



## Friendship quality, social preference, proximity prestige, and self-perceived social competence: Interactive influences on children's loneliness<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to test an integrative model in which peer relations at different levels of social complexity (friendship quality, social preference, and proximity prestige) are associated with children's loneliness, with children's self-perceived social competence acting as a mediator of these associations. A middle childhood sample of 509 Chinese children (233 girls and 276 boys; 3rd to 6th grade) completed a battery of sociometric and self-report questionnaires. Bootstrap analysis showed that self-perceived social competence mediated the relations between each peer variable and loneliness. In the integrative model tested with SEM, the mediating effect of self-perceived social competence in the relation between friendship quality and loneliness and between social preference and loneliness remained significant. However, self-perceived social competence no longer mediated the association between proximity prestige and loneliness, when considering the simultaneous influences of the three peer variables (friendship quality, social preference, and proximity prestige). The whole model accounted for 56% of the variance in loneliness. These findings suggest that self-perceived social competence played an important role in children's loneliness, that the quality and the quantity of direct peer relations (friendship quality, social preference, and part of proximity prestige) were associated with loneliness, and that indirect friends had a relatively lower but significant influence on children's loneliness. The results are discussed in terms of their implications for preventing children's loneliness.

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## 1. Introduction

As a social species, human beings innately have the need for social connection. An absolute or relative lack of social connection can result in the painful emotion of loneliness (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Weiss, 1973, p. 15). Loneliness is a common emotional experience among children. As many as 80% of children report having experienced loneliness at school (Berguno, Leroux, McAinsh, & Shaikh, 2004). One study of third-grade children found that 23% had a moderate level of loneliness, a feeling that steadily increased during the next two years (Jobe-Shields, Cohen, & Parra, 2011). Substantial evidences show that the feeling of loneliness in childhood not only is associated with children's current life quality but also predicts future maladjustment (Masi, Chen, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2011; Rotenberg, 1999; van Dulmen & Goossens, 2013). Lonely children are more likely to experience low self-esteem (Sletta, Valås, Skaalvik, & Søbstad, 1996), increased levels of social anxiety and social avoidance (Vanhalst, Goossens, Luyckx, Scholte, & Engels, 2012), poorer academic performance (Benner, 2011), higher risk of dropping out of school and of delinquency, and more mental and physical health problems (Harris, Qualter, & Robinson, 2013; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Loneliness in childhood is a valuable predictor of depressive symptoms in adolescence (Qualter, Brown, Munn, & Rotenberg, 2010).

Two theories have systematically illuminated the nature of loneliness and the factors that influence it: the social needs theory and the cognitive processes approach (Terrell-Deutsch, 1999). The social needs theory claims that loneliness is a response to unmet needs for social connection or to unsatisfactory interpersonal relationships. Consistent with this theory, the majority of research has focused on peer relations to understand children's loneliness, and during the past three decades, peer relations have been found to be a critical factor in children's loneliness (Asher & Paquette, 2003). In contrast to the social needs theory, cognitive processes theory suggests that loneliness is not a result of unmet inherent social needs but of dissatisfaction with one's perceived social relationships. In other words, it is the cognitive awareness of a deficiency in either the quality or the quantity of one's social relationships that leads to the discomfort of loneliness (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Terrell-Deutsch, 1999). However, there is little research examining the effects of individuals' internal cognitive representations of social relations (e.g., perceived social competence) in the link between peer relations and children's feelings of loneliness.

### 1.1. Peer relations and loneliness

Experiences with peers constitute an important developmental context for children. Children's peer experiences can be divided into several levels of analysis—individual characteristics, social interactions, dyadic relationships, and group membership and composition. The latter three levels of peer system reflect social participation at different interwoven orders of social complexity (Hinde, 1987; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Previous research has extensively explored the relations between loneliness and multiple types of peer relations, including peer relations at the dyadic and group levels (Margalit, 2010). Acceptance by the peer group and friendship have been found to be important factors for understanding children's experiences of feeling lonely (e.g., Asher & Paquette, 2003; Margalit, 2010).

The preponderance of research on children's loneliness has focused on the possible influence of acceptance versus rejection by peers (Asher & Paquette, 2003). The group's acceptance of a child refers to the degree to which the child is liked or disliked by group members, and group acceptance is an indicator of the child's social status in the group (Ladd, 1999). Peer acceptance is typically assessed using peer nominations, a sociometric method in which children identify (or "nominate") group members they like most and like least. Acceptance is measured by the number of "like most" nominations a child receives, standardized according to class size, and rejection is the standardized number of "like least" nominations received. These two scores can be combined to create a social preference score (the difference between the acceptance and rejection scores), reflecting the child's relative standing in terms of acceptance by the peer group (Hymel, Vaillancourt, McDougall, & Renshaw, 2002). Previous studies have shown that children who have higher levels of peer acceptance or are more socially preferred are less likely to report feeling lonely (e.g., Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009; Shin, 2007; Yu, Zhang, & Yan, 2005; Zhou, Sun, Zhao, & Hsueh, 2005).

Friendship lies at the dyadic level of peer experience. A "friend" is defined as a person you know well and like, usually not a member of your family (Hornby, 2010). Friendship is the relationship between friends. The definition of friend suggests that friendships may vary in their degree of mutual knowledge and affection, characteristics which constitute friendship quality. Researchers have consistently found a high negative correlation between friendship quality and children's loneliness (e.g., Hoza, Bukowski, & Beery, 2000; Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, & Carpenter, 2003; Parker & Asher, 1993; Sun, Zhou, Fan, & Ke, 2009). Specifically, studies have indicated that companionship and support from friends were conducive to lessening or eliminating children's loneliness (Parker & Asher, 1993; Uruk & Demir, 2003). Moreover, longitudinal research has shown that friendship quality in middle childhood significantly and negatively predicted loneliness two years later (Zhou, Zhao, Sun, & Ding, 2006).

Nonetheless, relatively few studies have examined the link between the quantity of friends children have and children's loneliness, and the findings of these studies were inconsistent. Ladd, Kochenderfer, and Coleman (1997) found that although the quantity of friends did not predict children's loneliness as they made the transition to kindergarten, it positively predicted other aspects of children's adjustment (such as academic readiness and school involvement). Parker and colleagues (Parker & Asher, 1993; Parker & Seal, 1996) have shown that in middle childhood having one friend is predictive of lower loneliness, but they did not explore the effect of having more than one friend. Recent research in middle childhood samples has suggested that the number of friends is important in predicting loneliness. With a sample of third- through sixth-grade students, Nangle et al. (2003) demonstrated that the number of both best friends and good friends was important in predicting children's positive adjustment, including a lower level of loneliness. The number of early mutual friends at the ages of 9–10 has been shown to significantly and negatively predict loneliness two years later (Zhou et al., 2006).

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