

What predicts the quality of children's friendships? Study shows cognition, emotion together play

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Whether children think their peers' intentions are benign or hostile, and how those children experience and express their own emotions, may

influence the quality of their friendships, according to a new study from the University of Illinois.

Friendships play an important role in children's psychological and behavioral adjustment, especially during the transition to adolescence. Some friendships may even provide positive support and act as buffers against stress at home. Others may have negative features such as conflict or rivalry.

Child development researchers at U of I wanted to look at what predicts the quality of children's friendships. In a recent study published in the journal *Child Development*, the researchers measured a child's cognitions about negative but ambiguous peer events (attribution biases) and the child's tendency to experience and express strong emotions ([emotional intensity](#)).

"We were most interested in understanding how children's cognitions and emotions worked together to predict whether child-[friend](#) interactions were more cooperative and positive or more negative and conflictual," says Nancy McElwain, a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at U of I.

Xi Chen, a doctoral student in the department and lead author of the study, explains that it was an interest in emotion that drove her to do the study. "But emotion doesn't stand by itself. It comes together with cognition in a social context when a child is interacting with others."

For the study, Chen and McElwain examined data from 913 study children (50 percent were boys; 78 percent were non-Hispanic white) and their friends who were participants in the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Children and their friends were observed during a series of interactive tasks at grades 4 and 6.

Children's attribution biases were assessed during interviews at grade 4, during which children were presented with scenarios depicting negative but ambiguous peer events (e.g., your radio is broken by a peer) and asked how they would interpret the peer's intention in each scenario (e.g., Did the peer mean to break your radio, or was it an accident?).

Responses that the peer intended to cause harm indicate a hostile bias. Responses that the peer did not intend to cause harm indicate a benign bias. Teachers also reported on children's emotional intensity at grade 4.

Children's biases predicted child-friend interaction quality at grade 6, but only when children had high levels of emotional intensity. For instance, a more hostile attribution bias, combined with high emotional intensity, predicted more negative child-friend interaction. But in contrast, a more benign attribution bias, combined with high [emotional](#) intensity, predicted more positive child-friend interaction.

"Emotional intensity may act as 'fuel' that motivates or spurs behavior," Chen explains. "At the same time, biases may act as the 'compass' that points children's behavior in a certain direction. Children who hold a more hostile bias, for example, may be more likely to act out and engage in negative interactions with friends when the hostile bias is fueled by intense emotions."

"Likewise, children who hold a more benign bias may engage in more positive behavior with friends, especially when this [bias](#) is again fueled by intense emotions," McElwain adds.

Though they did not address specific behaviors in the study, Chen adds that for children who tend to perceive peers' intentions as benign, and also tend to experience intense emotions, they might be more emotionally engaged when playing together with a friend, may initiate more pro-social behaviors, and share more laughter and positive

interactions.

For children who tend to perceive their peers' intentions as hostile and also who tend experience intense emotions, Chen says they may be more likely to act out, to "fight back" or attack their friends, or withdraw from interactions with friends.

There are ways that parents and teachers can help children develop quality relationships.

"One take-home message for parents and teachers is recognition that intense emotions can be beneficial. When paired with positive cognitions, intense emotion can promote positive interaction with friends," says McElwain.

Chen adds, "A challenge is helping children who show negative cognitions. Adults can help by modeling positive views about negative events when the situation warrants. An example would be telling the child, 'I don't think he meant to spill the milk on your homework. It was an accident.' A trusted adult might also ask - in a nonjudgmental way - about the child's thoughts about unintended negative events."

Often, a first good step in minimizing biases is recognizing they exist. "During adolescence, [children](#) are increasingly able to discuss and reflect on their own cognitions. So, this period of development, in particular, may be one in which negative cognitions and biases are open to change," McElwain explains.

More information: Xi Chen et al, Interactive Contributions of Attribution Biases and Emotional Intensity to Child-Friend Interaction Quality During Preadolescence, *Child Development* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13012](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13012)

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