

# The friendships of young children with developmental delays: A longitudinal analysis<sup>☆</sup>

Michael J. Guralnick<sup>\*</sup>, Brian Neville, Mary A. Hammond, Robert T. Connor

*Center on Human Development and Disability, University of Washington, USA*

Available online 14 November 2006

---

## Abstract

This longitudinal study examined the social interactions of children with mild developmental (cognitive) delays with friends across the early childhood and early elementary years. Results revealed increases in many forms of social exchange with effect sizes in the moderate range, but no changes in sustained interactive play. Social interaction patterns, difficulties in identifying friends to participate in the study, and concerns evident in children's peer and friendship networks suggest the general absence of reciprocal friendships. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that children's limited peer-related social competence constrains all aspects of their development of friendships. Despite these problems, the potential benefits of interventions designed to support relationships at this stage of friendship development for children with delays were noted.

© 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Friendships; Peer relationships; Children with delays; Social competence

---

## 1. Introduction

Friendships play a central role in children's relationships, are characterized by high levels of reciprocity, mutuality, and affect, and provide a context that supports numerous aspects of a child's development (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996; Hartup & Sancilio, 1986; Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Buskirk, & Wojslawowicz, 2005). Both the characteristics defining friendships and the functions of friendships are apparent even during the early childhood years (Howes, 1986; 1988). With respect to function, evidence suggests that friendships established during this period create a valuable context affording important opportunities to learn and practice skills essential to children's social, cognitive, communicative, and emotional development. The influence of friendship on young children's emerging socially competent behavior patterns has produced particularly consistent findings. Specifically, friend versus non-friend play comparisons have indicated that social play with friends is characterized by more positive affect, higher levels of social interactions, and more effective forms of conflict management (Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, & Eastenson, 1988; Hinde, Titmus, Easton, & Tamplin, 1985; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995, 1996).

---

<sup>☆</sup> This research was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (RO1 HD37429). Support from grant P30 HD02274 also facilitated our work.

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. University of Washington, Box 357920, Seattle, WA 98195-7920, USA. Tel.: +1 206 543 2832; fax: +1 206 543 3417.  
E-mail address: [mjgural@u.washington.edu](mailto:mjgural@u.washington.edu) (M.J. Guralnick).

Both conceptually and empirically, a close association exists between children's social competence and friendships across the life span (Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Howes, 1988). Having at least one reciprocal friend is positively associated with social competence. Children with more reciprocal friends have higher levels of social competence, and friendship dyads are characterized by more socially competent play than non-friend dyads (Lindsey, 2002; Vaughn et al., 2000; Vaughn, Colvin, Azria, Caya, & Krzysik, 2001). It is likely that this association reflects a complex process that evolves over time in which children's competence supports friendship development which, in turn, supports the further development of competence (see Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Of importance, recent longitudinal research suggests that positive aspects of friendships occurring during the early elementary years, especially the number of friends, are predicted by children's social competence evident during early childhood (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006).

Studies of the social play interactions of preschool-age children with mild developmental (cognitive) delays have revealed well-documented and unusual problems with respect to their peer-related social competence. Specific difficulties in social information processing and emotional regulation adversely affect numerous aspects of these children's social competence with peers, yielding unusually fragile and low levels of interactive or group forms of social play among other features (see Guralnick, 1999, for a review). The cognitive levels of children with mild developmental delays range from one to three standard deviations below the mean on standardized tests of intellectual development, and children exhibit considerable stability in cognitive functioning over time (Bernheimer & Keogh, 1988; Keogh, Bernheimer, & Guthrie, 1997; Vig, Kaminer, & Jedrysek, 1987). As might be expected, difficulties establishing friendships are especially apparent for these children. Compared to chronologically and developmentally matched groups of typically developing children and to children with communication disorders in playgroup settings, observational studies have revealed that young children with mild developmental delays rarely form reciprocal friendships (Guralnick, Gottman, & Hammond, 1996; Guralnick & Groom, 1988). Of importance, most children with delays do develop preferences to interact with specific children during the early childhood period (i.e., meet criteria for non-reciprocal friendships). However, in contrast to typically developing children (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Vaughn et al., 2001), children with delays who do form either non-reciprocal or reciprocal friendships do not engage in more socially interactive play with those peers in comparison to play with non-friends (Guralnick et al., 1996; Guralnick & Groom, 1988). This includes children's level of involvement in group play, a process requiring sophisticated interactive skills, as no increases during play with friends have been found for this measure. These studies suggest that the unusual difficulties in the peer-related social competence of children with developmental delays not only limit their ability to establish reciprocal friendships during the early childhood period, but may also affect their ability to take advantage of the opportunities occurring even when interacting with playmates they prefer.

Assessments of community-based friendship networks of children with mild developmental delays during early childhood are consistent with laboratory-based observational studies of friendships. Based on parent and teacher reports, the existence of friendships and more in-depth social contact with peers is more limited for children with delays than for typically developing children, although the general peer social networks of children with delays exhibit many similarities to those of their non-delayed peers (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002; Geisthardt, Brotherson, & Cook, 2002; Guralnick, 1997). In the vast majority of instances, typically developing children are identified as friends of children with delays (e.g., Freeman & Kasari, 2002; Guralnick, 1997).

General problems related to friendship and social competence extend beyond the early childhood period for these children (Leffert & Siperstein, 2002). School-age children with delays, in particular, frequently report high levels of loneliness and isolation (Howell, Hauser-Cram, & Warfield, 2001; Luftig, 1988; Margalit, 2004; Williams & Asher, 1992). Moreover, recent evidence suggests that young children with delays display only modest increases in peer-related social competence as they transition to the kindergarten and early elementary years, with a substantial proportion of children showing no growth at all (Guralnick, Hammond, Connor, & Neville, 2006). Nevertheless, it may well be that advantages of friendship in any form (reciprocal or unilateral) may become more apparent over time despite continuing problems in children's general social competence. Evidence does indicate that for a specific subgroup of children with delays, those with Down syndrome, older children interacting with friends may benefit from some aspects of a friendship relationship (Freeman & Kasari, 2002).

Specifically, for children with mild developmental delays beyond the early childhood period, it is quite possible that the repeated experience of the structure and perhaps script-like characteristics common to play with familiar playmates, especially those identified as friends, may be able to compensate to some extent for children's ongoing social competence difficulties (Nelson, 1981). Particularly in conjunction with the emergence of more advanced cognitive

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات