Friendship Among Children

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Friendships in childhood are essential to overall development, beyond having someone to socialize with. Research suggests that friendships in children can help mitigate psychopathology, can be considered protective factors against being bullied and acting as a bully, and help with developing strong cultural competence. Aspects of friendships such as quality and intimacy of the relationship, as well as quantity of friends have been investigated for their importance in moderating many of these factors. Lack of friendships can lead to both short-term and long-term challenges for children, such as loneliness and feeling isolated from peers, anxiety and other internalizing disorders, and potential school difficulties overall. Considering the benefits of having significant friendships and the risks associated with not having stable friendships, it is important to understand the mechanisms by which friendships impact children and their development.

As children grow, their need for friendships changes with their development. Typically, in their early years, children are more impacted by group acceptance and popularity amongst many people. As they age, the intimacy and quality of individual friendships becomes more essential to functioning than larger group acceptance. There is an important interaction between group acceptance and how this affects how many quality friendships a child has. Depending on age, children may feel more or less lonely based on their overall acceptance more so than how many quality friendships they have. A typical trend, however, is that the more acceptance by the group and the more quality friendships children have, the less likely they are to develop feelings of loneliness which lead to internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression.

These internalizing disorders are only exacerbated when children experience isolation due to situations such as bullying. The importance of friendship among children again becomes essential in these situations in many ways, for both the victim of bullying as well as the bully. While large numbers of children report being victims of bullying, there are indications that friendships play a significant role in preventing bullying from happening or supporting the child who has experienced bullying. Research has indicated that children with less friends tend to be more susceptible to bullying; however, not only is the number of friendships important, but the value of the friendships maintained influences how and when bullying occurs. For example, if the friend is also suffering from bullying, they may be less likely to be of help. This suggests that in order for friendships to be supportive and preventative, the friend must have certain qualities that would allow them to provide strength to their counterpart.

The strength from this friendship is essential not only in preventing negative social experiences, but also in overall development, in that it provides the child with a sense of belonging, comfort, and can inform them of their worth. Developing high quality friendships has also been shown to teach children the importance of relationships and understanding other people's needs. Having this level of relationship and understanding allows children to develop a sense of empathy for other children, which may in turn deter them from bullying other children who don't have the same type of support.

Beyond empathy, strong friendships allow children to practice social skills that will encourage them to continue to develop secure relationships. Providing a safe space to rehearse problem solving skills also discourages the use of aggressive behaviors in conflict situations, again deterring the development of bullying behaviors. High-quality friendships have all-around benefits for children and tend to boost self-esteem as well as teach important social abilities that

aid in overall development. Understanding how other children may feel and the importance of their backgrounds is also an essential lesson learned through developing friendships. From a young age, children are exposed to individuals of all different backgrounds, and this experience gives children the opportunity to develop into culturally aware and knowledgeable adults. Involvement in relationships with children of other races has been shown to decrease levels of prejudice by improving communication and understanding. The opportunities to become engaged in these friendships, of course, are associated with environmental factors, as well as age and gender.

At a young age, children show more interest in and acceptance of interracial friendships than they do as they grow into middle childhood. This is important in that it points to social influences, as well as a tendency to be more aware of differences as children age. The importance of these friendships is to encourage children to gain a better understanding of someone different from them, with the hopes that as they age, there will be a decreased likelihood of bias towards others, thereby decreasing exclusion of peers. This movement towards inclusion is important and beneficial in that, as mentioned previously, the development of strong friendships provides children with crucial social skills and self-esteem that will continue to aid them as they become adults.

Further Reading

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