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Connections between parents’ friendships and children’s peer relationships

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ABSTRACT
This study investigated connections between qualities of parents’ own friendships and children’s negative peer relationships (i.e., aggression and peer rejection). Participants were 57 dyads of second-grade children (29 girls and 28 boys; mean age = 7.6 years) and their parents. Data on child aggression were collected from teachers and peers, and child peer rejection was assessed using unlimited peer nominations. Parents reported on their own friendship network size, satisfaction, quality, and conflict. Results revealed that two aspects of parents’ friendships, conflict and satisfaction, predicted children’s peer rejection and aggression. Reasons for these linkages, and implications for intervention, are discussed.

KEY WORDS: aggression • children • conflict • friendship • networks

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Children who are peer rejected and aggressive are at risk for later problems such as depression and anxiety (e.g., Ladd, 2006), delinquency (e.g., Miller-Johnson, Coie, Maumary-Gremaud, Bierman, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2002), substance abuse, risky sexual behavior (e.g., Prinstein & LaGreca, 2004), and poor school achievement (Ialongo, Vanden-Kiernan, & Kellam, 1998). Thus, studying children’s peer relationships can provide important clues to understand processes that influence childhood adjustment and psychopathology.

Parents are one primary source of influence on children’s peer relationships. Most research on parents’ influence on children’s peer relationships falls into three areas. First, research on parent–child attachment demonstrates that the quality of the child’s relationship with his/her caretaker predicts the ability to maintain high-quality relationships with peers (e.g., Doyle, Markiewicz, & Hardy, 1994). Related research also suggests that qualities of parent–child interaction (e.g., frequency of conversation) are associated with children’s peer relationships (e.g., Goldstein, Diener, & Mangelsdorf, 1996; Jennings, Stagg, & Connors, 1991).

Second, parenting processes have been linked to children’s peer relationships. For example, Hart, Ladd, and Burleson (1990) found that children of mothers who were more harsh in their disciplinary styles were less accepted by peers and more likely to expect successful outcomes for unfriendly-assertive methods for resolving peer conflict. Similarly, harsh parenting styles predict children’s aggressive behavior with peers (e.g., Conger, Neppl, Kim, & Scaramella, 2003).

The third group of studies shows that parents’ involvement in their children’s peer relationships is associated with peer outcomes. Parents’ initiation, facilitation, and monitoring of their child’s social activities relate positively to peer acceptance, prosocial behavior, friendship quality, and social competence (e.g., Simpkins & Parke, 2002).

The purpose of the current study was to examine another parental factor that may be associated with children’s peer outcomes. Specifically, we investigated how parents’ own friendships are linked to their children’s negative peer relationships, namely, their levels of peer rejection and aggression. Cochran and Brassard (1979) proposed two pathways linking parent friendships and child outcomes. First, parents may directly model friendship for their children, who may observe and imitate specific behaviors, attitudes, or expectations.

In addition, the social support that parents receive from their friends may directly affect their parenting and thus indirectly affect children’s peer relationships. Literature has shown that social support is linked to specific aspects of parenting. Jennings et al. (1991) found that mothers with larger or more satisfying friendship networks praised their children more often and were less controlling. Similarly, Marshall, Noonan, McCartney, Marx, and Keefe (2001) found that parents who received more emotional support were more warm and responsive to their children, which was in turn associated with fewer behavior problems and more social competence in children. Thus, parents’ own friendships may be linked to children’s peer outcomes,
through both direct modeling and the indirect effect that social support may have on parental behaviors.

A small number of previous studies have examined connections between parents’ own friendships and children’s peer outcomes. These studies suggest that the size of parents’ friendship network is positively related to the size of children’s friendship network (Homel, Burns, & Goodnow, 1987; Uhlenendorff, 2000), the sophistication of children’s friendship concepts (Uhlenendorff, 2000), children’s social acceptance (Melson, Ladd, & Hsu, 1993; Simpkins, O’Neill, Lee, Wang, & Parke, 2001), and children’s social skills (Homel et al., 1987).

