effort to get the children thinking about friendships and provide their most accurate answers to the last two questions. Children were asked to choose three friends for each context and researchers would write down the response on the script. This process took about 15 min.

Roster Rating. For the roster rating task, the researcher began by training the child to use a three-category rating scale: "like a little," "just like," and "like a lot" (a modification of Asher et al., 1979). Cutout paper circles were used in order to represent the rating scale concretely for the child. A small circle represented "like a little," a medium circle "just like," and large circle represented "like a lot." Children had to rate every child in their class. Researchers used a Roster Rating Script that had distracters embedded into the task before and after the actual class list in order to avoid primacy and recency effects. For example, children were asked to rate the degree he or she liked certain foods (e.g., pizza, broccoli, ice cream, peas), animals (e.g., butterflies, spiders, tigers), or cartoon characters (e.g., SpongeBob, Power Rangers, Scooby Doo). In between the four distracter categories, the researcher would go down the classroom list reading classmates' names and asking how much the child liked them. The child pointed to the circle that corresponded with their rating for the peer. This measurement, conducted on a different day from the peer nomination task, also took about 15 min.

Social Behavior Observations. An observational checklist was created using items from the Baumrind Preschool Behavior Q-Sorts (BPB; Baumrind, 1968) and Behar Problem Behavior Questionnaire (PBQ; Behar & Stringfield, 1974). Denham and Holt (1993) found that two factors emerged when a reduction of the BPB and PBQ scales were validated. These were a Prosocial Behavior factor and an Assertiveness factor. The Prosocial Behavior factor had positive components of friendliness, cooperativeness, and tractability and negative components of aggression and hyperactivity. The Assertiveness factor had positive components of purposefulness, dominance, and independence and a negative component of sadness. The positive and negative components of the two factors, Prosocial Behavior and Assertiveness, were operationally defined by specific behaviors for each after receiving advice from Denham (see Table 1) and formed into a checklist used in observing each child. Denham and Holt reported reliabilities ranging from .38–.74. Hoge, Meginbir, Khan, and Weatherall (1985) obtained validity coefficients of .69–.70 from a multitrait-multimethod study of this instrument.

TABLE 1
Operational Definitions for Social Behavior Checklist

PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR	
FRIENDLINESS (+)	Helpful behavior, comforts others
COOPERATIVE (+)	Obedient, accepts guidance, cooperates with other children
TRACTIBLE (+)	Looks concerned by disapproval
AGGRESSION (−)	Does not share and grabs toys, tattles or blames others, aggression toward others, aggression toward things
HYPERACTIVITY (−)	Inattentive, restless, squirmy, shifts activities constantly
ASSERTIVENESS	
PURPOSEFULNESS (+)	Raises hand to participate, persistent, self-starting
DOMINANCE (+)	Peer leader, resists domination, direct
INDEPENDENCE (+)	Does not rely on teacher or peers for aid or support, not influenced by example of other, dresses self without help
SADNESS (−)	Pouting, sad expression, cries, gloomy, unhappy

A time series observation method was used to measure social behavior via the checklist while the children were engaged in variable activities during free play. Two researchers each observed each child twice at different times during the spring (March through June). The researchers watched one child at a time, in random order, for 10-min time periods with 1-min intervals for observation and 1-min intervals for writing down the behaviors observed (Altmann, 1974). These observations are to some extent a measure of the child's enduring social behavior as each child was observed twice on two different days. Reliability coefficients are reported in the following section.

RESULTS

Reliability

Interrater Reliability. There was a significant positive correlation between the ratings produced by the two raters, $r(116) = .73$, $p < .001$.

Reliability of Tasks. To assess the relation between the two tasks that measured friendship, a correlation was calculated between the total score for the roster rating task ((1 × like a little + 2 × just like + 3 × like a lot)/(n – 1)) and the total number of times a child was selected on the nomination task ((total number of times selected/(n – 1)). In these equations, $n - 1$ = number of children from the classroom minus the child doing the ratings. As expected, the scores from both instruments were positively correlated, $r(57) = .31$, $p < .05$, but the two measures were not redundant, sharing less than 10% common variance.

Friendship and Social Behavior

Correlations were calculated between friendship, as measured by the nomination task, and the total score for each of the nine components of prosocial behavior and assertiveness. A significant relationship was found between this friendship measure and positive assertiveness, $r(57) = .29$, $p < .05$. Children who displayed more assertiveness in positive ways tended to be liked more by peers. This was particularly important when boys nominated girls as friends. Girls who were selected as friends by boys were likely to be positively assertive, $r(26) = .55$, $p < .05$. This was not so true when boys nominated other boys as friends. Boys also tended not to like other boys who displayed negative assertiveness (sadness), $r(29) = -.43$, $p < .05$. However, it was not an important factor in their choices of girls.

