
THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL WORLDS: AN INVESTIGATION OF PEER RELATIONS

*Leslie Morrison Gutman and John Brown
Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education*

Introduction

There has been much concern in recent years about peer groups and their effects on children's academic achievement and behaviour. Much of this concern has focused on engagement in antisocial activities and risk-taking behaviours in adolescence while concerns for younger children have tended to crystallize around patterns of bullying and victimization. Relatively little consideration, in contrast, has been given to the wider patterns of friendship and the role these patterns can play in sustaining and developing positive as well as negative experiences and behaviours. Consequently, a large gap exists in the literature.

In the following study, we investigate the developing social worlds in late primary school, exploring the patterns in children's general peer relationships, their closer and more significant friendships and bullying behaviours. Using cluster analysis, we identify unique groups of children characterized not only by their experiences of bullying and victimization, but the support and satisfaction they receive from their friendships and interactions between the ages of 8 and 10. We also expand past research by examining how children's early development (ages 3 to 4) may predict their later designation as bullies and/or victims, and whether peer clusters relate to children's contemporaneous and later adjustment.

Key Findings

- Cluster analysis of the sample revealed **five patterns of friendship, three positive and two negative**.
- **Most (75 per cent) of our sample belong to positive friendship groups**. These children feel supported by their friends and do not engage in bullying or experience victimization. Different patterns of positive friendship were distinguished by their numbers of close friends and levels of 'falling out' with friends. Overall therefore, we labelled the three clusters as follows: **positive, many friends** (48 per cent of the sample), **positive but fallout** (18 per cent), and **positive, few friends** (10 per cent).
- **One in four of our sample children belong to groups characterized by poor social relationships** which have low friendship support and a much higher general prevalence of victimization and/or bullying compared to the other groups. These were labelled **victims** (20 per cent of the sample) and **bully/victims** (5 per cent) although not every child in each cluster would have *necessarily* been a bully or a victim. Very few children (fewer than 1 per cent) were 'pure bullies'.
- **Victims and bully/victims** have lower levels of wellbeing than children in the positive friendships clusters and are characterized by a number of difficulties, including low self-esteem and higher incidence of depression, that extend from early childhood through primary school.

- **Bully/victims** are particularly at risk of engaging in antisocial activities and having antisocial friends, and **are more likely to suffer from later symptoms of personality disorder, particularly anger and impulsivity.**
- There are **socio-demographic effects**, but membership in a positive or negative friendship group is not uniformly associated with socio-demographic advantage or disadvantage. Those from the **positive, many friends** cluster were more likely to come from privileged backgrounds and **victims** from more disadvantaged backgrounds, but those from the **bully/victim** group did not differ significantly from the other clusters in terms of income and maternal education. There was also a strong **gender bias** for some of the friendship patterns, suggesting that friendships may operate in different ways for boys and for girls.

Methodology

Data

Data are from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), a longitudinal study of children born in the former Avon Health Authority with an expected date of delivery between 1 April 1991 and 31 December 1992. This project uses data collected in a clinical setting when the children were aged 8 and 10 to determine patterns of peer relationships. These data are supplemented by mothers' reports on a broad range of outcomes, including social behaviour, socio-emotional adjustment, and well-being from infancy to later childhood, as well as school reports of key stage scores. We also used clinic data which assessed symptoms of personality disorder when the children were 11 years of age to examine how patterns of peer relationships are associated with later measures of adjustment.

Measures

- **Friendship patterns (ages 8 to 10):** victimization, bullying, friendship support and interaction, and number of close friends.
- **Demographic:** maternal education, family income, child gender and ethnicity, and number of siblings.
- **Child adjustment (ages 8 to 10):** external locus of control (i.e. beliefs that external forces have control over your life), self-esteem and depression, involvement in antisocial activities and with antisocial friends, and liking school.

- **Early markers (ages 3 to 4):** language development, social development, pro-social behaviour, and behavioural difficulties
- **Later outcomes (age 11):** symptoms of personality disorder (e.g. including anger; feelings of abandonment; intense brief episodes of sadness, anxiety or irritability, emptiness, identity disturbance (i.e. a shifting sense of self), paranoid ideation, emotion disaffection (feeling emotionally disconnected); suicidal or self-mutilating behaviours, impulsivity; and intense interpersonal relationships) and Key Stage 2 scores.

