

Peer Relations

J K Dijkstra and R Veenstra, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

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Glossary

Dyad: A pair of individuals such as two friends, a couple, or a bully and a victim.

Peer clique: An inclusive group of peers who interact and share interests, views, purposes, or behaviors.

Peer crowd: Reputation based collective of similarly stereotyped individuals who may or may not spend time together.

Social network: A social network is a social structure made up of individuals who are connected by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as friendship, kinship, or common interest.

Introduction

An eye-catching feature of adolescence is the increased prominence of peers in the lives of adolescents. This article introduces peer relations in adolescence by focusing on the importance of peer relations for adolescent adjustment and development. What prompts the increased salience of peer relations in adolescence? Why do peers become more important? In what way do peer relations change from childhood to adolescence?

Importance of Peer Relations

When children move into adolescence, the prominence of peers becomes more salient in their daily lives. Adolescents gradually shift their attention from parents toward peers, yielding peer relations as a domain that becomes increasingly important for support and companionship, and adolescents' social and mental development. The increased salience of peers is shown by the extent to which adolescents spend time with peers. In general, adolescents spend double or triple as much time with peers than with parents or other adults. For example, in the United States adolescents spend 50% of their time with peers and approximately 15% of their time with adults. This difference in time spending can partially be explained by daily, prescribed activities, particularly attending school in the proximity of peers, and results in age segregation and gives rise to the development of a distinct peer culture, independent from the adult world.

Yet, this is only half of the story. Increased time spending with peers is not only due to daily structured activities, but also reflects adolescents' preference to be with peers or alone rather than spending time with family or teachers. The increased importance of peers is also shown when adolescents are asked to indicate significant others. Adolescents consider peers as very important to them. Adolescents more often seek opportunities to spend time unsupervised and hanging around with peers. Moreover, recent changes in Western societies, particularly increasing demands for labor market participation of women, have reduced opportunities for parents to be at home during the day and increased the opportunities for unsupervised time spending.

A closer look at the changes in time spending from childhood to adolescence shows that for all adolescents, the amount

of time spent with parents decreases, whereas particularly for girls, time spending with peers increases. For boys, it is found that time spending with parents is mainly replaced by time spending alone. Particularly in the United States and Europe, adolescents spend a considerable amount of their time solely with peers, whereas in Asia, the presence of family members is more prominent.

Adolescents may spend less time with and seek more autonomy from parents, but they typically do so in the context of stable strong connections and parental influence. Well-behaved adolescents share their lives with their parents. They are willing to self-disclose to parents and are open to parental monitoring.

Dual Role of Peers

The importance of peers for the social and mental development of adolescents is unquestionable. In childhood, parents form the most relevant socializing agents, but in adolescence, the salience of peers for adolescents' development increases with distinct implications for adolescents' well-being and development. Relationships with peers in and outside school become increasingly important for the social and mental development of adolescents. Paradoxically, there are two sides of the coin regarding the role of peers in adolescence, reflected in two distinct views on adolescence.

On the one hand, adolescence is recognized as an important developmental period full of opportunities and challenges for personal growth, social commitment, identity development, and decision-making. Relations with peers form an important context in which adolescents acquire skills and exhibit behaviors that enable them to establish more mature relations with peers and achieve emotional independence from parents to prepare themselves to fully participate in life when moving toward adulthood.

The importance of peer relations is also reflected by the fact that adolescents who face difficulties in the establishment of relations with peers are at risk for maladaptive outcomes. Adolescents who are unable to establish a position within the peer group are likely to develop feelings of inferiority that can contribute to a sense of psychological ill-being and are at risk

for internalizing problems such as anxiety, loneliness, and depression. In turn, these indices of maladjustment cause difficulties for adolescents to develop meaningful relationships with peers. In that regard, peer relations also cause stress, insecurity, conflict, and disagreement.

On the other hand, the peer context puts adolescents at risk for engagement in maladaptive behaviors. Most prominently, peers are generally conceived as crucial in the development of adolescent risk behaviors, leading to conformity in behaviors to what peers do. It has been consistently shown that the number of deviant, antisocial, and delinquent friends is one of the strongest correlates of externalizing problem behaviors in adolescence, such as delinquency and substance use. Learning and socialization theories reveal the idea that peers influence one another's maladaptive behavior via learning of skills, norms, attitudes, and rationalizations of deviant behaviors, referred to as deviancy training. The attractiveness of risk behaviors in adolescence is also reflected by associations with status among peers. Perceived popular adolescents are known for their antisocial, aggressive behaviors and their prosocial, peer-valued characteristics.