Other studies have examined the quality of parents’ friendships. Doyle et al. (1994) found that the quality of mothers’ best friendship predicted children’s friendship network size and peer popularity. In addition, Simpkins and Parke (2001) demonstrated that the quality of parents’ friendships related to the quality of children’s friendships.

The current study expanded previous work in several ways. First, we examined a range of dimensions of parents’ friendships, including network size, satisfaction, quality, and conflict. Previous studies have not assessed parents’ friendships so comprehensively. In addition, we assessed the negative peer outcomes of child peer rejection and aggression, whereas previous studies have focused on positive peer outcomes. Furthermore, our assessment of peer rejection was more robust than most earlier work because of the use of peer nominations, the gold standard in the field (Cillessen & Bukowski, 2000). Moreover, data on aggression were aggregated across two sources, peers and teachers, to limit the bias sometimes inherent in relying on one source. Finally, separate sources of information for the parent and child variables reduced shared method variance.

We hypothesized that parents’ network size, friendship satisfaction, and friendship quality would relate negatively to peer rejection and aggression. Our hypotheses regarding conflict in parents’ friendships were less straightforward. On the one hand, conflict may have a disruptive effect, relating positively to child peer rejection and aggression. Some research supports this position, indicating that parental friendship conflict is positively related to negative peer outcomes (e.g., Simpkins & Parke, 2001).

On the other hand, research and theory across domains suggest that friendship conflict may not be associated with negative outcomes and may even be healthy. From a theoretical developmental perspective, Piaget (1932/1965) postulated that conflict with peers serves to enhance social development. Similarly, Adams and Laursen (2001) theorized that conflict is an unavoidable part of close relationships and emphasized the importance of conflict management. Indeed, adolescents from families that engage constructively in disagreement are better able to resolve conflicts productively than are other adolescents (Cooper, 1988). Given these equivocal findings, we explored how parents’ friendship conflict is linked to children’s peer rejection and aggression, without making a specific hypothesis about the direction of this association.
Method

Overview
Fifty-seven second-grade children, their parents, and their teachers were recruited from 12 classrooms in three elementary schools in a mid-Atlantic U.S. state. Through school-based individual interviews, children completed peer-nomination measures of their liking and disliking of classmates, as well as nomination items about their classmates’ aggression. Teachers completed a measure of aggression for each child participating in the study. Parents reported on their own friendship network size, satisfaction, quality, and conflict.

Participants and procedures
Meetings were conducted with teachers to explain the project and distribute permission letters. One hundred and fifty-six parents returned letters giving permission for themselves and their children to participate. The average classroom child participation rate was 65%, with a range from 53 to 82%.

Teacher and peer data for all 156 children were collected through classroom visits, during which interviewers collected peer nomination data from each child with parental permission. First, a child assent form was read aloud, and children had the option to either assent or decline to participate. During the classroom visits, teachers received a packet for each participating child. The completed packets were picked up 2 weeks later, and teachers were compensated with $5 per packet.

At the same time, a packet of measures was mailed to each parent to complete and return in a stamped, addressed envelope. We provided numerous reminders and incentives for parents to respond. First, reminder postcards were sent to each participating parent. Second, reminder phone calls were placed to parents who had not returned the packets. Third, parents’ names were entered into a raffle for monetary prizes. In addition, a $2 donation was made to the child’s school for each parent packet returned. In spite of these efforts, only 66 (42.4%) parent packets were returned. Of these packets, 9 were deemed not usable because of incomplete data or a lack of understanding of the instructions, leaving a final sample of 57 parent–child dyads. The measures we asked parents to complete were somewhat complex and time-consuming; it is likely that this factor contributed to the parental participation rate.

We conducted t-tests to determine if the children whose parents returned packets differed from the children whose parents did not. The groups did not differ significantly on child aggression or peer rejection. Thus, although the sample size was small, it was representative of the larger sample of children with parental permission, at least on the comparison variables.

