

Copy-cat? Youth with few friends conform to stay in a friend's 'good graces'

February 7 2023



The study revealed that the total number of friends that a child has is not the issue. What matters is whether or not the child has fewer friends than the partner. Credit: Florida Atlantic University

Peer influence is pervasive during childhood and adolescence.

Conformity can foster similarity, which makes it easier to get along and reduces the risk that disagreements over dissimilarities will rupture a friendship. Seen in this light, conformity is an effective strategy for appeasing friends and maintaining the potentially hard to replace benefits friendships provide.

But what gives one friend influence over another? Considerable attention has focused on who influences whom; much less is known about why one [partner](#) is prone to be influenced by the other.

Florida Atlantic University researchers tested the hypothesis that within a friend dyad, having fewer friends than one's partner increases susceptibility to influence, because it reduces dissimilarity and promotes compatibility. The study involved a diverse community sample of public middle school sixth graders in reciprocated friendships in Southern California, who were followed across a single academic year.

Teachers reported on students' prosocial behavior and academic engagement. Students reported on their own social anxiety and somatic symptoms (physical distress cues such as stomach aches) during the fall and spring of sixth grade.

The results, published in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, indicated that partners with fewer friends were influenced by children with more friends. In each case, the partner with fewer friends became more similar to the partner with more friends. Academic engagement was the only domain where partners with fewer friends also influenced partners with more friends.

"Of particular importance is that susceptibility depended not on having few friends, but instead on having fewer friends than one's partner. Children with the greatest number of friends were not the most influential; nor were children with the fewest friends the most

susceptible to influence," said Brett Laursen, Ph.D., a professor of psychology in FAU's Charles E. Schmidt College of Science.

"Imagine two students in the same classroom who have the same number of friends. Both are not equally susceptible to influence. Perhaps the clearest evidence on this point is that youth with only one other friend were susceptible to influence from partners who had relatively more friends, but not from partners who had relatively fewer friends."

Laursen notes that the total number of friends that a child has is not the issue. What matters is whether or not the child has fewer friends than the partner.

"Compared to the partner with relatively more friends, the partner with fewer friends has more to fear from the loss of the relationship and is therefore more invested in its success. Children with more to lose from friendship dissolution are aware that conformity helps to preserve existing friendships, by strengthening similarities that serve as a foundation for shared enjoyment and by reducing potential sources of conflict that may disrupt exchanges," said Laursen.

"They also know that their partner, the one with more friends, will not have as much difficulty finding someone else to hang around with and therefore does not have an incentive to be accommodating. Someone has to bend and the partner with fewer [friends](#) assume that they are that someone."

The authors say that for those with few alternatives, conformity may be an important strategy to strengthen friendship ties, promoting compatibility by reducing dissimilarity.

"There may be costs associated with conformity, but many youth are willing to bear them, apparently to stay in the good graces of a friend."

More information: Sharon Faur et al, Adolescents with Few Friend Alternatives are Particularly Susceptible to Influence from Friends, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s10964-022-01718-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-022-01718-x)

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

Citation: Copy-cat? Youth with few friends conform to stay in a friend's 'good graces' (2023, February 7) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-02-copy-cat-youth-friends-conform-stay.html>

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