DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 198 PS 018 599

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TITLE	Peer Relations and Social Adjustment: Are Friendship and Group Acceptance Distinct Domains?
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Child Health and Human Development (NIH), Bethesda, Md.
PUB DATE	Apr 89
GRANT	NICHHD-HD05951; NICHHD-HD07205
NOTE	29p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Kansas City, MO, April 27-30, 1989). Frequent filled-in type.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Research; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *Friendship; Group Behavior; *Loneliness; *Peer Relationship; Research Needs; *Social Adjustment; Socioeconomic Status

ABSTRACT

In a study of links between group acceptance and friendship among children in elementary school, 278 third- through sixth-graders, nearly evenly divided by sex, were assessed with measures of level of peer acceptance, primary and secondary friendship, friendship quality, loneliness, and social dissatisfaction. Findings suggested that the distinction between group acceptance and friendship is meaningful. Although fewer children with low degrees of acceptance have friends in comparison to other children, marginal group status does not preclude the possibility of a reciprocal friendship. Having a friend and the quality of the friendship appear to make contributions to the prediction of loneliness over and above the sizable contribution of level of acceptance. Problematic group acceptance is indicative of problems in dyadic friendship adjustment. The quality of children's friendships drops off as level of acceptance decreases. While it is clear that friendship and acceptance domains are linked, the reason why they are linked and what difference the linkage makes remain unknown. It is concluded that reaching an understanding of linkages between group acceptance and children's friendship success is an important research task with implications for intervention with children at risk due to poor peer relations. (RH)

Peer Relations and Social Adjustment: Are Friendship and Group Acceptance Distinct Domains?

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Paper presented in a symposium on "Properti(, Processes, and Effects of Friendship Relations During Childhood and (ɛescence" (William Bukowski, Chair) at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Kansas City, April, 1989. The research reported in this paper was supported by National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Research Grant HD05951 and by National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Training Grant HD07205.

The study of children's peer adjustment and peer relations has been an increasingly active and vigorous area of research. This is particularly true of research on individual differences in group acceptance, which has witnessed prodigious growth since the small handful of studies available two decades ago (Hartup, 1970). In these studies, researchers focus on individuals who are disliked by many of their schoolmates. The assumption is that low acceptance is an indicator of unsatisfactory social adjustment.

Several lines of evidence indicate that interest in children's level of acceptance is well-placed. Individual differences in group acceptance are relatively stable, both over time and across social contexts (see Coie & Dodge, 1983; Coie & Kupersmidt, 1983; Newcomb & Bukowski, 1984.) Further, differences in acceptance are associated in meaningful ways with differences in children's behavior with other children (see Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, in press) and with differences in children's social cognition (see Dodge & Feldman, in press). Unpopular children also report more loneliness than other children (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, in press) and have more negative perceptions of themselves and their social abilities (e.g., Hymel & Franke, 1985). Finally, there is evidence that individual differences in acceptance are related to a variety of later negative adjustment outcomes, ranging from dropping out of school, to criminality, to some forms of serious mental health disorder (see Parker & Asher, 1987).

Although the focus on peer acceptance has been extremely productive, it is important to recognize that peer adjustment can be conceptualized and assessed in other ways. In particular, an increasing number of authors have recently argued for greater attention to children's friendships as distinct from their level of general group acceptance (e.g., Asher & Hymel, 1981;

Bukowski & Hoza, 1989; Furman & Robbins, 1985; Gottman, 1983; Ladd & Asher, 1985; Masters & Furman, 1981; McGuire & Weisz, 1982; Parker, 1986; Tesch, 1983). Friendship and group acceptance can be viewed as conceptually related, but not equivalent, constructs. Group acceptance or popularity refers to being well-liked or accepted by members of a particular group of peers. Friendship is a close, mutual, relationship with another specific child.

How might friendship and group acceptance be related? It is possible to imagine two very different connections between these indexes of peer relations adjustment. One possibility is that children's success at friendship and their group acceptance go hand in hand. As noted, unpopular children show less behavioral and social-cognitive competence compared to their better-accepted agemates. A reasonable expectation, then, would be that the social skills deficits of unpopular children prevent these children from forming and sustaining satisfying dyadic friendships as well as from becoming accepted by the group as a whole. Indeed, this presumption abounds in the literature on peer relations where many authors tend to equate high acceptance with friendship success, or to equate unpopularity with friendship difficulty.