In the final sample, 50.9% \((n = 29)\) of the children were female. The average age of the children was 7.6 years. Parents included 44 mothers, 1 father, 1 stepmother, 1 grandmother, and 10 parents who did not provide this information. According to the parents’ report, 24 of the children were Caucasian, 17 were Hispanic/Latino, 12 were African American, one was...
Asian or Pacific Islander, and three identified more than one race; this racial breakdown is consistent with the larger school sample and also provides a good estimate of parental race. Forty-one percent of children in this school district were identified as receiving free or reduced-cost lunch.

**Measures**

**Child aggression.** Aggressive behavior was assessed by teacher and peer report. Teachers completed the Aggression and Conduct Problems subscales of the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992). For each item, teachers indicated how often a child engages in each behavior (1 = never to 4 = almost always). To derive a score for each scale, items were reverse-scored if necessary, and then averaged. Because scores for the two scales were highly correlated, *r*(57) = .73, *p* < .001, we averaged them to reach a final teacher report of aggression (*M* = 1.49; *SD* = .47). In the current study, Cronbach’s alphas were .95 for the Aggression scale, .69 for the Conduct Problems subscale, and .93 for the combined scale.

Peer data on aggression were collected through 3 peer-nomination items. Children were asked to nominate classmates ‘who start fights,’ ‘who yell and call other kids mean names,’ and ‘who hit and push other kids.’ Each item was listed on a page with the class roster. An interviewer read each item aloud and circled the names of classmates the child nominated. Children nominated an unlimited number of classmates for each item. The number of nominations that each child received for each item was standardized within classroom, the standardized scores were summed, and the total score was restandardized within classroom. This calculation resulted in a peer measure of aggression.

The teacher-report measure of aggression was standardized across classrooms. Then, the teacher- and peer-report measures of aggression were averaged to create a final aggregate used in subsequent analyses. A strong correlation between the two sources, *r*(57) = .72, *p* < .001, supported this aggregation.

**Child peer rejection.** We measured peer rejection through peer nominations. Children were asked, ‘who are the kids in your class that you like?’ and ‘who are the kids in your class that you don’t like very much?’. Children nominated an unlimited number of classmates for each item. The number of liking nominations received by each child was standardized within classroom, as was the number of disliking nominations. The difference between liking and disliking scores was then calculated and standardized within classroom; this score is referred to as social preference, and higher scores indicate greater liking and less disliking among peers. Social preference scores were then multiplied by –1 to obtain a peer-rejection score for each child (*M* = –.13; *SD* = 1.01). Terry and Coie (1991) found that this approach had greater temporal stability and discriminant validity than two other sociometric methods. Terry (2000) stated that reliable and valid sociometric
data can be collected when as few as 40% of the children in a classroom participate.

**Parents’ friendship network size and satisfaction.** Parents’ friendship network size and satisfaction were assessed using the Number and Satisfaction subscales of the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ, Short Form; Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983; Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, & Pierce, 1987). For each item on the Number subscale, parents were asked to list the people on whom they can rely in different sets of circumstances, the number of people listed was used as an index of network size (\(M = 3.04; SD = 2.38\)). Parents were asked to limit the number of friends they listed to 10, and to write ‘no one’ if applicable. For each corresponding item on the Satisfaction subscale, parents rated on a scale of 1 (‘very dissatisfied’) to 6 (‘very satisfied’) their satisfaction with this level of support (\(M = 4.91; SD = 1.39\)). In the current study, the internal reliability coefficient of each subscale was .96.

**Parent friendship quality and conflict.** Parents’ friendship quality was assessed using the Support and Depth scales of the Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991; Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, Solky-Butzel, & Nagle, 1997), and friendship conflict was assessed using the Conflict scale of this same measure. Parents answered the questions about their best friend. The Support and Depth scales were averaged into one variable (Quality) as they were strongly correlated, \(r(52) = .75, p < .001\). Each item was rated on a 1–4 Likert scale (Quality: \(M = 3.34, SD = .53\); Conflict: \(M = 1.51, SD = .42\)). In the current study, the internal reliability coefficients for the Quality and Conflict subscales were .91 and .75, respectively.

