

'You've Got A Friend' – And That's Good For Teens' Mental Health Down The Road

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If you are a well-adjusted young adult, you might want to thank your high school BFF.

New research from the University of Virginia shows teenagers who had stronger, closer relationships in middle adolescence tend to be less depressed and have lower social anxiety and increased self-worth when they are 25. Conversely, teenagers who were more popular in high school, with many

weaker relationships, may be more prone to social anxiety later in life.

“What we found is that peer relationships during adolescence seem to have some clear, long-term relations with mental health,” said Rachel Narr, a Ph.D. candidate in clinical psychology at UVA.



Ph.D. candidate Rachel Narr led the study with Joseph Allen, UVA's Hugh P. Kelly Professor of Psychology. (Photo by Dan Addison, University Communications)

Narr and her team tracked a sample of 169 ethnically and socioeconomically diverse adolescents for 10 years. Starting at age 15, the teens were asked who their closest friends were and participated in interviews about feelings of anxiety, social acceptance, self-worth and symptoms of depression. Those teens' close friends also shared their views on how attached they felt to their friend.

Popularity was defined as the number of peers in the teens' grade who ranked them as someone with whom they wanted to spend time. This was measured using nominations from all of the teens.

The research found that neither having solid friendships nor being popular pointed to short-term changes in mental health. The difference only appeared later, regardless of experiences in the interim.

The study results, which were just published in the journal *Child Development*, are unique.

“We know a fair amount about how different types of peer relationships correlate, during adolescence, with how people are doing, what kinds of things they are doing, and so forth,” Narr said. “But there has really not been much work looking at how different types of peer relationships predict mental health later in life.”

Narr said she had a hunch that a healthy relationship in middle adolescence would set a person up for good mental health later down the line. “On the other hand, we had thought ‘Well, kids who are well-liked or are popular with their peer group – maybe they have the skills it takes to go on to be successful in a bunch of different types of relationships.’ So we weren’t exactly sure which direction it would go.”

Narr said the results are potentially important for parents and educators alike.

“A lot of adults sort of treat adolescent relationships and friendships as something that’s kind of juvenile or transient – not something that’s going to stay with them – as kind of a distraction from things like school or work,” she said.

She said the findings suggest that’s really not the case at all. “Teenagers are really onto something when they are kind of obsessed with their peer group,” she said. “These relationships are meaningful long-term. Maybe as adults we should be giving them a little bit more weight and a little bit more seriousness than we do a lot of the time.”

Narr said building relationships on status and on pseudo-mature behaviors is where teens can run into problems with the “popularity thing.”

And there isn’t a magic number when it comes to the number of close friendships teens should have. “I think that just having the experience, whether it’s with one person, with three people, whatever, it is having an experience of having a really close, trusting, supportive relationship that goes really far.”

The study was co-led by Joseph Allen, UVA’s Hugh P. Kelly Professor of Psychology. “Being well-liked by a large group of people cannot take the place of forging deep, supportive friendships,” he said. “And these experiences stay with us, over and above what happens later. As technology makes it increasingly easy to build a social network of superficial friends, focusing time and attention on cultivating close connections with a few individuals should be a priority.”

MEDIA CONTACT

Jane Kelly

*University News Associate
Office of University Communications
jak4g@virginia.edu
● (434) 243-9935*

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