It is argued that the rise in problem behaviors in adolescence could be attributed to this process of age-segregation in which adolescents become alienated from societal values and norms, reflected by parental influence. Expectations and demands from peers might strongly contradict what is seen as normative from the adults' perspective. Yet, the influence of parents is not fading in favor of peers. Peer influence mainly concerns 'superficial' behaviors rather than fundamental values and norms that for instance reflect political or academic orientations. The role of peers is more restricted to short-term decisions and temporal engagement in adverse behaviors. This suggests that peers become more salient, but parents remain of critical importance. Moreover, adolescents are not equally susceptible to peer influence. Influence processes differ by age, peer group affiliation, and even community of residence, and interact with experiences in other contexts such as the neighborhood, the family, or sport clubs. Thus, peer influence is neither overwhelming nor uniform.

Most challenging to conclusions about peer influence is that similarity in behaviors between adolescents and peers does not automatically imply peer influence, considering that similarity might also emerge via a selection process, in which adolescents with similar behaviors, values, preferences, or characteristics select one another as friends. In other words, associations between adolescents' behavior and peers can also emerge from reversed causality, pointing to assortive pairing rather than influence effects. Most likely, both processes are at work simultaneously.

The extent to which both processes, that is, influence and selection, are at work also depends on opportunities to affiliate with peers. Structural characteristics that emerge from, for instance, attending a particular school or living in a specific neighborhood, affect the proximity to peers and, therefore, the opportunities to affiliate. Particularly, time spending with peers without adult supervision creates an opportunity structure for deviant behavior, even if adolescents initially do not aim for deviant acts. In reverse, unstructured, unsupervised activities might also be subject to selection effects by attracting peers who are more prone to engage in deviant activities.

As such, peer influence emerges via opportunities. These opportunities and constraints often reflect differences in structural characteristics, such as socioeconomic background and ethnicity. The formation and establishment of peer relations is, therefore, not purely based on individual preferences, but also bound by given opportunities.

Biological, Cognitive, and Social Changes

The reason why peers become more important for adolescents and the way in which peer relations are organized differently in adolescence compared to childhood reflects three major changes that adolescents undergo. These major changes can be distinguished into biological, cognitive, and social transitions. To understand the role of peers in adolescence, it is necessary to consider these changes, because they explain why peers become more important and in what way the organization of adolescents' peer relations differs from childhood.

First, the transition from childhood to adolescence is characterized by a process of biological and, consequently, sexual maturation. In a relatively short period of time, adolescents undergo accelerated changes in their secondary sex characteristics. In this growth spurt, known as puberty, adolescents biologically mature, reflected by physiological and physical changes. For boys and girls, this development differs in two ways. First of all, biological maturation starts earlier as well as comprises a shorter time period for girls than for boys. Girls undergo a process of biological maturation between ages 9 and 14, whereas for boys, maturation takes place between ages 10 and 17. Second, the biological changes, which are steered by changes in physiological processes, differ for boys and girls. Whereas for girls, estrogen is responsible for their biological maturation, such as first menarche, expansion of the hip, and breast growth, for boys, changes in the production of testosterone lead to changes in their physical characteristics such as hair growth, lower voice, maturation of testicles, and development of muscles.

These biological alterations that result in sexual maturation affect the organization of peer relationships rather straightforwardly. In childhood, peer relations are strongly sex-segregated and same-sex preferences dominate. When children enter adolescence, and become more biologically mature, sex boundaries are gradually crossed, and contacts and relationships with the other sex increase. One aspect of peer relations that facilitates cross-sex affiliations is that adolescents tend to belong to larger peer networks, which makes inclusion of cross-sex peers easy and assures participation in heterosexual-oriented activities. The time differences in biological development between boys and girls, in which girls start earlier and develop faster, result in girls being more inclined to seek affiliation with older male peers. These older boys are likely to perform more risk behavior than younger ones, thereby encouraging risk behavior in early maturing females in unsupervised contexts.