Girls did not make these distinctions. The relationships between the social behavior of the other children and nominating them as friends were the same whether they chose boys or girls. Table 2 depicts these relationships.

The roster rating task did not yield any significant correlations with social behavior (see Table 3). This measure was apparently not sensitive enough.

TABLE 2
Correlations Between Social Behavior and Nominations

	Social Behavior of Children Who Were Chosen			
	Prosocial +	Prosocial −	Assertiveness +	Assertiveness −
	Social Behavior of All Children Chosen			
Choosers were all children. ($N = 57$)	.06	−.02	.29*	−.20
	Social Behavior of Girls Who Were Chosen			
Choosers were girls. ($N = 26$)	.17	.01	.31	−.02
Choosers were boys. ($N = 314$)	.15	−.14	.55**	−.21
	Social Behavior of Boys Who Were Chosen			
Choosers were girls. ($N = 26$)	−.05	.22	.29	−.01
Choosers were boys. ($N = 31$)	.15	−.34	−.13	−.43*

Note. Correlations are between the behavioral score for a child and the number of times that child was chosen by other children.
$p < .05$, two-tailed. **$p < .01$, two-tailed.

Effect of Demographic Variables on Friendships

Two of the 59 children left the program before completing the nomination questionnaire. Hence, analysis was based on the data from the 57 remaining children.

Roster Ratings. As mentioned earlier, roster ratings is a weighted and proportional computation: ((1 × like a little + 2 × just like + 3 × like a lot)/(n − 1)), where n is the number of children in the classroom minus one (the rater). The overall ratings of the children were not a function of their gender or ethnicity. The genders were rated similarly, $F(1, 47) = .023$, $p > .05$; there was no difference between the ethnicities on this measure, $F(4, 47) = .834$, $p > .05$; and there was no interaction, $F(4, 47) = 1.210$, $p > .05$.

TABLE 3
Correlations Between Social Behavior and Roster Rating

	Social Behavior			
	Prosocial +	Prosocial –	Assertiveness +	Assertiveness –
		Social Behavior of All Children		
Ratings	.01	−.10	−.09	.05
		Social Behavior of Girls		
Ratings	.34	.04	−.25	.32
		Social Behavior of Boys		
Ratings	−.21	−.20	.06	−.33

Note. Correlations are between the behavioral score for a child and how much that child is liked by other children. None were statistically significant.

TABLE 4
Selection of Same-Gender Friends by Boys and Girls of Different Ethnicities

Boys Choosing Boys	*M*	*SD*
Middle Eastern	15.71	3.99
West African	14.56	4.25
Hispanic	15.00	2.90
European American	16.00	4.55
African American	11.83	2.40
Total	14.56	3.75
Girls Choosing Girls	***M***	***SD***
Middle Eastern	13.00	1.01
West African	15.84	3.74
Hispanic	16.00	5.48
European American	13.33	4.55
African American	14.33	5.13
Total	15.31	4.43

Note. Each child made 21 choices, 3 for each of the seven nomination tasks. The means are the average number of times each child picked his or her own gender.

Peer Nominations. An independent t test showed that boys had a strong tendency to nominate friends who were of their own gender, $t(56) = 8.90$, $p < .0001$. The same was true for the girls, $t(56) = 8.88$, $p < .0001$. A 2 × 5 ANOVA (two genders by five ethnicities) was calculated, with nomination of friends of the same *gender* as the dependent variable. The ANOVA showed that the two genders did not differ in their tendency to choose as friends members of their own gender, $F(1, 47) = .007$, $p > .05$. It also showed that the ethnicity of the children had no bearing on their tendency to choose friends of their own gender, $F(4, 47) = .484$, $p > .05$, and that there was no interaction, $F(4, 47) = .548$, $p > .05$. Descriptive statistics are given in Table 4.

A 2 × 5 ANOVA (two genders by five ethnicities) was calculated, with nomination of friends of the same *ethnicity* as the dependent variable. The members of one ethnic group were no more likely to choose their own ethnicity as friends than any other, $F(4, 45) = 1.17$, $p > .05$. Boys were no more likely than girls to differentiate between the five ethnicities when choosing friends, $F(4, 45) = .00$, $p > .05$, and there was no significant interaction between gender and ethnicity on selection of friends from the same ethnicity, $F(4, 45) = .49$, $p > .05$.