Alternatively, rather than being closely linked, friendship and group acceptance might operate as independent, or at least only modestly-related, domains of peer adjustment. Research with preschoolers suggests that children's judgments of liking and disliking can be quite relationship specific, based predominantly on their own experiences with a particular child, not on the child's behavior towards others generally (Masters & Furman, 1981). Although, there is a need to replicate this important study with older children, the results suggest that a child's generally aversive behavioral style need not act as an impediment to developing a friendship provided that

one's own interactional history with a particular child has been positive and rewarding. In addition, everyday experience suggests that how a person behaves in a group may be a poor clue to what that person is like one-to-one, in a specific relationship.

If group acceptance and friendship operate as distinct domains of peer adjustment, then a number of implications for researchers and practitioners would appear to follow. First, it could mean that the social life of some unpopular children is not as bleak as their marginal group status would at first suggest. Despite their problematic group status, some of these children might have rich and rewarding friendships with one or a few other classmates.

Second, it raises the issue of whether we habitually underestimate the social skills of low-accepted children since we typically assess their behavior in the context of a group in which they are not well-liked and not in the context of a one-to-one relationship with a receptive peer who likes them.

Third, as we have noted elsewhere (Parker & Asher, 1987), there might be different short-term and long-term outcomes for low-accepted children with friends versus low-accepted children without friends.

At present, however, there is little empirical basis for judging the degree of linkage between friendship adjustment and group acceptance. We know from some scattered evidence that, despite their marginal classroom status, some poorly-accepted children do in fact have mutual best friendships (e.g., Berghout-Austin, 1985; Bukowski & Newcomb, 1985; Buzzelli, 1988; Drewry & Clark, 1984; Feltham, Doyle, Schwartzman, Serbin, & Ledingham, 1985; Roopnarine & Field, 1984). However, it is not known whether large numbers of them ordinarily do, as the data in these studies are not of the form that allow estimates of the proportion of low-accepted children who have friends.

Moreover, the existing data do not make it clear whether low-accepted children who do have friendships, have friendships that are qualitatively equivalent to the friendships formed by their better-accepted agemates. There is growing empirical support for the everyday observation that individual friendships differ in quality (e.g., Berndt & Perry, 1986; Bukowski, Hoza, & Newcomb, 1987; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). Some friendships are more supportive than others; some have greater levels of intimacy, companionship, and conflict, for example. Thus far, however, there has been little attempt to ascertain whether the level of children's group acceptance relates to the quality of their friendships.

As several authors have pointed out (e.g., Bukowski & Hoza, 1989), one difficulty with past studies is that many commonly used sociometric measures of acceptance actually confound acceptance with friendship and may therefore have underestimated low-accepted children's success at friendship. This occurs, for example, when sociometric nominations are used to gauge acceptance. Sociometric nomination procedures require children to indicate their best friends from a roster of classmates. Typically only three choices are allowed. The number of nominations children receive is then taken as their level of acceptance. Sometimes children are also asked to list three other children they especially dislike, and the number of friendships choices and dislike nominations a child receives are used jointly to identify "rejected" children--children who receive few positive nominations and many dislike nominations. Although nomination measures have validity for certain research questions, when friendship nominations are used to assess peer acceptance an inevitable confounding of friendship and acceptance results.

The remainder of this paper describes a study we conducted recently that explores the links between level of group acceptance and friendship. As will be seen, the research offers several interesting insights into the issue of whether group acceptance and friendship represent independent domains of adjustment to peers. In particular, it indicates:

1) That many low-accepted children do, in fact, have reciprocal best friendships with other classmates, especially other low-accepted children;

2) These friendships, when they exist, make a difference in the level of loneliness these children report;

3) The quality of a child's friendships adds significantly to the prediction of feelings of loneliness, beyond the prediction possible from knowing the child's level of acceptance or even the number of friends a child has; and

4) Although unpopular children's friendships are similar on some dimensions to those of better accepted children, the two groups differ significantly on several other important dimensions, suggesting that their friendships may not have the same positive developmental implications for them as do the friendships of other children.