This relates to the second change in adolescence that affects adolescents' peer relations. From a social-structural perspective, changes in peer group structure also respond to changes in the social world, that is, the transition to secondary education. The transition from childhood to adolescence often coincides with entering a new school. Contrary to primary schools

which are generally small, secondary schools are usually large. For adolescents, finding their way within this larger peer ecology often results in seeking affiliation with a more well-defined group of peers. These groups are often based on shared values, interests, or norms concerning aspects like music taste, risk behaviors, school involvement, and substance use. Adolescents seek crowds that fit to their needs for emotional support and exploration or reaffirmation of values and attitudes and aspirations. Entering the large peer system with a lot of unknown and unfamiliar peers, adolescents may find that membership in a smaller group of befriended peers provides security. Moreover, categorization of different peer groups helps to organize participation and negotiation with unknown peers. Stated differently, entering secondary education with larger schools makes affiliation with peers based on different attributes and characteristics more salient. For instance, in the United States status and sports play an important role in the organization and definition of distinct peer groups, resulting in groups labeled as jocks, brains, and burnouts.

Associations with peers with whom adolescents share similar attributes and characteristics are also closely related to the third change in adolescence. The social-cognitive development of adolescents allows them to establish and maintain significant relationships with peers, and develop within these interactions their own identity. The development of identity is an important challenge for adolescents. Peers provide unique opportunities to establish and develop an identity. Particularly, the cognitive development enhances perspective taking, abstract thinking, meta-cognitive thinking, and role taking, which enables them to reflect upon social relationships and establish more mature relationships with peers.

In the achievement and establishment of an identity, peers play a crucial role for comparison and provision of information about appropriate behavior and self-knowledge and self-definition. Peer relations fulfill unique needs for the establishment of a personal identity, social acceptance, and sense of place in the peer hierarchy. Additionally, peer relations provide opportunities for adolescents to share experiences, thoughts, laughter, and mutual enjoyment with similar others.

Compared to parents, peers supply opportunities and experiences that cannot be duplicated by other socializing agents. Peer relations are considered as attractive for adolescents for being more egalitarian, less controlling, less judgmental, more accepting, and more present-oriented than relations with adults, who are more experts or authorities.

This coincides with one important developmental task in adolescence, namely, the establishment of a more emotional independent relation with parents in favor of more mature, intimate relations with peers. This is also reflected by gaining more autonomy and less adult's guidance or control. In childhood, peer groups are anchored in the neighborhood, but in adolescence, peers come often from different neighborhoods, which makes the area in which adolescents spend their time much larger and parental supervision harder. An important shortcoming in research is the predominant focus on school settings, whereas peer relations in other settings, like the neighborhood or workplace, have been studied less.

Thus, changes in peer relations are responsive to biological, social-cognitive, and social-structural changes. Together, these changes in adolescence affect the way peer relations are

structured compared to childhood by increased time spending with peers, and cross-sex interactions, increased salience of peer crowds, and more autonomy and less supervision by adults.

Three remarks should be made. First of all, the organization of peer relations differs somewhat between boys and girls. Girls generally operate more within intimate, closely knit relationships in which trust and mutual disclosure are highly valued, whereas boys are more in loose-knit groups and more organized around specific activities. Second, socioeconomic status (SES) also reflects upon the organization of peer relations, particularly in the United States, with high SES adolescents being part of expanding networks based on interests and activities, and groups of lower SES adolescents remaining in local networks.

Third, it is important to keep in mind that our knowledge about the world of adolescents is mainly based on research conducted in Western countries. Recognition of the different circumstances under which adolescents grow up and the extent to which these circumstances influence their organization of peer relations is warranted. For instance, in Western countries, peers become increasingly salient in the lives of adolescents, whereas adolescents in the Arab world face more restricted peer interactions, particularly girls. In some circumstances, for instance street children, peers are extremely important and function as a surrogate family in the absence of the natural family. Another striking cross-cultural difference is the extent to which adolescents aim for autonomy. Whereas in Western countries, gaining independence and autonomy from parents and family is a key asset of adolescence, adolescents in Asian countries keep closely connected to parents, for instance, via arranged marriages or earning income for their family.

Different Levels of Peer Relations

To understand the role of peers in adolescence, peer relations have been studied at the individual, dyadic, and group level. At the individual level, peer researchers have focused on adolescents' position in the peer network, yielding different types of status. Using peer nominations, information is assessed about with whom adolescents are friends as well as whom they like or dislike in the peer group. From these nominations, two dimensions are discerned. Social preference is the sum of like (or best friend) nominations minus nominations received from peers as being disliked. Social impact is the sum of nominations as like and dislike. Combining both dimensions has yielded different types of positions adolescents have in the peer group: being popular, controversial, neglected, rejected, or average.

