

Middle school is when the right friends may matter most

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Marie-Helene Veronneau of the University of Oregon says that having pro-social friends helps middle school students do better academically. Credit: Photo by Jim Barlow

As adolescents move from elementary school into their middle or junior-high years, changes in friendships may signal potential academic success or troubles down the road, say University of Oregon researchers.

A new study, appearing in the February issue of the *Journal of Early Adolescence*, found that boys and [girls](#) whose [friends](#) are socially active in ways where rules are respected do better in their classroom work. Having friends who engage in [problem behavior](#), in contrast, is related to a decrease in their grades. Having pro-social friends and staying away from deviant peers proved more effective for academic payoffs than

simply being friends with high-achieving peers.

The middle school/junior high years are a major transition for children, as students move away from grade-school classrooms led by one teacher every day into an environment of multiple classes with different teachers and opportunities to make new friends. This new study -- conducted by Marie-Helene Veronneau and Thomas J. Dishion of the UO Child and Family Center -- focused solely on the role played by friendship on academic achievement.

Their findings emerged from data collected in a [longitudinal study](#) of 1,278 students -- 55 percent of them girls -- done previously by center researchers. In that study, students named their three best friends. Instead of relying on student reports of their peers' behaviors and grades, researchers in the new study looked specifically at behavioral and academic records of the friends.

A surprise discovery was that girls who already were struggling academically in sixth grade actually suffered later when their chosen friends were already those making the highest grades, Veronneau said. "We don't know the mechanisms on why it is this way for girls, but we can speculate that girls compare themselves to their friends and then decide they are not doing very well. Perhaps this affects their self-efficacy and belief in their own abilities."

For girls already doing well in sixth grade, however, there was an opposite influence. "It could be for these girls, having friends who also are getting good grades, school is challenging and stimulating, and they end up doing better than expected," she said.

The study's findings clearly show that in the middle school years "a great deal of learning is taking place that is not being attended to," said Dishion, director of the Child and Family Center and professor of school

psychology. "Puberty is taking place. The brain is changing rapidly. Kids' brains are almost wired to be reading the social world to see how they fit in, and the school is the arena for it."

These transitional years may be pivotal, Dishion said. In a previous longitudinal study, he said, he and colleagues looked at the impacts of peer relationships of young people at ages 13, 15 and 17 to look for predictive indicators of life adjustments at age 24. Those influences at age 13 -- going back to [middle school](#) -- were the most influential, he noted. While instruction in school is vitally important, he said, it may be that more eyes should be looking at shifting peer relationships.

In their conclusions, Dishion and Veronneau suggested that responsible adults -- at school and at home -- "should pay special attention" to changes in [friendships](#) and encourage students to pursue and participate in adult-supervised activities to promote pro-social relationships.

"Parents should pay attention to what their kids are doing and with whom they hang out," Veronneau said. "If parents notice that there is a shift in a child's friendship network, they should try to get to know those kids, talk with teachers and communicate naturally with their own child about where they are going and when they will be coming home."

Provided by University of Oregon

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