Playground peers can predict adult personalities

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Even on the playground, our friends know us better than we know ourselves. New research has revealed that your childhood peers from grade school may be able to best predict your success as an adult.

Lisa Serbin of the Department of Psychology at Concordia University and Alexa Martin-Storey, a recent Concordia graduate and a current post-doctoral student at the University of Texas – both members of the Concordia-based Centre for Research in Human Development – recently published a study online, which reveals that childhood peer evaluation of classmate personalities can more accurately predict adulthood success than self-evaluation at that age.

"This study, known as the Concordia Longitudinal Risk Project, was started in 1976 by my colleagues in the Department of Psychology, Alex Schwartzman and Jane Ledingham, who is now at the University of Ottawa" says Serbin. "Over two years, Montreal students in grades 1, 4 and 7 completed peer evaluations of their classmates and rated them in terms of aggression, likeability and social withdrawal. The students also did self-evaluations."

Over the next 20 years, these children were closely followed as researchers used the exhaustive longitudinal study to track their progress into adulthood. A follow-up survey was conducted between 1999 and 2003 with nearly 700 of the participants from the initial study. The survey included measurement of adult personality traits, such as levels of neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness and

conscientiousness.

"We were able to compare peer and self-perceptions of the childhood behaviours to these adult personality factors," says Martin-Storey. "We found the evaluations from the group of peers were much more closely associated with eventual adult outcomes than were their own personality perceptions from childhood. This makes sense, since children are around their peers all day and behaviours like aggressiveness and likeability are extremely relevant in the school environment."

For example, children who perceived themselves as socially withdrawn exhibited less conscientiousness as adults. On the other hand, kids whose peers perceived them as socially withdrawn grew up to exhibit lower levels of extraversion. The latter being a more accurate association.

Peer-perceived likeability also predicted a more accurate outcome, associating the personality trait with higher levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness, and lower levels of neuroticism than those who thought of themselves as likeable. Overall, the findings supported the use of peer rather than self-ratings of childhood personalities in the prediction of adulthood success.

"Adult personality traits are associated with a lot of important life factors, such as health, mental health and occupational satisfaction," says Serbin. "The information from our study could be used to promote better longitudinal outcomes for children by helping kids and parents develop effective mechanisms for addressing aggressive or socially withdrawn behaviours and promoting more pro-social behaviour."

Provided by Concordia University

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