



Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

1313 L Street, NW • Washington, DC 20005

OFFICE: (202) 289-7905 • FAX: (202) 289-4203

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Contact Information:

Andrea Browning
Society for Research in Child Development
Office for Policy and Communications
(202) 289-7905
abrowning@srcd.org

The Status of Adolescent Peer Groups Plays a Role in Understanding How Groups Influence Preteen and Early Teen Behavior

Children who are part of the cool group are more likely to be influenced by their friends than children who are friends with peers who are kind, nice, and well-liked.

That's one of the findings of a new study published in the July/August 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

Acknowledging that by early adolescence, peer groups have a significant influence on children's behavior, researchers at the University of Western Ontario sought to determine whether some peer groups are more influential than others. Specifically, they contrasted the effects of two types of peer group status on youngsters' deviant, aggressive, and prosocial behavior. The first type of group (group centrality) had children who were cool and popular. The second type (group liking) was made up of the kind, nice children everyone likes.

The researchers looked at 526 Canadian children in grades 5 through 8 who reported on their deviant behavior (such as theft and skipping school) and identified peer groups in their grade. The children also were asked to nominate classmates in their grade who were physically aggressive (children who started fights), social aggressive (children who excluded others), prosocial (children who were kind to others), and whom they liked the most and the least. The children, whose average age was 12, identified 116 peer groups.

Over a three-month period, the researchers found that the children generally tended to become more similar in behavior to the others in their group. However, this occurred to a much greater extent in popular groups than in well-liked groups. Children's strong desire to belong to a popular group, together with pressure from group members to conform to group norms, may account for the profound influence of such groups. Group liking affected adolescents' behavior only when groups were disliked; members of deviant disliked groups became more deviant over time, the researchers found.

"Our results have important practical implications," suggested Wendy E. Ellis, assistant professor of psychology at King's University College at the University of Western Ontario and the study's lead author. "Although being a member of a popular group may bring benefits such as positive social behavior and esteem, potential costs include higher rates of risky behavior and social aggression. Preservation of popular status may propel group members beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior, and high motivation to belong to popular groups may cause group members to resist adult intervention attempts.

"In the long-term, however, popular group members may fare better than disliked children in

deviant groups who have little exposure to prosocial behavior models and poor social relationships.”

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 78, Issue 4, *Peer Group Status as a Moderator of Group Influence on Children's Deviant, Aggressive and Prosocial Behavior* by Ellis, WE, and Zarbatany, L (the University of Western Ontario). Copyright 2007 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.