

## Relations of Friends' Activities to their Similarity in Academic Adjustment

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine whether adolescents were more similar to their best friend in their perceived and actual academic adjustment when they spent more time with their best friend in various activities. Seventh graders ( $n = 177$ ) and tenth graders ( $n = 145$ ) answered questions about their own and their best friends' positive involvement in school, disruptive behavior at school, report-card grades, and the amount of time spent in various activities with their best friend. Adolescents' adjustment was positively related to their perceptions of and to the actual adjustment of their best friend. Tenth graders spent more time socializing and in extracurricular activities with their best friend while seventh graders reported more participation in sports with their best friend. More time socializing with a best friend was related to having a more negative profile of academic adjustment, while adolescents who spent more time in school-related and extracurricular activities with their best friend had a more positive academic profile. Few interactions of best friends' adjustment and time spent in activities with a best friend were significant predictors of seventh graders' adjustment. However, tenth graders viewed themselves as more similar in their disruptive behavior to that of their best friend when they did more extracurricular and school-related activities with their best friend. By contrast, tenth graders were less similar to their best friend in their actual academic adjustment when they spent more time engaged in school-related, extracurricular, and sports activities with that friend.

### Introduction

Spending time in activities with friends provides a context through which friends may influence one another. Time is spent in the company of friends increases such that by

adolescence, two to three hours each day are devoted to activities with friends (Larson & Verma, 1999). However, little is known about how time spent in activities with friends is related to adjustment. Some types of activities may promote more positive outcomes. For example, when friends work on school assignments together they may encourage one another to become more positively involved in school. However, other types of activities may lead to more negative outcomes. Some recent studies (e.g., Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996) have suggested that adolescents who spend more time in unstructured, unsupervised socializing with friends may be more likely to engage in deviant behavior. The first purpose of this study was to explore whether time spent in activities with friends varied with age and to examine the relationship between time spent in activities with friends and academic adjustment.

How do friends influence adolescents' behaviors and attitudes? Past research has identified two important pathways through which friends impact one another. First, characteristics of an adolescent's friends can influence the corresponding characteristics of the adolescent. For example, in one longitudinal study of seventh and eighth graders (Berndt & Keefe, 1995), adolescents who had friends who were high in disruptive behaviors at the beginning of the school year increased in their disruptive behavior by the end of the school year. Features of a friendship, such as its closeness or quality, represent a second pathway of influence. For example, according to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), observational learning is enhanced when the individual has a positive relationship with the model. Indeed, in one study adolescents who had closer relationships with delinquent friends showed a greater increase in the seriousness of their own delinquent behavior over time (Agnew, 1991).

When examining the impact that friends have on one another, researchers typically examine either the influence of friends' characteristics or the features of the friendship but not

both. Recently it has been proposed that friends' influence on one another is magnified when their friendships are closer or more intense (e.g., Berndt & Murphy, 2002). This magnification hypothesis implies that friends who participate in more activities together will have more opportunities to be influenced by one another, so they become more similar to each other in their academic adjustment. The second purpose of this study was to test whether adolescents who participate in various types of activities with their best friend are more similar to that friend in various aspects of their academic adjustment.

### Method

Participants were 177 seventh graders and 145 tenth graders. The majority (57%) of the adolescents were female and nearly all (96%) were European-American.

Students reported on their own and their best friend's academic adjustment (i.e., their perceptions of their friends' adjustment) by answering questions regarding positive involvement at school (e.g., "How often do you/this friend take part in class discussions or activities?"), disruptive behavior (e.g., "How often do you/this friend misbehave in class?"), and academic achievement (i.e., their own and their best friend's report-card grades). The internal consistency of these measures ranged from .77 to .87. Most students had a best friend who was also in the sample, so the actual scores for their friend's adjustment could be matched to the students' scores.

