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Early Behavior Problems Appear to Lead to Peer Rejection and Friendlessness, Which Can Lead to Depression and Loneliness in Adolescence

Behavior problems in the early grades appear to lead to peer rejection and a lack of friends in elementary school. This, in turn, can lead to early adolescent depression and loneliness.

Those are the findings of a new study by researchers at the Universities of Montreal and Oslo; the study is published in the July/August 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Researchers collected information from 551 children beginning when the children were 6 years old and continuing annually until they were 13. They also collected information from the children's teachers, mothers, and peers.

Specifically, teachers and mothers described the children's levels of anxiety (including a tendency to prefer solitary play and to fear new situations) and their disruptiveness (including physical aggression and hyperactivity) when the children were 6 and 7. Classroom peers reported on the children they liked most and least each year from ages 8 to 11. Children reported how many friends they had each year from ages 8 to 11, as well as their own levels of depression, loneliness, and involvement with delinquent behaviors at ages 12 and 13.

The researchers found that children who were disruptive in early childhood were more likely to be rejected and lack friends in elementary school. Anxious children also tended to have few friends, although they were not more likely to be rejected by their peers.

The study also found that rejection contributes to the risk that children won't have friends. Children who are rejected early in elementary school are more likely to lack friends later in elementary school.

Both rejection and a lack of friends in elementary school put children at risk for adjustment problems in adolescence, the researchers found. Specifically, children who are rejected in elementary school are more likely to be lonely as adolescents, while children who lack friends in the early grades—a critical time for the development of close, reciprocal relationships—are more likely to be lonely and depressed as teenagers. In contrast, rejection and a lack of friends don't put children at risk for delinquency—only early disruptiveness does that.

“The study's findings indicate that the developmental consequences of risky peer relations are not limited to childhood,” according to Sara Pedersen, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Montreal's Research Unit on Children's Psychosocial Maladjustment and lead author of the study. “These results suggest that interventions to prevent adolescent depression and loneliness should target elementary school

peer relationships. The results also reveal that interventions targeting only childhood rejection and friendlessness are unlikely to prevent later delinquency.”

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 78, Issue 4, *The Timing of Middle Childhood Peer Rejection and Friendship: Linking Early Behavior to Early Adolescent Adjustment* by Pedersen, S, Vitaro, F, Barker, ED (University of Montreal), and Borge, AIH (University of Oslo). Copyright 2007 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.