

## PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S FRIENDSHIPS AND PEER ACCEPTANCE: LINKS TO SOCIAL COMPETENCE

Eric W. Lindsey  
Texas Tech University

Preschool children (166 three- to six-year-olds; *M* age = 62 months) were interviewed using standard sociometric procedures and teachers were asked to rate children's aggression and peer competence. Based on children's reciprocal *like most* nominations, 73% of children had at least one mutual friendship and 27% had two or more mutual friendships. Children with at least one mutual friend were better liked by peers and were rated by teachers as being more competent than children with no mutual friend. Longitudinal analysis with 36 children followed over two years revealed that children with at least one mutual friend at year one were better liked by peers a year later than children with no mutual friend, even after controlling for children's year one peer acceptance level. In addition, both concurrent and longitudinal analyses revealed that children who were mutual friends were similar in their level of aggression, peer competence, and peer acceptance. The findings of this study suggest that mutual friendship is an important factor in children's social development as early as the preschool years.

Children's ability to form positive relationships with peers represents an important component of social development (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). One feature of children's peer relationships of interest to both parents and teachers is the phenomena of friendship. Evidence suggests that children begin to discriminate among peer partners and form preferences for particular playmates within their peer groups as early as toddlerhood (Corsaro, 1985; Howes, 1983; Ross & Lollis, 1989). By preschool, over half of all children have reciprocated friendships and many of these friendships are stable over time (Gershman & Hayes, 1983). Evidence suggests that these early friendships may be differentiated from other peer relationships by the amount of time children spend in close proximity to each other and by friends' engagement in reciprocal and complementary interaction (Howes, 1983; Howes & Phillipson, 1992). Despite the early appearance of friendships, there is a noticeable lack of attention given to the study of preschool children's friendships (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Consequently, questions remain concerning the unique characteristics of children's friendships compared to other aspects of peer relationships in the preschool years, as well as questions about the role that similarity plays in preschool children's friendships.

In order to determine the developmental significance of children's friendships, it is important to consider how the ability to establish and maintain a friendship is related to other dimensions of children's social functioning. In particular, researchers have pointed to the necessity of distinguishing between children's peer group acceptance and having friends (e.g., Bukowski & Hoza, 1989; Parker & Asher, 1993). Acceptance refers to being generally well liked by a group of peers, rather than participation in a specific dyadic relationship. Friendship, in contrast, is a close dyadic relationship between two individuals. Research with school-age children

and adolescents suggests that acceptance and friendship are unique, but related, domains of children's peer relationships (see Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996). In one of the only studies to examine both friendship status and peer acceptance in early childhood, Ladd (1990) found that children who formed new friendships in their Kindergarten classroom experienced improvements in school performance over the course of the year. In contrast, peer rejection predicted less favorable attitudes toward school, greater school avoidance, and lower levels of academic performance at the end of the school year. Although the author did not compare the relative contribution of friendship status and peer rejection to school adjustment, his findings suggest that both may provide preschoolers with different developmental opportunities, and may differ in adaptive significance. Additional research is needed to clarify the extent to which children's mutual friendships represent a distinct facet of social competence during preschool, separate from the ability to gain acceptance in the classroom more generally.

To the extent that children's friendships represent a unique component of their social milieu, it is important to consider what processes may account for friendship formation. Of particular interest are the patterns of attraction that lead children to seek out others with whom to become friends (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996; Clark & Ayers, 1988). The importance of this issue centers on evidence that friends become major socializing agents over the course of childhood, influencing children's behavior, self-perceptions, and attitudes (Snyder, Dishon, & Patterson, 1986). We do know that young children are more likely to form friendships with children who they see on a regular basis and that preschool friends are more likely to maintain close proximity to one another than children who are not friends (Corsaro, 1985; Howes, 1983). It also has been found that young children make more social overtures, or interactive bids, to friends than to non-friends (Ross & Lollis, 1989). In his seminal investigation of young children's emerging friendships, Gottman (1983) identified similarity, connectedness, and conflict negotiation as important processes in the formation and maintenance of friendships. In seeking out others with whom to become friends, preschool children demonstrate preferences for peers who are similar to themselves in terms of age (Guralnick & Groom, 1988), sex (Maccoby, 1988), race (Finkelstein & Haskins, 1983; Singleton & Asher, 1979) and physical attractiveness (Vaughn & Waters, 1981). It is less clear whether patterns of affiliation between preschool friends extend to behavioral domains. Howes and Phillipson (1992) found that preschool-aged friends were less similar to each other in social skills than toddler-age friends. In contrast, Rubin, Lynch, Coplan, Rose-Krasnor, and Booth (1994) found that, among a sample of 7-year-olds, children who displayed a clear preference for one previously unfamiliar peer over another demonstrated similar behaviors as the preferred peer. Given the discrepancy between these two studies and the limited data on preschool children's friendships, additional research is needed to explore the role of similarity in young children's friendships.

