

Friends' school achievement influences high school girls' interest in math

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Girls in high school take as many math courses as boys, influenced by close friends and peers who are doing well in school. More than boys, girls look to their close friends when they make important decisions, such as whether to take math and what math classes to take, confirming how significant peers are during adolescence.

Those are the findings of a new study conducted by researchers at the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Pennsylvania, and Michigan State University. The study is published in the January/February 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Researchers looked at 6,547 high-school girls and boys who had a variety of relationships with peers and tracked the math courses they took. All of the students had taken part in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health from 1995 to 2001.

The researchers found that, contrary to popular opinion but in line with recent government findings, girls have caught up with boys in terms of the math courses they take in high school. One reason this is so, they found, is the kinds of friends and peers they have in high school. All teens—girls as well as boys—with close friends and other peers who made good grades took more higher-level math than other teens, according to the study. But the connection between these relationships and the math classes was stronger for girls than for boys.

In the end, social factors meant more for girls than for boys in decisions

about math coursework, especially when enrollment in math classes was optional and when girls were doing well in school.

“These findings stress the need to turn attention away from documenting gender differences in math course-taking in high school and toward looking at the reasons why girls and boys take different paths to the same outcomes,” according to Robert Crosnoe, associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin and the study’s lead author. “In other words, just because girls and boys might have the same academic standing at the end of high school does not mean that they got there in the same way.”

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Source: Society for Research in Child Development

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