Students also reported on the activities they did with their best friend. These activities included socializing (e.g., "How often do you and [friend's name] hang out together at the mall or some place else?"), school-related activities (e.g., "How often do you and [friend's name] study for tests together?"), sports-related activities (e.g., "How often do you and [friend's name] do things together with others on your school's sports teams?"), and extra-curricular activities

(e.g., How often do you and [friend's name] do things together for your school's service organizations?"). The internal consistency of these measures was .86 for socializing, .77 for school-related activities, .70 for extra-curricular activities, and .73 for sports.

## Results

### Relationship between Adolescents' Adjustment and Best Friends' Perceived and Actual Adjustment

Adolescents' academic adjustment was similar to their perceptions of their best friend's academic adjustment and to their friend's actual adjustment (see Table 1). This was equally true in early and late adolescence with two exceptions. The correlation between adolescents' positive involvement in school and their perceptions of their best friend's positive involvement in school was stronger in early than late adolescence. The correlation between adolescents' grades and their best friend's actual grades was stronger in tenth grade than in seventh grade. Age

### Differences in Time Spent in Activities with a Best Friend

Time spent in various activities with friends varied with age (see Table 2). Tenth graders spent more time socializing and in extracurricular activities with their best friend than did seventh graders. Seventh graders reported participating in sports with their best friend to a greater extent than did tenth graders. Time spent in school-related activities did not vary with age.

### Academic Adjustment and Activities with a Best Friend

At both ages, adolescents who spent more time socializing with their best friend had a more negative profile of academic adjustment (see Table 3). These students were less involved in the classroom and more disruptive. Conversely, adolescents who spent more time in school-related and extracurricular activities with their best friend had a more positive academic profile.

This was especially true in late adolescence. Late adolescents who reported higher report-card grades also reported spending more time with a best friend in school-related and extracurricular activities. This relationship did not exist in early adolescence. Finally, early adolescents who reported doing more sports activities with their best friend were also more disruptive in class but this was not true in late adolescence.

#### Relationship Between Similarity to a Best Friend in Adjustment and Time Spent in Activities with a Best Friend

Regression analyses were conducted to examine how activities with a best friend were related to academic adjustment. Each measure of students' adjustment was used as the criterion in a separate set of regression analyses. The predictor variables were the corresponding measure of friends' adjustment (perceived or actual), time spent in one type of activity with their best friend, and the interaction of friends' adjustment and time in the activity. The magnification hypothesis suggests that the interaction of friends' adjustment and time in various activities with a best friend will be positive and significant.

For seventh graders, few interactions of friends' adjustment and friends' activities were significant. By contrast, tenth graders perceived their best friend as more similar to themselves in disruptive behavior when they engaged in more extracurricular and school-related activities with their best friend (see Table 4). Standard procedures used to decompose the interaction indicated that adolescents who perceived their best friend to be more disruptive generally were more disruptive themselves, but this effect was magnified when more time was spent with this friend in extracurricular and school-related activities. These results suggest that frequent activities together magnify friends' similarity in how they perceive one another's disruptive behavior.

On the other hand, the comparable interactions between friends grades and time spent in extracurricular and sports-related activities with those friends were negative and significant (see Table 4). Decomposing these interactions indicated that adolescents perceived themselves to be similar to their best friend in grades only when they didn't spend much time with the friend in extracurricular or sports-related activities (see Figure 1). In these cases, extracurricular activities and time spent in sports appeared to allow friendships to form between individuals who did not view themselves as similar in their grades. Moreover, these perceptions were based in reality. The interactions of friends' actual grades and school involvement with school-related activities and sports were also negative and significant. Decomposing these interactions suggested that school-related activities and sports provide a context in which friendships can form between adolescents who are not similar in their grades and school involvement. For other adolescents, similarity in grades or in involvement in school is enough for the formation of a friendship; time spent in school-related activities and sports is unnecessary for the friendship.