A major limitation in the study of children's friendships is the lack of casual data from longitudinal designs. As a result, it is not clear to what extent children's friendship status predicts their future adaptation. Furthermore, as evident by the limitations of the research cited previously, there are a number of questions

regarding friendship processes that remain to be addressed by longitudinal research. For example, does the contribution of children's friendship status differ from the contribution of children's overall peer acceptance in determining future social functioning? In addition, although evidence points to similarity as an important component of friendship, the majority of this research has focused on school age children. Thus, a question that remains to be addressed is "Do preexisting similarities between preschool children result in the formation of friendship or do preschool age friends become more similar over time?" Finally, how do similarities between friends influence children's future behavior? The present study addresses these issues by examining data on a subsample of preschoolers for whom data was collected over two consecutive years.

In summary, this paper expands previous research on children's friendships by examining two issues concerning friendship during early childhood. First, the relative contribution of children's mutual friendship status and peer acceptance was examined in relation to children's social competence. Based on previous research with older children, it was expected that children involved in mutual friendship would also be better liked by peers and would be rated by teachers as being more competent. It also was predicted that children's friendship status and peer acceptance would make nonoverlapping contributions to teacher ratings of children's social competence. However, it was expected that children's peer acceptance would account for more of the variance in teacher rated social competence than friendship status. These hypotheses were expected to hold true in longitudinal analyses, involving data for a subsample of children, in which peer acceptance and friendship status at year one were examined in relation to children's year two teacher rated competence and peer acceptance. Second, characteristics of mutual friends were examined to determine if behavioral similarity is a characteristic of preschoolers' friendships. It was expected that children in mutual friendship dyads would be behaviorally similar, as indicated by their having similar scores on teacher rated social competence, and peer acceptance.

### *Method*

#### *Participants*

Over a period of 5 consecutive years, 216 children (111 males) ranging in age from 45 to 85 months ( $M = 62.23$ ,  $SD = 9.33$ ) were recruited from 14 classrooms at a university sponsored preschool-Kindergarten program in a small southern city. The center served predominately European-American, middle-class families and students. The participants represented 76% of all children enrolled in these classrooms (20 children failed to receive parental consent and researchers were unable to collect sociometric data for 15 additional children). The sample was 77% White, 7% Black, 8% Asian or Hispanic, and 9% were classified as other.

Data were collected on all children. However, because we were interested in identifying children with and without mutual friendships (see subsequently), children with no mutual friend, who nominated a classmate with missing sociometric data as a liked-most peer, were excluded from analyses to eliminate the possibility that they might have had a mutual friend who could not be identified due to

missing data. In addition, for the purposes of examining characteristics of children involved in a friendship, one member of each mutual friendship pair was selected at random to serve as a target child in data analysis in order to eliminate problems of multicollinearity that would result from using data from both friends. Data from the other member of the friendship pair was used only in analysis examining similarity between mutual friends. Based on these procedures, 166 children (83 males) ranging in age from 43 to 80 months ( $M = 61.89$ ,  $SD = 8.70$ ) were identified as target children from mutual friendship dyads. Included in this sample are 36 children with complete data who attended the center for two consecutive years during the five years of data collection (10 from 1 to 2 years, 9 from 2 to 3 years, 8 from 3 to 4 years, and 9 from 4 to 5 years). Data from both their years of attendance are included in the analyses. In addition, their data was examined longitudinally.

### Measures

**Mutual friendship.** In the spring of each year of data collection, sociometric assessments were conducted in each classroom, following the procedure described by Asher, Singleton, Tinsley, and Hymel (1979). In individual interviews, children were shown head and shoulder photographs of classmates and asked to name each child. After each classmate had been identified, children were asked to nominate three peers with whom they liked to play and three peers with whom they did not like to play. We then examined the choice matrix within each classroom to identify children who nominated each other as liked most and liked least playmates. *Mutual friendship* pairs were identified on the basis of reciprocal liked-most nominations. Children were considered to be mutual friends if a classmate they nominated as among their liked-most playmates in turn included them among his or her list of three preferred playmates. Based on recommendations by Bukowski and Hoza (1989), children's *friendship extensivity* was also identified based on the number of their mutual friendships. Of all children with at least one mutual friend ( $N = 122$ ), 35% of children had two mutual friendships and 7% of children had three mutual friendships.