Method

Subjects

Our sample consisted of 278 third- through sixth-grade children. There were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls.

Measures

Level of acceptance. Sociometric ratings were used to assess children's level of acceptance. Sociometric ratings avoid the confounding of acceptance and friendship that is inherent in sociometric nomination procedures. In this

procedure, children indicate on a 1 to 5 rating scale how much they liked to play with each of their classmates. A child's level of acceptance is determined from the average rating received from his or her classmates, standardized within gender within each classroom. In our study, children who fell in the top, middle, and bottom thirds of the sample with respect to level of acceptance were designated High-accepted (n = 93), Average-accepted (n = 92), and Low-accepted (n = 93), respectively.

Primary friendship assessment. In assessing friendship, we were mindful of the fact that a relationship cannot be considered a friendship unless the feelings of friendship felt by one member is reciprocated by the other (see Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). Accordingly, to identify a child's friends we asked children to indicate their three very best friends from a roster of their classmates, and then examined the choice matrix of individual classrooms to determine children who nominated each other. For children with more than one reciprocal best friend (45.3% of children), the sociometric rating scale information was used to identify the highest rated friend for further study. In the event that the rating-scale data failed to establish a priority among friendships, one friendship was randomly selected as the focal friendship.

Secondary friendship assessment. We also included a second, supplemental measure of friendship--dubbed the "Friends in the world" assessment--for the specific purpose of evaluating the appropriateness of restricting friendship choices to within classrooms. We were concerned whether restricting choices to within classrooms might underestimate the proportion of children with friends or the number of friends children had. This would be especially problematic if unpopular children were more likely than other children to have friends outside the classroom. Therefore, before

children completed any other sociometric measure they were asked to write the names of their three very best friends. The children were told that these friends could live anywhere, but should be other children and not adults. The number of friends listed who were not class members was tallied for each child.

Friendship quality. To assess the quality of children's best friendships, we administered a questionnaire that asked children to describe various aspects of their relationship with one of their reciprocal best friends. This questionnaire was a modified version of a questionnaire developed by Bukowski, Hoza, and Newcomb (1987). Certain items used by Bukowski et al. (1987) were dropped based on reliability information supplied by Bukowski (W. M. Bukowski, personal communication, November 23, 1987). Another change we made was to customize each child's questionnaire by embedding in each item the name of the child's friend selected from the reciprocal friendship nomination information. This insured that each child described an actual reciprocal relationship. It also minimized the chance that the children described some composite or idealized friendship, rather than one of their actual friendships.

The final version of this measure, the Friendship Quality Questionnaire, required children with mutual best friends to rate their friendships on 40 items assessing seven facets of friendship quality: 1) Play and companionship, 2) Help and sharing, 3) Intimate exchange, 4) Self-validation, 5) Loyalty, 6) Amount of conflict, and 7) Ease of conflict resolution. These seven facets, or subscales, are shown in Table 1, along with a sample item, and the alpha reliability for each subscale.

Loneliness and social dissatisfaction. Children's feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction were assessed using a 24-item self-report questionnaire developed by Asher and Wheeler (1985). This questionnaire contains 16 items focused on feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction and 8 "filler" items focused on hobbies, interests, and activity preferences. The 16 primary items include four different kinds of items. These items assess: (a) children's feelings of loneliness (e.g., "I'm lonely at school"), (b) children's appraisal of their current peer relationships (e.g., "I don't have any friends in class"), (c) children's perceptions of the degree to which important relationship provisions are being met (e.g., "There's no other kids I can go to when I need help at school"), and (d) children's perceptions of their social competence (e.g., "I'm good at working with other children in my class"). Children respond to each item on a five-point scale, indicating the degree to which each statement is a true description of themselves (i.e., "that's always true about me; that's true about me most of the time; that's sometimes true about me; that's hardly ever true about me; that's not true at all about me"). Total scores can range from 16 to 80, with greater scores indicating greater loneliness and social dissatisfaction.

