



## Concurrent and longitudinal links between children's and their friends' antisocial and prosocial behavior in preschool

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### ABSTRACT

Concurrent and longitudinal links between children's own and their nominated best friends' antisocial and prosocial behavior were studied in a normative sample of 3–5-year-olds ( $N = 203$ ). Moderating effects of age and gender were also explored. Subscales of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) were used to obtain teacher ratings of behavior for each target child and his/her nominated best friends. Nomination of best friends with higher levels of antisocial behavior and lower levels of prosocial behavior was concurrently linked to more antisocial behavior in boys. Nomination of highly prosocial best friends was concurrently linked to more prosocial behavior in both boys and girls. However, the study found no longitudinal effects of best friends' behavior on target child's behavior over a one-year period. A group of children who nominated no best friends at T1 were generally perceived as less prosocial, but not more antisocial, than other children.

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The important role of peers in shaping and socializing behavior and adjustment throughout childhood is widely recognized (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 2000; Ladd, 1999). Peers may influence one another by acting as agents of mutual socialization (Aboud and Mendelson, 1996; Ladd, Herald, & Andrews, 2006), by reinforcing already existing similarities in social cognition and behavior (Burlison, 1994; Kupersmidt, DeRosier, & Patterson, 1995; Poulin et al., 1997; Rubin, Lynch, Coplan, & Rose-Krasnor, 1994), and by providing social support to one another when needed (Dunn, 2004; Laursen, Bukowski, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). When a child chooses a friend, it is the mark of a voluntary desire to be especially affiliated with and liked by that person (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996; Dunn, 2004). Consequently, close friends may exert particular influence on a child's social development.

Early theories regarding children's social development doubted the capacity of preschool children to develop stable and identifiable friendships (Mannarino, 1995; Selman, 1971; Sullivan, 1965). However, observations of young children in social settings have found that even toddlers show preferences for certain playmates

over others, form relatively stable affiliative networks, and engage in different kinds of behavior with preferred versus non-preferred peers (Boivin, Vitaro, & Poulin, 2005; Hay and Cook, 2007; Howes and Lee, 2006; Strayer and Santos, 1996). Whilst there is now a large body of literature concerned with the nature and characteristics of friendship in early childhood and its outcomes (Howes, 2009; Parker, 1986), most research regarding the concurrent and longitudinal associations between their friends' and children's own behavior has focused on older children and adolescents (see Vitaro, Boivin, & Bukowski, 2009). Notable exceptions to this are described in the following sections.

### 1. Links between friends' and children's own behavior: existing research with young children

Research on peer affiliation and the potential influence of friends in early childhood provides evidence of both behavioral similarity and mutual socialization within groups of affiliated peers of this age (Boivin et al., 2005; Farver, 1996; Hanish, Martin, Fabes, Leonard, & Herzog, 2005; Snyder, Horsch, & Childs, 1997; Snyder et al., 2005). For example, a cross-sectional study examining associations between aggressive behavior and social networking in a sample of 4-year-olds observed that children formed social "cliques" according to similarities in levels of aggressive activity, social competence, and behavioral style (Farver, 1996). These findings provide important evidence of behavioral homophily among affiliated peers, even

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in very young children, but the cross-sectional nature of the data precludes any conclusions with regard to the longer term significance of such homophily. However, at least two longitudinal studies have provided evidence of short-term longitudinal effects of aggressive or externalizing peers on preschool-aged children. In an observational study of preschoolers' peer affiliations and aggressive behavior, Snyder et al. (1997) found that association with either moderately or substantially aggressive peers was related to increases in both observed and teacher-rated aggression over a 3-month period. In comparison, those who had only minimal association with aggressive peers at Time 1 showed no change in their aggressive behavior over the same period. Snyder and colleagues also observed that both aggressive and non-aggressive preschoolers tended to actively seek out and affiliate with peers who had a similar behavioral style. Another study (Hanish et al., 2005) found that preschool children who spent more time interacting with externalizing peers – based on observed behavior – showed greater increases in teacher-rated aggression over the course of a semester (September to December).

Other studies of the effects of aggression on children's friendship patterns in early childhood indicate that aggressive children are less well-liked, have fewer mutual friends and have less stable friendships than nonaggressive children (Burr, Ostrov, Jansen, Cullerton-Sen, & Crick, 2005; Johnson and Foster, 2005). Importantly, however, this pattern appears to differ according to the type of aggression under study, with some evidence that relational aggression may in fact be associated with having more mutual friends (Burr et al., 2005). Moreover, gender appears to play a role in moderating this association (Burr et al., 2005; Sebanc, 2003). Collectively, these studies of preschool-aged children suggest that the impact of social behavior on processes of peer affiliation and socialization by close peers is already evident in the earliest peer relationships. Yet even the longitudinal findings of Snyder et al. (1997) were based on a period of only three months. Preschoolers are subject to a great degree of influence from other sources, such as the regulation of parents and teachers, and the effects of peers' influence may thus be unstable or short-lived at this age (Boivin et al., 2005; Ladd, 1992). There is a need, therefore, to study the potential effects of preschoolers' friendship affiliations over longer periods of time in order to establish their significance for subsequent behavior development. Hence, the current study investigated whether associations between preschoolers' behavior and that of their nominated best friends could be found both concurrently and longitudinally, after a one year interval.