**Level of acceptance.** Following the nominations procedure of the sociometric interview, children were provided with training in how to use a "liking" scale for rating each classmate. This was done by teaching the children to sort pictures of familiar foods into boxes according to whether they like the food *a lot* (indicated by a happy face and assigned a rating of 3), *only a little, or sort of* (indicated by a neutral face and assigned a rating of 2), and *not at all* (indicated by a frowning face and assigned a rating of 1). Then children were shown the photographs of their classmates in random order and asked to rate how much each was liked as a playmate and placing the photograph in the photograph in the appropriate box.

A child's level of acceptance was determined from the average rating received from his or her classmates, standardized within gender within each classroom. Children were classified as *high-accepted* ( $n = 12$  boys and 15 girls) if their received rating z score was greater than or equal to 1. Children were classified as *low-accepted* ( $n = 16$  boys and 16 girls) if their z score was less than or equal to -1. The remaining children ( $n = 55$  boys and 52 girls) were classified as *average-accepted*. The high-accepted and low accepted group represented the highest 16% and lowest 19% of

the sample in terms of acceptance, respectively.

*Teacher ratings of social competence.* The head teacher of each classroom completed an adaptation of the Teacher Checklist of Peer Relations (Coie & Dodge, 1988). The Teacher Checklist yields scores for peer acceptance (6 items: sample "Other children like this child and seek him or her out for play"), social skills (7 items: sample, "Is aware of the effects of his or her behavior on others"), and aggressiveness (4 items: sample, "Starts fights with peers"). Composites were formed for each scale that was highly internally consistent ( $\alpha = .69, .95, \text{ and } .91$ , respectively). These scales were in turn moderately intercorrelated (absolute value of  $r_s = .35$  to  $.67$ ). A composite *teacher-rated social competence* ( $\alpha = .92$ ) was created by averaging the peer acceptance and social skills items. *Teacher-rated aggression* ( $\alpha = .91$ ) was retained as a separate variable.

### Results

#### *Friendship extensivity*

Examination of the mutual friendship variable revealed that 74% of the children in this sample had at least one mutual friend. Examination of mutual friendship among children of different levels of acceptance revealed that 50% of low-accepted, 77% of average-accepted, and 89% of high-accepted children had at least one mutual friend.

In order to examine gender and sociometric status differences in children's mutual friendships, a 2 x 3 analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, with gender (boy vs. girl) and level of acceptance (high, average, low), as independent variables. A significant effect for level of acceptance,  $F(2, 165) = 7.08, p < .001$  was observed. There was no significant effect for gender, nor did gender significantly interact with Level of Acceptance. Post hoc (Tukey) comparisons indicated that low-accepted children had significantly fewer friends,  $M = 0.63, SD = 0.75$ , than average-accepted children,  $M = 1.50, SD = .86$ , or high-accepted children,  $M = 1.33, SD = 0.79$ .

The relationship between the acceptance levels of mutual friends also was examined. All dyads that met the criteria for mutual friendship ( $N = 123$ ) were classified according to the level of acceptance of each partner. There were no dyads involving low-accepted children, 22 dyads were composed of a low-accepted and an average-accepted child, 3 dyads were composed of a low-accepted child and a high-accepted child, 60 dyads included 2 average-accepted children, 33 dyads consisted of an average accepted and a high accepted child, and 5 dyads were composed of 2 high-accepted children.

#### *Mutual Friendship, Acceptance and Teacher Rated Competence*

In order to examine friendship, sociometric and gender differences in children's teacher rated competence, a 2 x 3 x 2 ANOVA was conducted, with Friendship status (friended vs. friendless) x Level of acceptance (high, average, low) x Gender as independent variables. This analysis yielded a significant main effect for acceptance level,  $F(2, 165) = 4.32, p < .02$ , and a significant main effect for friendship status  $F(1, 165) = 3.95, p < .05$ , but no friendship status x acceptance level

interaction. There was no significant main effect for gender, nor were there any significant interactions between gender and acceptance level, or gender by friendship status. Post hoc comparisons (Tukey) indicated that low-accepted children,  $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = .69$ , had significantly lower teacher ratings of competence than did average-accepted children,  $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = .73$ , and high-accepted children,  $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = .68$ . Likewise, the main effect for friendship status indicated that children without mutual friends,  $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = .72$ , had lower teacher ratings than children with mutual friends,  $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = .71$ .

