

What are friends for? Negating negativity

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"Stand by me" is a common refrain when it comes to friendship but new research from Concordia University proves that the concept goes beyond pop music: keeping friends close has real physiological and psychological benefits.

The presence of a best friend directly affects children going through [negative experiences](#), as reported in the recent Concordia-based study, which was published in the journal [Developmental Psychology](#) and conducted with the collaboration of researchers at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Feelings of self-worth and levels of cortisol, a hormone produced naturally by the adrenal gland in direct response to stress, are largely dependent on the social context of a negative experience.

"Having a best friend present during an [unpleasant event](#) has an immediate impact on a child's body and mind," says co-author William M. Bukowski, a [psychology professor](#) and director of the Concordia Centre for Research in Human Development. "If a child is alone when he or she gets in trouble with a teacher or has an argument with a classmate, we see a measurable increase in cortisol levels and decrease in feelings of self-worth."

A total of 55 boys and 48 girls from grades 5 and 6 in local Montreal schools took part in the study. Participants kept journals on their feelings and experiences over the course of four days and submitted to regular saliva tests that monitored [cortisol levels](#).

Although previous studies have shown that friendships can protect against later adjustment difficulties, this study is the first to definitively demonstrate that the presence of a friend results in an immediate benefit for the child undergoing a negative experience.

These results have far-reaching implications. "Our physiological and psychological reactions to negative experiences as children impacts us later in life," explains Bukowski. "Excessive secretion of cortisol can lead to significant physiological changes, including immune suppression and decreased bone formation. Increased stress can really slow down a child's development." When it comes to feelings of self-worth, Bukowski goes on, "what we learn about ourselves as children is how we form our adult identities. If we build up [feelings](#) of low self-worth during childhood, this will translate directly into how we see ourselves as adults."

The study builds on previous research at Concordia that has shown multiple friendships inoculate against negative outcomes such as bullying, exclusion and other kinds of aggression.

More information: The paper, "The Presence of a Best Friend Buffers the Effects of Negative Experiences," is published in the journal *Developmental Psychology*. psycnet.apa.org/journals/dev/47/6/1786

Provided by Concordia University

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