Results and Discussion

Prevalence of Friendship

Seventy-five percent of all the children in our sample had at least one reciprocal best friend. As expected, the prevalence of friendship varied as a function of level of peer acceptance (see Figure 1). Fewer low-accepted children had friends (53.8%) than average-accepted (79.3%) or high-accepted (91.4%) children. Low-accepted children also had fewer friends (mean = .83)

than either average-accepted (mean = 1.41) or high-accepted (mean = 1.90) children (see Figure 2). Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that over half of all low-accepted children had friends. Thus, while it was less common for low-accepted children to have friends than other children, it was certainly not rare. Note, too, that although the vast majority of high accepted children had friends, some did not.

Comparisons of the proportion of children with friends or comparisons of the number of friends children have might be influenced by a disproportionate tendency for high-, average-, or low-accepted children to have friends outside the classroom. Accordingly, we examined how often children included peers from outside their classroom on their lists of "Friends in the world", and whether high-accepted, average-accepted, and low-accepted children differed in this respect. On average, children included just under one (mean = .90) nonclassmate on their list of friends in the world. This did not vary by sex or grade. More importantly, high-accepted, average-accepted, and low-accepted children did not differ in the number of nonclassmates they included. Our data did not make it possible to determine whether these extra-class friendships were actually reciprocal relationships. Still, whatever underestimating of friendship does take place by restricting friendship assessment to the classroom seems to be limited and not particularly biased toward one acceptance group or another.

Because we knew the identities of children's friends, we also examined the extent to which children made friends with other children who were similar in level of acceptance. Children tended to have friends whose group status was similar to their own (see Figure 3). For low-accepted children, 60% had friends who were other low-accepted children. Similarly, 60.4% of all high-

accepted children had friends who were other high-accepted children. For Average-accepted children, the percentage children with friends of similar status was 44.4%. This association was highly significant, X^2 (4) = 33.88, $p < .001$. Similar patterns have been reported for highly aggressive, unpopular children by Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, and Gariepy (1987), who suggested that unpopular children may form their own cohesive subgroup within the larger peer group (see also Putallaz and Gottman, 1981).

Loneliness and friendship among low-accepted children. In the sample as whole, there were large differences between children with friends and children without friends in terms of the level of reported loneliness and social dissatisfaction. The average loneliness score for children with reciprocal friends was 27.7. The average loneliness score for children without friends was 35.8. We wondered whether this pattern held true among the specifically for low-accepted children.

Results indicated that the presence or absence of a friend made a difference in reported levels of loneliness in this population of disliked children (see Figure 4). In fact, the level of loneliness reported by low-accepted children with friends (mean = 32.3) approached that reported by average-accepted children (mean = 29.2).

Friendship quality and loneliness. Our remaining analyses focused on the quality of children's friendships. As noted above, there were striking differences in loneliness in our sample between children with at least one reciprocal friendship and children without a friend. We wondered whether measures of friendship quality would also relate to feelings of loneliness and whether this relationship would hold after controlling for a child's level of acceptance.

To examine this, we regressed children's scores on the seven subscales of the Friendship Quality Questionnaire on loneliness,after controlling hierarchically for sex, grade, level of acceptance, and the number of reciprocal friendships the child had. This latter score could range from 1 to 3. Neither sex nor grade added significantly to the prediction of loneliness. Consistent with previous research, level of acceptance was a strong predictor of loneliness [R^2 increment = .16; $F(1, 198) = 36.94$, $p<.001$]. However, the set of seven friendship quality scores were also quite strongly related to loneliness, even after controlling for level of acceptance [R^2 increment = .14; $F(7, 191) = 5.44$, $p<.001$].

Interestingly, the number of reciprocal friends a child had did not add to the prediction of loneliness, either before or after considering the contribution of level of acceptance.

The quality of low-accepted children's friendships. We examined next the critical question of whether low-accepted children who have mutual best friendships have friendships that are of comparable quality to the friendships of other children. To address this question, we conducted a Gender (2 levels) by Grade (4 levels) by Level of Acceptance (3 levels) MANOVA using the seven Friendship Quality Questionnaire subscales as dependent variables.