In order to examine the relative contribution of children's friendship status and sociometric status in the prediction of teacher rated competence, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted with the subsample of 123 children with mutual friends. Because of the significant negative correlation between teacher rated social competence and teacher rated aggression ( $r = -.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), in order to avoid redundancy, analyses were conducted only with teacher rated social competence. In the first regression, level of acceptance was entered first and accounted for a significant 9% ( $p = .001$ ). Mutual friendship status was entered second and accounted for an additional, significant 4% ( $p = .01$ ) of the variance in teacher rated competence. In the second regression, friendship status was entered first and accounted for a significant 7% ( $p = .001$ ). Level of acceptance was entered second and accounted for an additional, significant, 8% ( $p = .001$ ) of the variance in teacher rated competence.

### *Similarity between Mutual Friends*

Because it was of interest to examine possible similarities between children and their mutual friends, correlations were computed between teacher ratings and average peer acceptance scores of mutual friendship pairs. Results revealed a significant positive association between mutual friend's teacher ratings ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $r = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ , for teacher rated peer competence and aggression, respectively). In addition, there was a significant positive association between mutual friend's average rating of peer acceptance ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These findings suggest that mutual friends have similar behavioral styles in the eyes of both teachers and peers.

### *Longitudinal Analyses*

In order to examine changes in children's friendship status and social competence over time, a series of analyses were conducted with a subsample of participants for whom data were available over two consecutive years. Among these 36 children, at year one 26 had at least one mutual friendship, whereas 10 were friendless. At year two, 30 children had at least one mutual friendship and 6 were friendless, with 8 children gaining a mutual friend and 4 losing a mutual friend. Preliminary analysis revealed no significant difference between children who changed in friendship status and children whose friendship status did not change, on any variables used in the study. Out of 10 children whose mutual friend at year one also made the transition to year two, six children maintained their mutual friendship over the two year period, however, only one child from each of these friendship dyads was included in analyses using friendship status to predict changes in social competence.

Correlations between children's variables at year one revealed significant associations between mutual friend's teacher rated aggression ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ), teacher rated social competence ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ), and peer acceptance ( $r = .43, p < .01$ ) scores. Similarly, at year two significant correlations were found between teacher ratings of aggression ( $r = .51, p < .01$ ) and peer acceptance ( $r = .48, p < .01$ ) for mutual friends. Children's teacher rated aggression at year one was significantly associated with their mutual friend's teacher rated aggression score at year two ( $r = .44, p < .01$ ). Children's peer acceptance at year one was significantly associated with their mutual friend's peer acceptance ( $r = .31, p < .05$ ).

Next, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the contribution of friendship status and social competence to changes in social competence over time. In the first regression, teacher rated competence at year two was used as the criterion. Children's year one teacher rated social competence score was entered first and accounted for a near significant 8% ( $p = .09$ ) of the variance in year two teacher rated competence. Mutual friendship status at year one was entered second and failed to account for a significant proportion 1% ( $p = ns$ ) of the variance in year one teacher rated competence. In the second regression, children's year two-peer acceptance was used as the criterion. Children's peer acceptance at year one was entered first and accounted for a significant 30% ( $p = .001$ ). Mutual friendship status at year one was entered second and accounted for a significant additional 9% ( $p = .05$ ) of the variance in year two peer acceptance.

In summary, the longitudinal data indicate that the majority of children maintained their friendship status, if not their specific friendship, from one year to the next. Moreover, children appeared to be involved in friendships with other children who were behaviorally similar to themselves. Some support also was found for the hypothesis that friendship status and overall peer acceptance make distinct contributions to children's social competence.

### Discussion

The results of the present study are consistent with previous evidence indicating that children as young as preschool age develop and maintain friendships (Dunn, 1993). In the present sample, almost 75% of children had a least one friend in their classroom identified on the basis of mutual *like most* nominations. In addition, out of 10 friendship dyads that were not disrupted by one partner leaving the child care center, six maintained their friendship status across 2 years. This evidence is consistent with findings that, when given the opportunity, many young children do maintain their friendships over time (Gershman & Hayes, 1983; Howes, 1988), and belies arguments that stability is a characteristic only of friendships among older children (Furman & Bierman, 1984). At the same time, the findings suggest that most preschool children do not have the opportunity to maintain stable friendships given the changing nature of preschool attendance from year to year. It may be worthwhile for parents and teachers to invest effort in helping children maintain their friendships. Of course it is important that such efforts be guided by consideration of the possible effects such early friendships may have upon children's adjustment.