The mean number of times children chose friends of their own ethnicity was first compared with the mean number of such choices that would be expected given their own ethnicity's relative frequency among the participants. Only first choices were considered to minimize the effect of the small numbers of potential choices of the same ethnicity in some classrooms. This analysis showed that ethnicity was not a significant factor in the selection of friends from among these five ethnic groups (Middle Eastern, West African, African American, Hispanic, and European American). For the sample as a whole, the choices of friends from the same ethnicity did not differ from the expected number of choices based on the number of children of the same ethnicity in these Head Start classes, $t(56) = 1.41$, $p > .05$. This was also true for each of the five ethnicities considered separately (see Table 5).

TABLE 5
Mean Expected and Actual Choices of Friends of the Same Ethnicity

Ethnicity	*N*	Expected	Actual	*SD*	*Significance test*
Middle Eastern	8	0.88	2.00	2.88	$t(7) = 1.10$, $p > .05$
West African	22	2.65	2.68	1.81	$t(21) = 0.03$, $p > .05$
Hispanic	11	1.25	1.64	1.91	$t(10) = 0.67$, $p > .05$
European American	7	0.75	1.14	1.56	$t(6) = 0.66$, $p > .05$
African American	9	1.00	1.56	2.07	$t(8) = 0.81$, $p > .05$
Total	57	1.64	2.02	2.03	$t(56) = 1.41$, $p > .05$

Note. Expected mean choices of the same ethnicity for the seven scenarios are seven times the number of children of the same ethnicity minus one (the chooser), divided by 56 (the total number of children from whom to choose, minus one).

DISCUSSION

Given the small sample size, the results of this study should be treated cautiously unless they are confirmed in other preschool studies. Three main findings emerged here. First, for preschoolers, gender was an important determinant of friendships, at least as measured by their choices of who they would like to share activities with. This confirms the findings of other researchers who have consistently obtained similar results for children of all ages (Aboud et al., 2003; Graham & Cohen, 1997; Graham et al., 1998; Lederberg et al., 1986; Musun-Miller, 1993). The present research shows that preference for one's own gender was quite pronounced in these Head Start classrooms.

Second, it is possible to assess, with relatively unintensive and unintrusive observations, certain aspects of behavior that predict which preschoolers are most likely to be selected as friends. Other researchers (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Denham & Holt, 1993; Denham et al., 1990; Ladd, Price, & Hart, 1988) have been able to assess and identify naturally occurring behaviors (as opposed to experimentally contrived problem-solving situations) that predict which preschool children will be better liked by their peers as measured by roster ratings. The present research shows that the method used by Denham and her collaborators is useful in the hands of other researchers using the nomination technique. However, the findings for this group of children were different from those Denham and Holt and Denham et al. reported. Positive prosocial behavior in this sample had little to do with how often a child was nominated as a friend. This may reflect sample differences, as the earlier research was conducted at a university preschool that enrolled primarily upper middle class children. The present research also shows that differences in the way friendship is assessed are important. The nomination technique gave one pattern of results, but the roster rating task used in this research yielded no significant correlations or mean differences for the same sample. Nominations presumably referred to other children with whom the respondents interacted frequently. Roster ratings, because they involved the whole class, included children with whom the respondent was less involved, which may have made them a less sensitive measure.

Likewise, the finding of Arsenio et al. (2000) that negative prosocial behavior—which consists primarily of aggressiveness and hyperactivity—was a determinant of peer acceptance was not replicated here. There was no trace of a relationship between a girl's negative prosocial behavior

and her selection as a friend by other girls. However, the magnitude of the correlation coefficient when boys were choosing boys leaves the issue in some doubt. It would be especially risky to accept the null hypothesis in this case.

Particular aspects of social and emotional development that are potentially important in Head Start classrooms did emerge in the current research. Positive and negative assertiveness were especially important in determining how often a child was chosen as a friend. Positive assertiveness was generally correlated with selection as a friend by other children, whether boys or girls were doing the selecting. Perhaps positive assertive behavior stands out and is noticed by other children. This enhanced social salience may lead to the child's being better liked. Positive assertiveness by girls was especially attractive to boys. The correlation coefficient r *is* the magnitude of effect, and that found here was large (Cohen, 1992) for girls chosen by boys. Apparently little girls who showed purposefulness, independence, and were not easily dominated were much more appealing to little boys than girls who were indecisive, passive, and submissive. However, these traits were irrelevant when boys were considering other boys, and girls did not distinguish between girls and boys in this regard.