The results indicated two important similarities between the friendships of low-accepted children and the friendships of other children. First low-accepted children did not report greater amounts conflict in their friendships than did other children. Second, low-accepted children's reports indicated that they perceived as much play and companionship in their friendships as did other children.

In all other respects, however, the friendships of low-accepted children appeared to be of poorer quality than those of either high- or average-accepted children. The most striking difference was with respect to conflict resolution: Low-accepted children's reports indicated that they resolved disagreements with their friends less effectively and less amicably than other children and their friends (see Figure 5). Low-accepted children also reported less intimate exchange (see Figure 6), less self-validation (see Figure 7), and less loyalty (see Figure 8) in their friendships than other children. They also reported less help and sharing, although this difference was only apparent in the sixth grade (see Figure 9).

Conclusion

To close, we would like to return to the issue of distinguishing between group acceptance and friendship. Our data suggest that the distinction is a meaningful one and should be preserved. As we have seen, although fewer low-accepted children have friends compared to other groups, marginal group status does not preclude the possibility of a reciprocal friendship. In addition, having a friend and the quality of the friendship appear to make substantial contributions to the prediction of loneliness over and above the already sizable contribution of level of acceptance.

At the same time, problematic group acceptance is indicative of problems in dyadic friendship adjustment. In this sense, then, the two domains are clearly not independent domains of peer adjustment. As we have seen, for most dimensions, the quality of children's friendships drops off as level of acceptance decreased. This is nicely illustrated by the findings on conflict resolution: Although low-accepted children did not report greater conflict in their friendships than did other children, they did report that their

disagreements took longer to resolve and were resolved less amicably. Low-accepted children's friendships also seemed to have less intimate disclosure, less self-validation, less loyalty, and, at older ages, less help and sharing.

It is clear, then, that friendship and acceptance domains are linked. What we do not know yet is why they are linked or what difference this linkage makes. Investigations might be made, for example, of the role of social skills in this linkage. Are friendship adjustment and level of acceptance related because they are based on a common set of core social skills? Or is it that success at friendship and success at group acceptance require distinct skills, but that these skills tend to covary within individuals.

It is also intriguing that the friendships of low-accepted children, despite their poorer quality, nonetheless help buffer these children against feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. Although it is tempting to conclude from this that low-accepted children's friendships are meeting these children's needs, it is important to distinguish between the short-term and the long-term functions of children's friendships. Are friendships that are low in loyalty, validation, help and sharing, and disclosure providing children with the kinds of socialization experiences and contexts that in turn promote interpersonal skills and long-term adjustment?

Understanding the linkages between group acceptance and children's friendship success is a challenging and important research task. Given the importance of both acceptance and friendship in children's lives, a more complete understanding of how these two domains relate should help facilitate our intervention with children who are at risk due to poor peer relations.

