



Losing and gaining friends: Does friendship instability compromise academic functioning in middle school?



Leah M. Lessard*, Jaana Juvonen

University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Psychology, Franz Hall, 502 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521, USA

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ABSTRACT

Extending past research on the academic benefits of having close friends in early adolescence, the study examines how instability of friendships (i.e., losses and gains of friends) is related to academic engagement and performance in middle school. The sample was drawn from a longitudinal study of ethnically diverse youth across 26 middle schools ($N = 5991$). The results demonstrated that over two thirds of friends were either lost or gained during the first year in middle school. When controlling for friendship network size, both friendship losses and gains were concurrently associated with lower academic engagement and performance at spring of sixth grade. Moreover, higher overall instability during the first year in middle school was related to lower academic engagement in seventh grade, which in turn, predicted lower grade point average (GPA) by the end of middle school. The findings suggest that friendship instability captures a disruptive social process that can compromise academic functioning in middle school.

1. Introduction

Establishing friendships is considered a central developmental task of early adolescence (Sullivan, 1953). At a time of increased independence from parents and a growing motivation for intimacy with peers, close relationships with same-aged peers (i.e., friendships) fulfill critical social needs that provide young adolescents with a sense of security, validation, emotional and instrumental support (Hartup, 1989; Vitaro, Boivin, & Bukowski, 2009). As such, friendships help buffer distress following negative social experiences (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999) and also promote positive school attitudes and academic performance (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004). Although the evidence supporting the benefits of friends is robust, most studies consider friendships at only one time point. However, friendships are not static. Young adolescents make new friends, while other relationships dissolve over time (Meter & Card, 2017; Poulin & Chan, 2010). In the current study, we focused on dynamic changes in friendships following the transition to middle school. We proposed that much like instability in other close adolescent relationships (e.g., romantic relationships), changes in friendship may be disruptive especially in early adolescence when students are acclimating to a new school environment. Extending past studies that focus on the maintenance of friends over time (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Ladd, 1990), we examined the effects of friendship instability — that is, changes in friendship due to either dissolution and formation (Chan & Poulin, 2007, 2009) — during the first year of middle school on academic engagement and performance.

A variety of conceptual approaches guide research on friendships and academic functioning. Research examining peer selection and influence processes suggests that adolescents both choose academically similar friends and also become more similar to their friends over time (Kindermann, 2007; Rambaran et al., 2017; Shin & Ryan, 2014). Highly engaged and achieving students befriend other academically-oriented peers who promote academic success, whereas less academically-oriented students tend to seek out

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: Leahmlessard@ucla.edu (L.M. Lessard).

friends who are similarly disengaged and low achieving, compromising academic functioning over time (Ryan, 2000). In addition, the effects of having friends (regardless of the characteristics of the friend) are robust. Compared to adolescents without friends, those with at least one friend display higher academic achievement (Wentzel et al., 2004). Moreover, friendships characterized by greater emotional support facilitate classroom involvement, whereas highly conflictual friendships exacerbate school adjustment problems in childhood (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996) and early adolescence (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). Beyond such effects of friends and friend characteristics, the current study examined how high friendship turnover, or what we call here friendship instability, is related to academic engagement and performance in middle school.

1.1. (In)stability of close relationships

Given that only about half of adolescents' friendships are maintained over a school year (Bowker, 2004; Değirmencioglu, Urberg, Tolson, & Richard, 1998; Poulin & Chan, 2010), there are many youth for whom friends “come and go,” particularly following the transition to middle school (Hardy, Bukowski, & Sippola, 2002). Friends who once spent the entire day together in self-contained elementary school classrooms might have little contact in the new middle school environment where there are increased opportunities to form new friendships based on a much larger pool of peers. Given that high-quality friendships provide important resources to promote academic motivation and engagement (Hosan & Hoglund, 2017) and that changes in close friendships weaken access to friendship provisions (e.g., emotional support and intimacy; Aikins, Bierman, & Parker, 2005; Berndt, Hawkins, & Hoyle, 1986), youth with high levels of friendship instability may therefore lack the necessary support to stay engaged in class and do well academically. That is, without a stable and secure friendship base, youth may participate less and withdraw from classroom activities (Ladd et al., 1996).