**Results**

**Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses**

Descriptive statistics for each variable are provided above. Variables that were significantly skewed (using a cutoff of \(+/-0.5\); Glass & Hopkins, 1996) were corrected using log transformations (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2001), which produced the final variables used in analyses.

Bivariate correlations between all final variables are displayed in Table 1. Child aggression and peer rejection were positively related. Within the parent friendship variables, network size and satisfaction were positively related, as were quality and satisfaction. Between the child peer and parent friendship variables, there were two significant associations. Child peer rejection and parent friendship satisfaction were negatively related. In addition, child aggression and parent friendship conflict were negatively related.

Gender differences were examined with *t*-tests. Boys were rated as more aggressive than girls, \(t(56) = 3.09, p < .01, d = 0.83\); no other gender differences emerged. Therefore, gender was included as a covariate in all subsequent analyses that included child aggression.
Regression analyses
We regressed child peer rejection and aggression on the parent friendship variables of network size, satisfaction, quality, and conflict using two separate block-entry analyses. Each child variable was the dependent variable in a separate analysis. For both regressions, gender was entered in the first block. The second block included the alternate child outcome (e.g., child aggression when peer rejection was being regressed); using this approach, any associations between a parent predictor variable and the child peer variable in question would emerge only after accounting for the variance attributable to the alternate child peer variable. This consideration was important, because peer rejection and aggression were significantly correlated. Finally, in the third block, we simultaneously entered all four parent predictor variables, to determine their unique effects on each peer outcome variable.

In the regression predicting child aggression, gender was a predictor in the first block, with boys rated as more aggressive than girls ($\beta = –.38$, $p < .01$). Child peer rejection was a positive predictor in the second block ($\beta = .34$, $p < .01$). In the third block, parent friendship conflict negatively predicted child aggression ($\beta = –.34$, $p < .01$), above and beyond the effects of gender and child peer rejection. None of the other three parent friendship variables was a significant predictor.

In the regression predicting child peer rejection, child aggression was a positive predictor in the second block ($\beta = .39$, $p < .01$). In the third block, parent friendship satisfaction negatively predicted child peer rejection ($\beta = –.31$, $p < .05$), above and beyond the effect of child aggression. None of the other three parent friendship variables was a significant predictor.

Discussion
The aim of the current study was to examine the associations between the parent friendship qualities of network size, satisfaction, quality, and conflict and the negative child peer outcomes of aggression and peer rejection. Two significant findings emerged. First, parents’ friendship satisfaction negatively predicted child peer rejection. This finding may be a result of both direct
and indirect influences, as Cochran and Brassard (1979) suggest in their theory linking parental friendships and child outcomes. In terms of direct influences, parents who are satisfied with their friendships may believe that friendship is important, model strong friendships for their children, initiate play-dates, or intervene when children are upset about their own friendships. In these ways, parents may facilitate good peer relationships for their children. Additionally, parents’ friendship satisfaction may indirectly affect children’s peer rejection. Parents who are dissatisfied with their own friendships may experience and express more negative emotion, making them less warm and attentive in their parenting. These parenting qualities may indirectly influence their child’s likelihood of experiencing peer rejection.

The second significant finding was that parents’ friendship conflict negatively predicted child aggression. Research and theory across domains suggests that effective management of conflict may be beneficial to relationships (e.g., Adams & Laursen, 2001; Cooper, 1988). There are several reasons why parents’ friendship conflict may have been particularly related to the child aggression outcome. Parents who effectively model conflict with their own friends may help their children understand that it is a natural part of close relationships, helping children to be prepared when conflicts inevitably arise with their own peers. Additionally, children whose parents effectively resolve conflicts may learn that anger or aggression are not adaptive ways to solve an argument. Thus, these children may be more resourceful in managing peer relationships and less likely to resort to aggressive behaviors with peers. Through witnessing their parents successfully resolve conflicts with friends, children may build an arsenal of strategies for conflict resolution, leading to a decrease in their aggression.