Negative assertiveness—being sad and mopey—was particularly unattractive when boys were choosing boys as friends. It apparently did not matter at all to girls. The finding that what matters for young girls is not the same as what matters for young boys echoes the findings of Musun-Miller (1993) for social problem-solving skills and is not altogether surprising. What is important is that Head Start teachers may be well advised to pay particular attention to those boys who are often sad, and make efforts to dispel that emotion. For girls, on the other hand, sadness is less likely than passivity and submissiveness to result in having few friends. Encouraging initiative and assertiveness may be especially important, at least in being liked by male classmates, although these are not behaviors that have traditionally been encouraged in young females.

Third, the finding that ethnicity had relatively little impact on the formation of friendships in this sample contradicts the reports of earlier researchers. The heterogeneity of the sample investigated here suggests one reason for this positive development. More ethnic diversity in elementary school classrooms seems to support the development of cross-ethnic friendships (Howes & Wu, 1990). These researchers found cross-ethnic friendships were frequent in classrooms with four main ethnic groups and that the number of cross-race friendships increased as the children got older. It appears that the more interactions children experience with other ethnic group members the more comfortable they feel to form cross-race friendships.

It also seems likely that cross-ethic friendships increase when no one ethnicity is dominant numerically. Hallinan and Smith (1985) found that when classrooms were most racially balanced, the interracial friendliness of both Blacks and Whites was maximized. They also found that the earlier the children are exposed to cross-race members the less likely they were to have negative racial attitudes when they are older.

The children in the present research were in classrooms with five broad ethnic groupings. Further, the West African children came from families with different languages and heritages, as did those classified as Middle Easterners. Although it may be more natural for children to play with others who speak the same language, for example, English or Spanish, that option was not very viable in these classrooms. Five of every 6 children were learning English as a second language, and only 15% were Spanish speakers. Hence, choice of playmates would be very limited if a child wasn't open to playing with others who did not speak his or her language. Nearly all of the children were ethnic minorities, and one's own minority was always

a small portion of the available playmates. (The Middle Easterners were almost all Moslem but were from cultures with varying heritages, languages, modes of dress, and skin color.) It is much easier to fall into a pattern of playing with children who look and talk much like you when the classroom is divided between light-skinned European Americans, dark-skinned African Americans, and Spanish-speaking Hispanics. In these well-integrated classrooms, it was incumbent on the children to cross ethnic lines to find children with whom they liked to play, and the staff of course encouraged that.

Openness to children of other ethnicities may also be becoming more accepted and is certainly strongly encouraged in Head Start classrooms. Although early studies of elementary school children show a preference for one's own ethnicity (Graham & Cohen, 1997; Graham et al., 1998), in a more recent study of Aboud et al. (2003) only White boys, especially older White boys, showed a preference for friends of their own ethnicity. The Head Start children studied here are younger and may not have acquired stereotypes as strong as those learned by elementary children in past years. The very recent study of minority children (first and fourth graders) by Margie et al. (2005) found that minority children (African American, Hispanic, and Asian) perceived similarity mainly on the basis of shared interests and activities rather than ethnicity. The same sort of perceptions may have been operative in the present study, contributing to the lack of ethnic biases. Whether for this and the other reasons advanced here, or for reasons yet to be discovered, the result for the children in this study is good news: the children showed no discernible ethnic bias in their selections of friends. The Head Start setting may be optimal for reducing ethnic and racial prejudice. Children are exposed to children of different ethnic backgrounds at an early age, leading to many positive experiences that may be influential in their relationships.

In sum, these Head Start preschoolers tended to select friends who were of the same gender and displayed positive assertiveness. A girl's positive assertiveness was particularly predictive of her choice as a friend by boys, and boys were unlikely to choose negatively assertive boys as friends. Ethnicity did not seem to be a feature to which these Head Start preschoolers paid attention when selecting friends. This could be because the environment they are exposed to at Head Start provided them with potential friends from many different ethnic backgrounds and with diverse cultural experiences that taught them to relate to others of different ethnicity.

POLICY AND PRACTICE

These findings should be interpreted cautiously unless and until they are replicated in other programs. The data gathered here suggest that classrooms composed of children from many cultures seem to be in Head Start children's best interests. Such classrooms are often not feasible, but when they can be constituted they appear to facilitate cross-cultural friendships.

Certain personal characteristics have different effects for children of different genders. Girls tend to be better liked by boys if they are positively assertive. This is a trait that may not be valued in all cultures but can be facilitated in the Head Start environment. Boys who are sad and withdrawn seem to be more vulnerable than girls to having few friends. Teachers should be informed that special efforts to counteract the moodiness of such boys and include them in group activities may be advisable.

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