Analysis

SPSS TwoStep clustering was used to ascertain whether there were clusters of peer relationships using 12 friendship/peer relations measures, including bullying and victimization. Relationships between membership of a particular cluster and other variables - including elements of socio-demographic background, early markers of child development contemporaneous and later measures of child well-being – were then examined using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA).

For full details of the measures and analytical methods used, see the main report at www.learningbenefits.net.

Main findings

The cluster analysis identified five clusters of friendship patterns based on the 12 measures of friendship used. Because the cluster analysis searched for commonalities across several different dimensions of peer relationships, there was still considerable variation within the clusters on individual measures, particularly those (e.g. bullying) where the measure was characteristic of only a relatively small number of children. Individuals within the clusters may therefore conform to the descriptions below to a greater or lesser degree. This “fuzziness” in the categorisation is an inevitable result of attempting to simplify complex social relationships into a limited number of identifiable patterns. Three clusters were characterized by positive friendships. These children feel supported by their friends and do not engage in bullying or experience victimization to any material degree. Yet there are significant differences among these clusters. **Positive, many friends** generally have a high number of close, supportive friends, come from a higher socio-economic background than the other groups and are more likely to be girls. **Positive, few friends** have relatively few close friends (an average of 10.35 compared to a sample mean of 16.60), but feel supported and

interact frequently with them. Members of this group are more likely to be boys with a high proportion of their friends being boys. The **positive but fallout** cluster consists of approximately equal numbers of boys and girls who have fairly extensive friendship groups and high friend support but also experience a high number of fallouts with their friends.

Two clusters were characterized by poor social relationships. These clusters were labelled **victims** and **bully/victims** due to the much higher general prevalence of victimization and/or bullying compared to the other groups, although this does not mean that *all* individuals in those groups are necessarily bullies or victims. At age 8 **victims** and **bully/victims** reported mean victimization scores of 0.71 and 0.95 respectively compared to a sample mean of 0.44, and mean bullying scores of 0.13 and 0.48 compared to a sample mean of 0.10. There were also wider indicators of poor social relationships: both clusters reported lower than average levels of friendship support, although victims had a larger than average number of close friends.

Unexpectedly, there was not a cluster of 'pure bullies'. Further analysis indicated that, while 7 to 8 per cent of children reported engaging in bullying from the ages of 8 to 10 years, fewer than 1 per cent did so without also being victims of bullying from ages 8 to 10 years. This finding may reflect the socio-cognitive level of primary schoolchildren. In primary school, there is a strong belief in the symmetry of power and less tolerance of power differentials in peer relationships. As a result, counter-attacks are the social norm, resulting in high bully/victim prevalence and fewer pure bullies.

There were also a number of changes between the ages of 8 and 10 that were common across all the clusters. On average, victimization decreased, while the rates of bullying remained fairly stable and there was an increase in friendship support. In addition, there were changes in the level of interaction with friends, but these differed in size and direction for different groups. However, these changes do not affect the essential stability of the friendship clusters identified, and the differences in experience which these represent.

Socio-demographic measures for these friendship clusters showed that those from the **positive, many friends** cluster were more likely to come from families with higher levels of maternal education and household income and to have parents who were married compared to **victims**. **Victims** were also significantly more likely to be members of minority ethnic groups than the **positive, many friends** cluster. However,

owing to the small size of the minority ethnic population in the sample, this finding may not be typical of the wider population. Not all the positive friendship clusters had uniformly favourable socio-demographic backgrounds – **positive, few friends** had mothers with low average educational levels - and nor did the negative friendship groups necessarily have poor socio-demographic characteristics – **bully/victims** did not significantly differ from the other clusters in terms of income and maternal education, for instance. Moreover, family income had no independent effect when the other socio-economic indicators were taken into account.

There was also a strong gender bias to some of the friendship patterns: **positive, many friends** were most likely (62 per cent) to be girls while boys predominated in the **positive, few friends** (68 per cent) and **bully/victim** (74 per cent) groups. Friendships may therefore operate in different ways for boys and for girls. It was also noticeable that the male-dominated groups had higher than average numbers of close friends who were boys, while the reverse was true for the female-dominated groups, indicating that for many children friendships may be heavily gendered.

