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# Individual characteristics, early adolescent peer affiliations, and school dropout: an examination of aggressive and popular group types

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**Abstract**

Individual characteristics (i.e., teacher-rated aggression and popularity) and peer group membership type in 7th grade was examined in relation to school dropout. Peer group type was characterized according to the proportion of group members who were high on teacher-rated aggression and popularity. Both aggressive and popular group types were linked to dropping out. Being a member of an aggressive group was associated with increased rates of dropout for aggressive, but not nonaggressive, youth. Membership in popular (i.e., majority of members were popular) and zero-popular (i.e., no popular members) groups was linked to dropping out, while membership in a nonpopular group (i.e., a few popular members) appeared to be protective for aggressive youth. Both popular and nonpopular youth who affiliated with aggressive peers had elevated rates of school dropout. All aggressive participants who were socially isolated dropped out, while nonaggressive youth who were socially isolated tended to complete school.
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## Introduction

In the past decade, several studies have examined predictors of subsequent school dropout. Recent work suggests that dropping out of school reflects the contributions of multiple factors beginning in the elementary school years and working across the course of development. In the early school years, factors that contribute to later school dropout include family resources, the quality of the caregiving environment, low parental academic support, academic difficulties, behavior problems, and peer relationship problems (Alexander, Entwistle, & Kabbani, 2001; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000). Similarly, dropping out during the middle school years is related to a range of individual (e.g., misbehavior, academic problems, absenteeism), family (e.g., low socioeconomic status, frequent mobility, parental academic support), and school (e.g., discipline practices, public vs. private) variables (Rumberger, 1995). Likewise, leaving school prior to 11th grade has been associated with configurations of multiple risks in 7th grade including aggression, academic problems, low socioeconomic status, and associating with peers who subsequently dropped out (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989).

While these investigations clearly demonstrate that school dropout is impacted by multiple factors that begin to influence development prior to the adolescent period, they also suggest that behavioral adjustment and peer relations during early adolescence may be proximal factors that contribute to not completing school. French and Conrad (2001) found that school dropout was associated with early adolescent aggression but not social preference. Youth who had rejected sociometric status were not more likely to dropout unless they were also high in antisocial behavior. In a study of subtypes of school dropouts, youth who had high levels of problem behavior tended to have the highest likelihood of dropping out (Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000). Such youth also tended to associate with delinquent peers. While these studies suggest that problem behavior and problematic social relations in early adolescence may work together to contribute to school dropout, more work is needed in this area. Specifically, there is a need to clarify the relationship between individual (i.e., popularity, level of aggression) and peer group factors (i.e., proportion of aggressive members, proportion of popular members) and leaving school early.

## Peer affiliations and maladaptive outcomes

Several studies have linked deviant peer affiliations in early adolescence to subsequent maladaptive outcomes. Much of this work has focused on adolescent adjustment difficulties including externalizing behavior problems, juvenile delinquency, substance use, and involvement in youth violence (e.g., Ary et al., 1999; Dishion, Eddy, Haas, Li, & Spracklen, 1997; Laird, Jordan, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2001; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2000). Relatively few studies have examined the relationship between early adolescent peer affiliations and school dropout. Of the extant work, it appears that youth who associate with deviant peers are less likely to complete school (Fergusson & Horwood, 1998; Newcomb et al., 2002).

Most studies of peer affiliations rely on either reciprocated friendship nominations or adult reports of the level of deviancy of youth's friends and associates. While these

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