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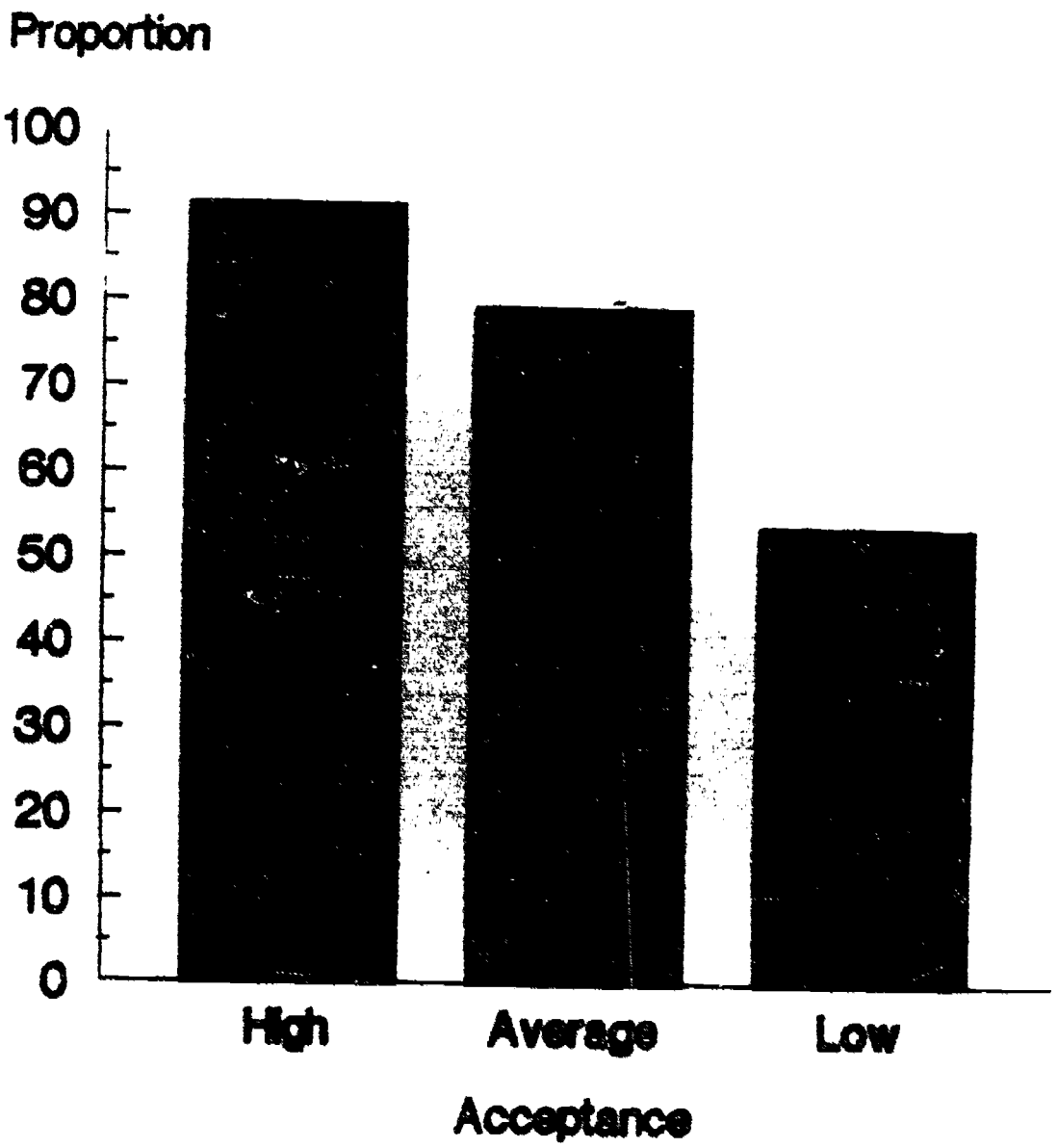
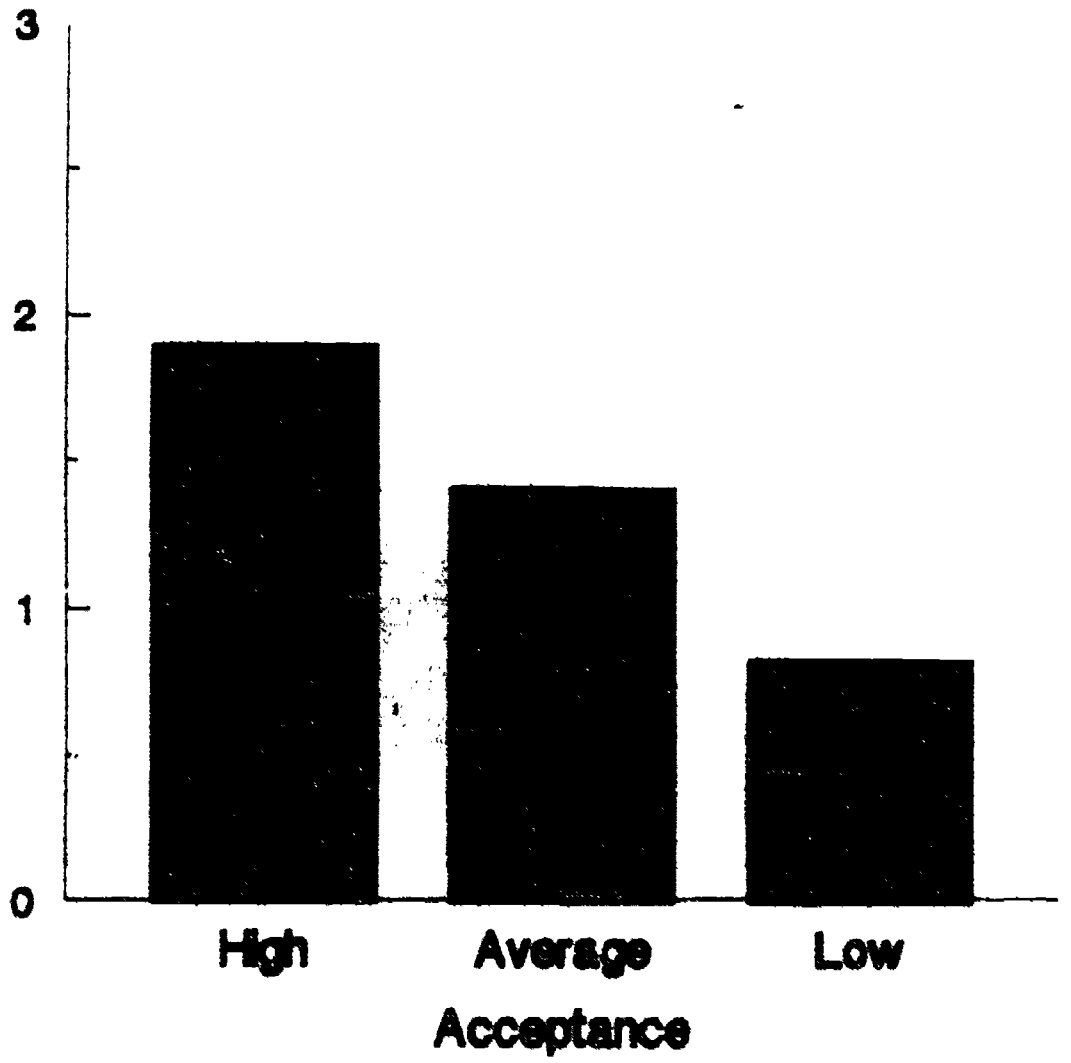
FRIENDSHIP QUALITY QUESTIONNAIRE SUBSCALES