### Conclusions

How adolescents spend their time with friends changes over the course of adolescence. Tenth graders spent more time socializing and in extracurricular activities with their best friend while seventh graders reported more participation in sports with their best friend. One factor that contributes to these age changes is that extracurricular activities are more common in high school than middle school. In addition, physical activity decreases with age, which may account for the decrease in sports with a best friend. Also, parents allow their children to spend increasing amounts of unsupervised time with friends as they get older. Thus, tenth graders may spend more time socializing with friends than seventh graders do because they have the freedom to do so.

Adolescents' adjustment was related to how they spent their time with their best friend. Students who socialized more frequently with their best friends were somewhat less well-adjusted to school. Other researchers have found that youth who spend more time in unstructured, socializing activities with friends are more likely to engage in deviant behavior (Osgood et al., 1996). Parents and teachers who want to encourage a positive adjustment to school may find that limiting unstructured free time with friends will help adolescents to remain positively involved in school and to excel academically.

Finally, the results provide modest support for the hypothesis that similarity between friends is magnified if they spend more time together. Tenth graders who spent more time in school-related and extracurricular activities were more similar to their best friend in their disruptive behavior. Because adolescents can directly observe and reinforce instances in which a friend is being disruptive, this may be an aspect of adjustment on which friends have considerable influence. In addition, activities such as working on a class project or being on the drama club together may provide contexts in which adolescents can engage in and encourage disruptive behaviors. Friends may initially be drawn together because they are similar in how disruptive they are, and when they spend time together in certain activities, they may become even more similar in their disruptive behaviors.

In contrast to the magnification hypothesis, tenth graders who spent more time in school-related, extracurricular, and sports activities with a best friend perceived themselves to be less similar to their best friend in their report-card grades. Tenth graders who spent less time with a best friend in these types of activities were more similar to their best friend in their actual grades and involvement in school. These results suggest that the magnification hypothesis does not describe all the processes that contribute to similarity between friends. Apparently, similarity in

academic adjustment, and especially in report-card grades, is a primary basis for friendship formation among adolescents who do not participate frequently in school-related activities or sports with their friends. But when adolescents and their friends participate in multiple activities together, they can form and maintain a close friendship despite a lack of similarity in grades and other indicators of academic adjustment.



Figure 1

Relationship Between Similarity to a Best Friend in Report-Card Grades and Time Spent in Extracurricular Activities with a Best Friend