The present study also suggests that friendships do have important implications for preschool children's social functioning. Consistent with studies involving older children (Parker & Asher, 1993), friendship status was associated with measures of general peer acceptance and teacher rated social competence. The preschool children in the present study who were involved in a friendship were viewed by both peers and teachers as being more competent than children who had no friends. Moreover, children with a greater number of friends were rated by teachers as being more competent and were better liked by peers than were children who had fewer friends, or no friend at all, in the classroom. In addition, high-accepted preschoolers were almost twice as likely to be involved in mutual friendships as low-accepted preschoolers. Together, this evidence suggests that the social skills that contribute to preschool children's formation of friendships deserve greater attention. Efforts to identify friendship skills may help lead to the development of strategies to promote children's social functioning.

One question concerning the impact of children's friendship on adjustment outcomes has to do with the relative contribution of friendship status compared to general positive peer relationships. Despite the overlap between peer acceptance and friendship status in the present study, having a mutual friend contributed to the prediction of teacher rated social competence even after considering children's overall acceptance by classroom peers. Moreover, longitudinal analyses indicate that friendship status at year 1 made a unique contribution to children's peer acceptance at year 2. These findings support the contention that popularity and friendship are different aspects of children's peer relationships (e.g., Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). Thus, the ability to develop a mutual friendship seems to represent a unique social skill that may benefit young children in terms of developing meaningful social relationships.

This study also examined characteristics of young children's mutual friendships. Consistent with studies on older children's friendship (Cauce, 1986; Clarke & Ayers, 1988; Snyder, Dishon, & Patterson, 1986), similarity appeared to be an important component of preschool children's friendships. Friends were similar in terms of overall peer acceptance and teacher rated social competence. In addition, similarity between friends was observed over time, with children's teacher rated aggression and peer acceptance being associated with mutual friends' teacher rated aggression, and peer acceptance at year two. This finding, together with the fact that 15 children changed the person with whom they were friends, supports previous evidence suggesting that preschoolers seek out peers who are similar to themselves in forming friendships. This also suggests that children with behavior patterns that are extremely different from their peer group may have difficulty gaining general peer acceptance and developing friendships.

The results of this study have implications for efforts to intervene in children's development of positive peer relationships. Although intervention studies have shown that children can be taught social skills to improve their acceptance by peers (see Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996, for review), relatively little attention has been given to intervention in children's ability to make and maintain friendships (see Selman & Schultz, 1990, for an exception). The results of the present study join



with other studies to suggest that friendship and peer acceptance are two unique dimensions of children's peer relationships. Consequently, the skills associated with friendship formation and peer acceptance may not necessarily overlap. Thus, intervention efforts, which target only one or the other area of peer relationships, may be overlooking skills that have the potential to be beneficial to children. Moreover, given that a majority of the preschool children in the present sample had friendships, and that children with at least one friendship were more competent than children with no friend, the findings of this study suggest that efforts to improve children's friendship skills should begin at an early age.

There are a number of limitations in the present study that are important to consider when interpreting the findings. First, the data do not address the quality of preschool children's relationships. That is, identification of mutual friendships was based on mutual like most nominations rather than behavioral indices of friendship. Thus, we do not know how much time mutual friends spent interacting with one another or how positive or negative their interactions with one another might have been. It may be that children simply nominated other children who were well liked as friends rather than children with whom they had a personal relationship. Second, assessment of classroom peer nominations most likely underestimate the number of children who may participate in friendships with children outside of school. Thus, it is possible that children identified as friendless actually did have a friend outside the classroom. Third, the amount of variance in social competence measures accounted for by children's participation in a friendship was limited, suggesting that there are other factors not assessed in the current study that may have equal, or more, importance for children's social competence than friendship status. Finally, data spanning two years were available for only a small number of children, thus the conclusions that may be drawn from the longitudinal analyses are limited due to low statistical power (Kraemer & Thiemann, 1987).

Despite these limitations, the present study joins with a growing body of literature pointing to the nonredundant nature of friendship and general peer acceptance as indices of children's social competence with peers (see Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995, for a review), and extends this pattern of divergence between friendship and peer acceptance to the preschool years. It will be of interest to identify how friendship and peer acceptance relate to other areas of preschool children's adjustment, as well as the unique skills that preschoolers acquire from these two domains of peer relationships. The present study is also among the first to identify behavioral similarity as a notable characteristic of preschool children's friendships. It will be important for future research to investigate more specific indices of behavioral similarity among preschool children to identify the areas that are most relevant to friendship formation and maintenance.

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Correspondence should be addressed to:

Eric W. Lindsey  
Department of Human Development and Family Studies  
P.O. Box 41162  
Texas Tech University  
Lubbock, TX 79409-1162

