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What Are Friends For?

The importance of friend groups in academic success



By Emily Neuhoff

Humans are social beings. We are innately responsive to those around us. Even infants turn their heads towards the sound of a human voice. Early in life, children begin to interact with other children outside the family; these new friendships are less intimate and safe than relationships at home, but they are essential for social development. Familial ties cannot substitute for the new friendships children make at school. Likewise, friends at school should not be a replacement for family members.

Think back to when you were eight or nine. Do you remember who your friends were? Does thinking about elementary school as a social experience bring about positive memories? Believe it or not, the friends we make in elementary school have a significant impact on things like self-esteem and academic success; experiences with early friendships are also a good predictor of delinquent behavior and social anxiety. Friends made early in life tend to have a greater influence on behavior, because young children are more likely to change the way they think and act in response to their peers. This does not mean that friends cannot influence behavior in adolescence and adulthood, but the influence is significantly weaker than that of friends in childhood. By adulthood most of us have developed a set of morals and values to live by, and

are more willing to make decisions based on our own wants and needs.

Assistant Professor Travis Wilson, the newest addition to Oberlin College's Psychology department, focuses his research on the effects of friend groups in elementary school students on academic success. More specifically, he examines ethnic and racial differences in the classroom, social peer status (popularity), and segregation patterns. In his 2011 study of 3rd and 4th graders, Wilson and his researchers found that African-American children tended to segregate from other races more often and were rated as less popular by children of other ethnicities, but only when the African-American children were the minority in the classroom. He also found that this segregation was positively associated with same-ethnicity social preference. This means that if children have a social preference for peers of their own race, they are more likely to spend their time with children of their own race than to integrate themselves with other ethnicities. This might seem obvious, but it implies that when children segregate themselves by race, they are consciously acting on a preference with full knowledge of the outcome.

Observing children's tendencies to segregate themselves into peer groups helps us understand the way they socialize in the context of both race and academic prowess. Wilson's findings are especially interesting because even at a young age, children are forming groups

with other children like them, oftentimes based on skin color. This is also true of academic distinctions: smarter kids start spending most of their time at school together once classes begin to be leveled in early middle school. These students are put into classes which challenge even the highest achieving students. In response to the rigorous course load, these students tend to form a group and spend time together outside of the classroom on schoolwork. This is one theory that explains why having more friends in elementary and middle school is significantly associated with attaining higher grades. However, this is not to say that students in average-level classes have fewer friends. Researchers clarify that students not in honors classes just spend less time on schoolwork and tend not to use their friends as academic resources. Obviously there are other factors involved in predicting academic achievement, but friend groups and their influence over young students seems to be one of the strongest predictors of success at school.

Although the influence of friends declines with age, peers will always be important. How do you remember your early school years? The memories may not be preserved perfectly in your mind, but the experience has left its mark. Remember this when you are raising your own children: good friend-making skills are useful for more than just creating an exciting social life. ●