Although no studies to date have examined the impact of friendship instability on academic outcomes, mounting evidence suggests that changes in friendship can be disruptive. For example, Chan and Poulin (2009) found that friendship instability, computed as the number friendship losses and gains relative to the size of the friendship network, was related to elevated depressive symptoms in young adolescents. There is also evidence that discontinuity in other types of close relationships (e.g., romantic) places adolescents at risk for psychological and academic problems. For example, the dissolution of romantic relationships is related to emotional and behavioral maladjustment (e.g., depression, lower self-esteem, suicidality; Chen et al., 2009; Price, Hides, Cockshaw, Staneva, & Stoyanov, 2016). Likewise, having a greater number of dating partners takes a toll on emotional health and is related to declining academic performance and motivation between the ages of 12 and 16 (Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2001). It is presumed that the time required interacting with potential and actual partners displaces emotional and motivational resources that could be devoted to schoolwork (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2001). Although romantic relationships are fundamentally different in many ways from friendships inasmuch as they involve physical attraction and sexual intimacy (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999), instability of friends may also contribute to maladjustment. Thus, any changes (due to either dissolution or formation) in friendships are likely to cause disruption that undermines academic functioning.

Losing friends may be especially consequential after youth transition to middle school – a transition frequently accompanied by disruptions in social networks and associated with decreased motivation and academic performance (Eccles et al., 1993; Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004). At this time of multiple simultaneous changes (e.g., new peers, larger size and different organizational structure of the school), stable friends that serve as a “secure base” may be particularly important. Indeed, the maintenance of a friend across the middle school transition is related to more positive attitudes towards school, higher grades and teacher ratings of involvement (Aikins et al., 2005; Berndt & Keefe, 1995). Among young children, those who are able to maintain more friends following the transition into elementary school (i.e., kindergarten) show greater improvements in school performance and fewer school absences (Ladd, 1990). Accordingly, the lack of friendship maintenance, or the loss of friends, during the first year in middle school is expected to negatively impact academic functioning.

In addition to losing friends, acquiring new friends – although possibly exciting to young adolescents – also contributes to relationship instability. However, the impact of new friendships on academic functioning is less clear. Evidence from childhood suggests that friendship gains promote academic functioning by widening the circle of peers who can offer assistance with school-related tasks (Ladd, 1990). In adolescence, however, the process of developing new friendships may be distracting because recently formed friendships do not yet represent strong bases of intimacy or emotional support. Rather, gaining new friends, just as new romantic relationships (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2001), requires explicit effort and attention (Oden & Asher, 1977) that may interfere with academic focus and performance. After all, adolescents with new friends are likely to spend considerable time and effort managing the relationships (e.g., spending time together in school and planning out-of-school activities). Thus, gaining friends — much like losing friends — can then compromise academic engagement and performance.

1.2. Current study

The primary goal of the current study was to investigate whether instability of friends — a relatively normative experience during early adolescence (Meter & Card, 2017; Poulin & Chan, 2010) — is related to lower academic engagement and academic performance (i.e., GPA) across middle school. Whereas past studies have focused on the protective function of friendship maintenance (Aikins et al., 2005; Ladd, 1990; Ladd & Price, 1987), we focused here on the academic risks associated with instability. Friendship instability is defined to reflect not only lack of maintenance (i.e., loss of friends), but also formation of new friendships (Chan & Poulin, 2007, 2009). Moreover, rather than considering the degree to which the number of friends changes over time (e.g., Hardy et al., 2002), we specifically examined whether youth nominate the same or different grade mates as friends at the fall and spring of their first year in

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