Characterizing these different sociometric status groups on dimensions of sociability, aggression, withdrawal, and cognitive abilities showed the following picture. Popular adolescents, who score high on social preference, are known for their sociability and cognitive abilities, whereas their level of withdrawal and aggression is low. Controversial adolescents differ from popular peers by not only being liked but also being disliked by peers (scoring high on social impact). Their controversial status is reflected in their behaviors, combining aggression with sociability. By contrast, rejected adolescents are also considered as aggressive, but lack sociable and cognitive

abilities. Yet, they have a negative status in the peer group by being disliked by peers and, thus, scoring low on social preference. In addition, some rejected adolescents are not known as aggressive, but rather as withdrawn. In a similar way, neglected adolescents are also characterized by low levels of aggression and sociability. However, they are kept unnoticed by their peers, receiving few nominations for being liked or disliked. They score low on social impact. The average status position is reserved for those children who do not meet the criteria for one of the other status groups, having moderate levels of aggression, sociability, withdrawal, and cognitive abilities.

It is important to keep in mind that these status groups are based on the aggregate of interpersonal liking and disliking by asking adolescents to nominate the peers *they* like or dislike. Consequently, both dimensions of liking and disliking do not form one continuum. Whereas some children like a particular peer, others might dislike him or her. The implication is that the dimensions of social preference are not a continuum, running from dislike to like, but rather two single dimensions that only modestly correlate. Hence, nominations for being liked or disliked have also been translated into two distinct dimensions; peer acceptance and peer rejection, which are differently related to behaviors. For instance, negative behaviors such as aggression and bullying are consistently related to peer rejection, whereas associations with peer acceptance are more ambiguous. Negative behaviors do not always translate into fewer nominations as liked.

More recently, the concept of perceived popularity has been emphasized, reflecting hierarchical ordering of the peer group. Contrary to the above-mentioned sociometric status groups that are based on the aggregate of interpersonal liking and disliking, perceived popularity reflects the reputation of adolescents within their peer group derived from nominations for who is the most popular and who is the least popular. Despite some overlap with being liked or having many friends in the peer group, perceived popularity is a distinct measure of peer status that indicates dominant and prominent adolescents, who have power to attract peers and being influential. Perceived popular adolescents are generally seen as aggressive as well as having prosocial behaviors and peer-valued characteristics, most prominently athletic abilities and psychical attractiveness. It has been argued that these latter characteristics mitigate the negative effects of their aggression in peer relations. Whether aggression helps to achieve popularity has been debated, but it is generally conceived as an important means to maintain status in the peer group by beating competitors who also aim to gain a high status in the peer group.

On the dyadic level, most research has focused on friendship relations, whereas research on negative relationships, such as bully-victim dyads and antipathies, and positive relationships, such as romantic relationships and victim-defender dyads, is emerging. Using a dyadic approach has yielded more insights into the dynamics underlying different types of relationships. For instance, bully-victim relationships have been characterized by a power imbalance, with aggressive children initiating bullying of vulnerable, rejected children. Picking vulnerable peers who are not well liked or even rejected, bullies seem to choose their victims strategically by not facing the loss of friendships in the peer group at large.

The study of mutual dislike relationships on the dyadic level, so-called antipathies, has gained mixed findings regarding its significance for adolescents' development. Although mutual antipathies do not necessarily relate to maladjustment, it has been found that they form an important context for aggression and victimization; in particular, when both actors in the relationship are physically strong. Future research has to provide more insight into the unique impact of antipathy relationships for adolescents' development.

Romantic relationships have also gained more attention from researchers. An important feature of adolescence is the increasing cross-gender interactions including romantic relationships. These relationships form an important context for the development of interpersonal skills, intimacy, nurturance, attachment, mutual support, and sexual behaviors. Romantic relationships may be developmentally positive or negative depending on the characteristics of the partners, the quality of the relationship, and the context in which it occurs. They may be especially important as buffers against the potential harm of weak bonds with parents or peers. Age differences emerge in romantic affiliations with girls, reflecting their early maturation, being more likely to date older boys. In other aspects, partners in romantic relationships tend to be similar, such as in ethnicity, status, physical attractiveness, and also depressive symptoms. Whether similarity emerges via a process of assertive mating or via socialization remains an avenue for future research. The formation of romantic relationships is not solely driven by personal preferences but also subject to cultural norms and expectations. For instance, Asian-American adolescents are less likely to date at an early age than adolescents from other ethnic backgrounds.