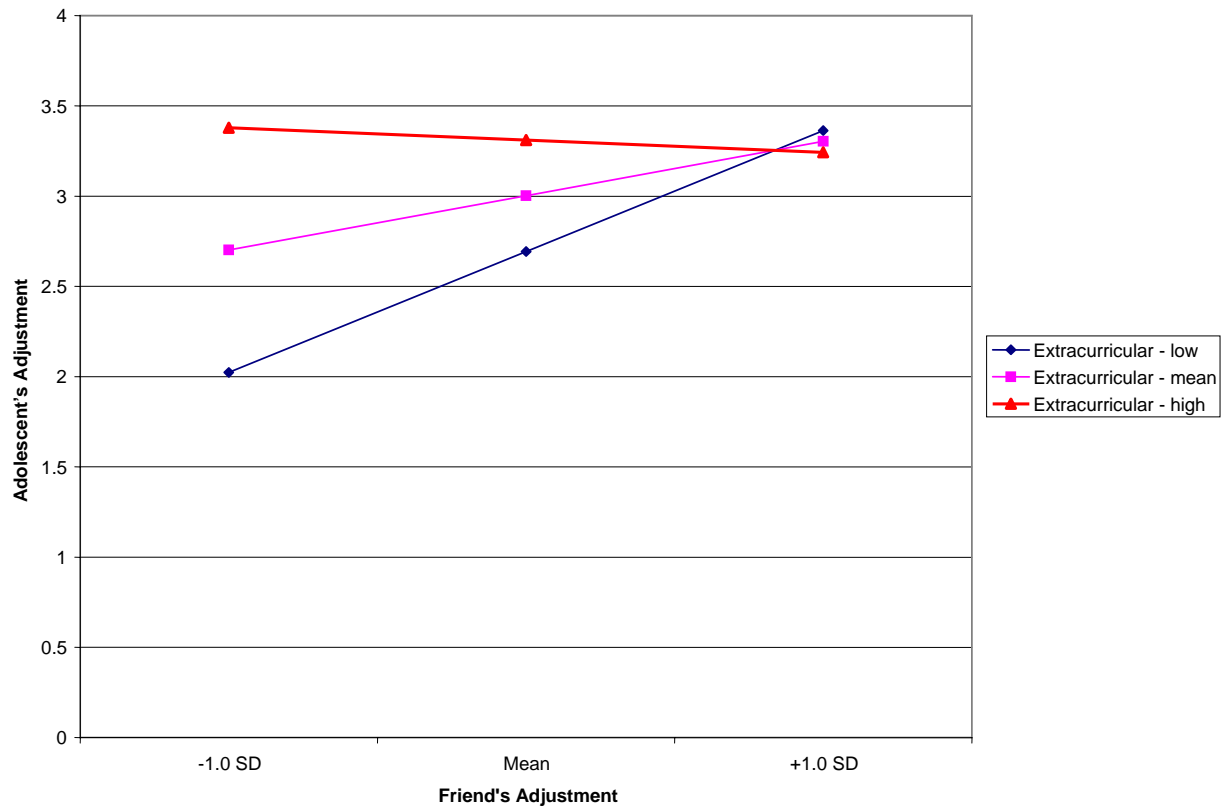


Table 1

Relationship Between Adolescents' Academic Adjustment with Best Friends' Perceived and Actual Academic Adjustment

	Perception of Friends' Adjustment	Friends' Actual Adjustment
Involvement	.65**/.46**	.27**
Disruption	.57**	.37**
Grades	.43**	.23*/.56**

Note. *N* ranges from 196-317 for *rs* with perceptions of adjustment; *Ns* range from 75-174 for *rs* with actual adjustment; \*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .001$ ; when two correlations are separated with a slash they differ significantly by age; the first correlation represents the value for the 7<sup>th</sup> graders and the second correlation represents the value for the 10<sup>th</sup> graders.

Table 2

Age Differences in Time Spent in Activities with a Best Friend

	Socializing	School-Related	Sports	Extracurricular
7 <sup>th</sup> Grade <i>M</i>	2.34 <sub>a</sub>	2.48 <sub>a</sub>	2.50 <sub>a</sub>	1.39 <sub>a</sub>
<i>SD</i>	(.79)	(1.15)	(1.17)	(.57)
10 <sup>th</sup> Grade <i>M</i>	2.54 <sub>b</sub>	2.42 <sub>a</sub>	2.14 <sub>b</sub>	1.53 <sub>b</sub>
<i>SD</i>	(.72)	(1.15)	(1.07)	(.78)

Note. Means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ at  $p < .05$ .

Table 3

## Relationship between Academic Adjustment and Activities with a Best Friend

	Socializing	School-Related	Sports	Extracurricular
Involvement	-.23***	.18**	.01	.13*
Disruption	.18**	-.14*	.21**/-.02	-.11
Grades	-.09	-.01/.36***	.07	.11/.37***

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*Note.* *N* ranges from 296-311; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; when two correlations are separated with a slash they differ significantly by age; the first correlation represents the value for the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and the second correlation represents the value for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade

Table 4

Standardized Regression Coefficients from Analyses in Which the Interactions of Time Spent with a Best Friend in Activities and Friends' Perceived and Actual Adjustment were Predictors of Tenth Graders' Academic Adjustment

	Socializing	School-Related	Sports	Extracurricular
<b>Perceived Adjustment</b>				
Grades	-.16	-.08	-.21**	-.27*
Positive Involvement	-.06	-.02	-.01	-.01
Disruptive Behavior	.09	.16*	.06	.16*
<b>Actual Adjustment</b>				
Grades	.03	-.29**	-.24*	-.32*
Positive Involvement	-.12	-.32*	-.22*	-.22
Disruptive Behavior	.03	.15	.07	.10

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$