Most of the aforementioned studies of friends' influence on young children employed either observational or teacher-report methods for determining friendship affiliation. However, child interviews and peer nominations have been employed in other types of studies on similar themes, for example in several studies examining qualities of friendship and their associations with positive and negative social behaviors (Burr et al., 2005; Johnson and Foster, 2005; Sebanc, 2003). Children's self reports of friendship have also been used effectively in studies of friends' influence among older children (Adams, Bukowski, & Bagwell, 2005; Berndt and Keefe, 1995; Mrug, Hoza, & Bukowski, 2004). Asking young children whom of their peers they consider to be their friends adds an important, subjective dimension to understanding friendship affiliations in early childhood that is not gained through observation. For this reason, the current study used individual child interviews to obtain information regarding participants' friendship relations.

## 2. Links between friends and children's own behavior: beyond aggression

Most research has been concerned with the putative influence of friends' behavioral characteristics on children's aggressive

behavior, or on related externalizing difficulties such as antisocial and delinquent behavior (Bowker, Rubin, Rose-Krasnor, & Booth-LaForce, 2007; Snyder, 2002; Snyder et al., 2005; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2000). A smaller body of research has also been concerned with the predictive effect of friends' behavioral characteristics on children's levels of internalizing behavior (Bagwell et al., 2000; Brendgen, Lamarche, Wanner, & Vitaro, 2010; Brendgen, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 2000; Pedersen, Vitaro, Barker, & Borge, 2007). In contrast, relatively little attention has been given to the potentially positive influence of friends' prosocial behavior. However, one study by Sebanc (2003) found that prosocial behavior was a significant predictor of supportive friendships among preschoolers, and supportive friendships have, in turn, been found to lead to positive social outcomes in older children (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999).

Hay and Cook (2007) divide prosocial behavior into three domains: feeling for another (friendliness, affection, empathic concern), working with another (cooperative activity and goal-setting, sharing resources, helping another to accomplish tasks) and ministering to another (nurturing, comforting, providing resources, responding to another's wishes and needs). Researchers have increasingly established the importance of prosocial behavior for children's social and emotional adjustment and, more particularly, their peer relations (Arsenio and Lemerise, 2001; Nelson, Robinson, & Hart, 2005; Phillippsen, Bridges, McLemore, & Saponaro, 1999; Vitaro, Gagnon, & Tremblay, 1990). Furthermore, prosocial behavior explains unique variance in children's peer relations over and above that explained by antisocial behavior. This is shown in a study by Vitaro et al. (1990), who found that stability in peer rejection from kindergarten to grade one was more dependent upon rejected children's lack of prosocial behavior than upon their levels of antisocial behavior. Another study, investigating longitudinal associations between overt and relational aggression, prosocial behavior and social adjustment, observed that prosocial behavior contributed unique information (beyond that provided by overt and relational aggression) to the prediction of future social adjustment (Crick, 1996).

In one of the few studies to examine the putative influence of highly prosocial friends, Barry and Wentzel (2006) found a longitudinal association between friends' and adolescents' own prosocial behavior. Specifically friends' prosocial behavior was related to adolescents' prosocial behavior one year later, albeit not concurrently. To our knowledge, however, there have been no studies of the direct predictive effects of friends' prosocial behavior on children's own prosocial behavior in early childhood. Furthermore, we do not know how the prosocial behavior of friends might be related to levels of antisocial behavior in children or, conversely, whether affiliation with antisocial peers is related to children's expression of prosocial behavior. Consequently, the current study simultaneously examined concurrent and longitudinal links between friends' antisocial and prosocial behavior and children's own antisocial and prosocial behavior.

## 3. Gender and age differences

Some studies have found gender differences in rates of antisocial, primarily aggressive behavior among preschool children. Specifically, boys have been found to engage in more physical aggression than girls (Crick et al., 2006; Juliano, Werner, & Cassidy, 2006; Romano, Tremblay, Boulerice, & Swisher, 2005). There is also some, but far more limited evidence that girls in this age group show more prosocial behavior than boys (Van Leeuwen, Meerschaert, Bosmans, De Medts, & Braet, 2006). Previous studies have further suggested that gender may play a moderating role in the link between the behavior of the peers children affiliate with and children's own social behavior. For example, in Hanish et al.'s (2005) study of the effects of observed exposure to

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