At the group level, peer cliques and peer crowds have been studied. Peer cliques are interaction-based entities of befriended peers, whereas peer crowds are larger, more reputation-based groups, which primarily reflect cognitive phenomena and stereotypical images of a group. Different types of peer cliques and peer crowds have been identified using peer reports on who are associated with one another and who are seen as distinct cliques and crowds. Definitions of peer crowds are often based on distinct features of the crowds, such as being academic oriented ('brains'), sport oriented ('jocks'), or deviant ('burnouts'). Peer crowds differ not only in their orientation, but also in their status. Particularly, sport-oriented and socially active crowds possess a high status, which is reflected by more self-esteem of its members as well as attaching more importance to being member of a crowd compared to peers in lower status crowd.

Cliques can be hierarchically ordered. For example, popular children are often followed by wannabes. The willingness to become or remain a member of the popular clique can yield insecurity, frustration, and unstable friendship relations. So-called middle friendship groups provide more egalitarian and stable friendships.

Another way of approaching larger peer groups is by means of social networks derived from best friend nominations. Social network analysis yields insights into the structural features of the network, such as mutual friendship patterns ('reciprocity'), friendship triangles meaning that friendships are more likely to be established when persons share a common friend ('transitivity'), centrality of individuals in the network as

well as the role of personal characteristics, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, in establishing friendship relations.

The group level has been studied less frequently than the individual and dyadic level. One reason is that social networks are more difficult to define and measure. Most researchers agree that peer status refers to a rank ordering of individuals according to their degree of acceptance, rejection, or popularity. The measurement of dyadic relationships is relatively straightforward as well. Friendships are typically derived from reciprocal best friend nominations. Similarly, operational definitions have been used to identify enemies or mutually aggressive pairs. The identification of social networks is more complex and challenging because they are not fixed entities but clusters of connected individuals that change over time. At any given time, the members of a network are in it with varying received and given nominations; over time, the network relations may increase or decrease and individuals may move in and out of the group. Progress in models that can study social networks allows investigators to examine changes in behaviors and networks over time.

An avenue for future research is the interaction between different levels of peer relations and their influence on adolescents' social and mental development. An influential model to study the interaction between individuals and the group is the person–group dissimilarity model, which postulates that negative social behaviors like aggression are more likely to lead to negative peer evaluations when these behaviors are not normative in the peer context. Evidence indeed suggests that children are more likely to be rejected when they behave dissimilar to their peer group context and, thus, deviate from the group norm.

Another avenue for future research is the understanding of group dynamics on adolescents' social and mental development. In Western societies, the peer group has become the major social context in which respect and recognition of social maturity may be granted. This is particularly noticeable in risk behaviors that seem to be intrinsically linked to the context of adolescent peer relations. The question, however, is how individual positions within peer networks and being embedded in specific peer groups can have a major impact on adolescent behaviors.

Conclusions

The importance and organization of peer relations alters in adolescence as a result of biological, cognitive, and social changes. Socially, moving into adolescence is associated with entering larger schools. To establish a sense of belonging within these larger peer ecologies, adolescents engage in peer groups that often have a distinct identity. Cognitively, adolescents develop toward mature autonomous individuals where this is related to gaining a more independent position toward parents. Relations with peers enable adolescents to establish valuable relationship independent from parents. Pubertal

changes, which are steered by changes in physiological processes, are reflected in a gradual shift in attention toward cross-sex peers. To understand the role of peers in adolescence, peer relations have been studied at the individual, dyadic, and group level. At the individual level, research has focused on different social status positions of adolescent in their peer group, showing its impact on social and mental adjustment. At the dyadic level, most research has focused on friendship relations, whereas research on negative relationships, such as bully–victim dyads and antipathies, and positive relationships, such as romantic relationships and victim–defender dyads, is emerging. At the group level, disentangling the larger structure of adolescents' social networks, particularly via identification of different peer cliques and crowds, has enhanced our understanding of how peer groups are organized and how identity is reflected by membership of particular cliques and crowds. Little is known, however, about the interplay between different levels of peer relations and changes in peer group formation over time. Furthermore, the cross-cultural validation of these changes and their impact on adolescents is needed.

See also: Alcohol Use; Bully/Victim Problems during Adolescence; Disruptive Behaviors and Aggression; Peer Influence; Popularity and Social Status; Risk-Taking Behavior; Romantic Relationships; Socialization; Tobacco use.

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