While our results suggest that parental friendship conflict can be beneficial for children, it will be important to examine additional factors before this association is fully understood. In particular, researchers should assess whether children are aware of their parents’ conflict with friends and how it is managed, and if so, how they perceive this conflict. Furthermore, it will be important to measure more thoroughly parents’ conflict resolution and emotion-regulation strategies during conflict with their friends. It is likely that children benefit more from witnessing effective strategies during disagreements than they benefit from witnessing conflict per se.

These findings may have implications for interventions to help children who are struggling with peer relationships. Most such interventions are school based, involving the children themselves, teachers, and peers. These interventions do not address the role of the parents’ own friendships. Future intervention work could include a focus on both parental friendship satisfaction and conflict, two constructs which emerged as important in our findings. Communication skills training or social skills training could be used to increase parents’ friendship satisfaction. In addition, our findings indicate that it is beneficial to children when their parents experience conflict with their friends. However, we are not suggesting that interventions should simply aim to increase this conflict. Rather, interventionists could use examples of effective friendship conflict management to model for children.
appropriate ways to negotiate and resolve conflict, to regulate emotions during conflict, and ultimately, to repair and maintain strong relationships with others.

Null findings, limitations, and directions for future research
Despite the important results, many of the hypothesized links between parents’ friendships and children’s peer relationships were not significant. One likely reason for these null findings, and the most significant limitation of our study, was our small sample size and low power. We conducted a power analysis to estimate the number of participant dyads needed to obtain significant effects with power of .80 and an alpha of .05. Results suggested that 97 participant dyads would be needed to reveal a medium effect and 46 would be needed for a large effect; our N of 57 fell between these two estimates. It is possible that some of our nonsignificant effects were small or medium in size and would have reached significance with a larger number of participant dyads.

One reason for our small sample was that many parents did not return their questionnaire packets, despite our best efforts. Future studies may be able to increase parents’ participation by making the parent questionnaire more clear and concise, by offering oral interviews to parents with limited reading abilities, and by allowing parents to participate in Spanish.

Furthermore, the small sample precluded examination of the potential moderating effects of gender or race/ethnicity, an important topic for future work. Parents’ friendships and children’s peer relationships may be more strongly related for girls than boys, or for families from collectivistic rather than individualistic cultural backgrounds.

A second possible reason for the null findings is the complexity of parental friendships. We concentrated on four specific aspects of parental friendships but many other qualities may be important. Future studies should also address possible confounds to the assessment of parental friendship. For example, parent personality factors or psychopathology might affect self-report on friendship variables. Also, our measures of parents’ friendships were limited, in that they relied solely on self-report data. In future studies, it will be important to assess parents’ friendships more thoroughly, in particular by collecting corroborating data from parents’ friends or by assessing children’s perceptions of their parents’ friendships.

Another limitation of the study is that the results obtained cannot be generalized to other developmental levels. In future work, researchers should investigate the associations between parents’ friendship and children’s peer relationships across the developmental span of childhood and adolescence and into adulthood. Parents’ friendships and children’s peer relationships may be more closely linked at certain ages, such as the first transition to school, or the onset of adolescence.

Finally, the data in the current study were concurrent. Longitudinal research, though expensive and time intensive, would be the best way to determine if parent friendships at an earlier time point predict later negative child peer relationships; concurrent data do not allow us to make definitive
statements regarding the direction of the association between parent friendship qualities and child negative peer outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the results of the current study provide strong initial support for associations between qualities of parents’ friendships and children’s negative peer relationships. These findings suggest that parents may transmit important social values and skills to their children through their own friendships. In addition, they indicate that parental friendships may serve as an untapped avenue for intervening with children who struggle with peer relationships. Future longitudinal and developmental work can build on these findings and bring into clearer focus ways to address or ameliorate children’s peer rejection and aggression.

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