The Friendship Project

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The general objective of our research is to study the nature, quality, functions, and sources of friendship and parent-child relationships during the transitions from elementary school (fifth grade) to middle school (sixth grade); from middle school (eighth grade) to high school (ninth grade); and from high school (twelfth grade) to “beyond.” Thus far, data have been collected up until the first year post high school graduation. We have been examining how, and if, friendships and parent-child relationships are related to, and predictive of child/adolescent and family characteristics and to child/adolescent socio-emotional adjustment.

Of specific interest has been the evaluation of the prevalence, stability, and quality of the best friendships of 5th, 6th, 8th, 9th, and 12th grade children/adolescents identified as “typical” (control), socially withdrawn, or aggressive. Another aim of the study has been to determine whether the friendships of socially withdrawn and aggressive children buffer them from developing psychosocial difficulties or whether these friendships actually exacerbate their difficulties. We are also investigating whether, during these various transitional periods, friendship can serve as a protective factor when children’s/adolescents’ relationships with their parents are qualitatively troubling.

Of course, a central aim of the study is to examine whether particular groups of children (e.g., socially withdrawn children) are at particular risk as they make transitions from one school milieu to another. We are asking, for example, whether the socially anxious and fearful child’s/adolescent’s friendships and/or parent-child relationships can help make the transition into middle or high school a relatively harmless one. But, given that many, if not most children will find school transitions somewhat stressful, we are studying the roles of parents and friends in protecting children from these school-related
stressors. In short, we have been evaluating the ways in which relationships with best friends and parents shape adjustment over time. The psychological “outcomes” we have been studying include psychosocial adjustment (e.g., civic engagement; social and emotional competence); self-esteem and self-perceptions of competence in a variety of domains; and such psychological difficulties as rejection sensitivity, anxiety, depression, and risky behaviors (e.g., delinquency; substance use and abuse).

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