There were highly significant differences between the groups for *all* measures of children's well-being and achievement, even when the effect of socio-demographic variables was taken into account. In general, belonging to a cluster characterized by a negative friendship pattern (i.e. being a **victim** or **bully/victim**) was significantly related to worse levels of well-being, behaviour and achievement. Compared to the positive friendship groups, these children overall suffered higher levels of depression, lower levels of self-esteem, were less likely to feel they had control over events, and less likely to enjoy or do well at school. They also engaged in more antisocial activities and interacted with more antisocial friends than the other clusters. This difference was especially large for **bully/victims**, indicating that they are most at risk of such problems.

In the main, the differences among the positive friendship groups were not significant – they experienced similar levels of well-being and achievement, and engaged in similarly low levels of antisocial behaviour. However, the **positive but fallout** cluster had high levels of external locus of control similar to those of **bully/victims** and **victims**. This suggests that for the **positive but fallout** cluster, the capricious nature of their friendships may contribute to feelings that their lives are due more to chance or luck than of their own volition.

Our findings show that there is strong continuity between early development, later friendship patterns and continued well-being. In most cases, it was the membership of a positive or a negative cluster which was the important factor.

Bully/victims and **victims** were more likely to have worse indicators of development in their pre-school years - lower language, social and pro-social development as well as more hyperactivity than the other groups - but there was no significant difference among groups with more positive friendship patterns. These findings indicate that difficulties in later social relationships may be detected in pre-school children, highlighting the possibility of early intervention.

We also found that **bully/victims** and **victims** were more likely to suffer from later poor well-being, exhibiting more negative behaviours indicative of personality difficulties at age 11 compared to the more positive groups. With the exception of feelings of abandonment and identity disturbance, however, symptoms were most severe for **bully/victims** especially for anger and impulsivity. These findings support other studies, indicating that **bully/victims** may be particularly at risk of severe mental health problems as they mature.

Conclusions

Our study provides important insights regarding peer relationships in primary school. On an optimistic note, three out of four children have stable, positive peer relationships. These children differ in their friendship patterns but, overall, feel supported by their friends and experience little or no victimization or bullying. On the other hand, one in four children were identified as having poor social relationships, characterised by a high prevalence of victimization and/or bullying. These children typically have a number of adjustment difficulties, including depression, behavioural problems, and low self-esteem, suggesting a link between social competence and well-being. Our study also documented several early childhood markers that may help identify children at risk of later bullying and/or victimization. What is difficult to disentangle here is the precise nature of cause and effect: we can see that early development problems are linked to later negative friendship patterns and that negative friendship patterns are linked to poor subsequent well-being. What we cannot tell from this analysis is whether the negative friendship patterns merely reflect children's intrinsic problems, or whether the friendship patterns themselves are active in developing and reinforcing poor well-being and behaviour.

Implications

Despite the uncertainties about causal effects, it is important for children to develop and sustain positive social relationships and supportive friendships. These skills are important for all children: even those in positive friendship patterns may experience problems which affect their enjoyment and learning as the findings for our **positive but fallout** group demonstrate. However, of particular concern are those children who experience victimization and/or engage in bullying. We find that bullying and victimization are both prevalent, affecting a sizeable minority on a regular basis, and related to well-being and achievement. This demonstrates the importance of the effective and continuing implementation of programmes such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) and arrangements through the National Strategies for targeting schools that have particular bullying issues.

We would particularly highlight the importance of early intervention. Early language, social and behavioural difficulties are predictive of later problems in social relationships and this has significant implications for the work that is already under way to help very young children develop friendships. The Early Years Foundation Stage, for example, recognizes that friendships are an important part of children's early development. One of its aims is to help children learn to care for others and to accept and value them for their intrinsic qualities. Such early interventions are important in helping to prevent later difficulties in developing and maintaining positive peer relationships. Our findings also indicate that interventions that teach young children coping strategies for developmental problems such as hyperactivity may also alleviate the later possibility of being targeted for victimization and/or engaging in bullying. Given the long-term implications of bullying and victimization for future social relationships, emotional and academic adjustment and engagement in negative behaviours, these early programmes are vital.

Additional Information

To obtain the full report, visit the web-site: www.learningbenefits.net. This report can be freely downloaded. The web-site contains details of how to order a hard copy. ISBN 978-0-9552810-9-9

DCSF Research Briefs and Reports can also be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Rachel Barker, W606, DCSF, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ.

Email: rachel.barker@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

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