SUBSCALE NAME	SAMPLE ITEM	RELIABILITY
Companionship	"Tim and I spend all our free time together"	.84
Prosocial Support	"Becky helps me when I'm having trouble with something"	.80
Intimacy	"Tim knows and cares about how I feel and what I like"	.81
Loyalty	"Becky would stick up for me if another kid was causing me trouble"	.82
Self-validation	"When I do a good job at something, Tim is happy for me"	.88
Conflict	"Becky and I disagree about many things"	.67
Conflict Resolution	"If Tim and I have an argument or fight we can say 'I'm sorry' and everything will be all right"	.66



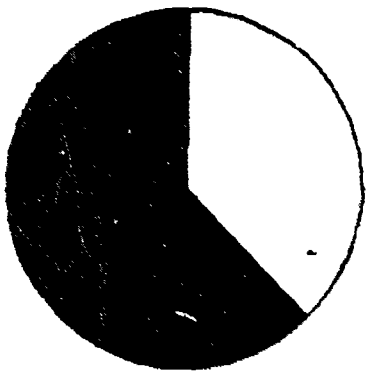
Proportion of children with best friends

Average number of friends



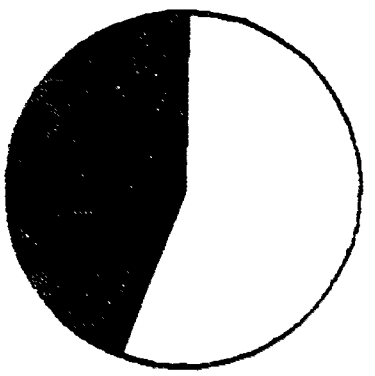
Percent of children whose friend is similar in level of group acceptance

60.6%



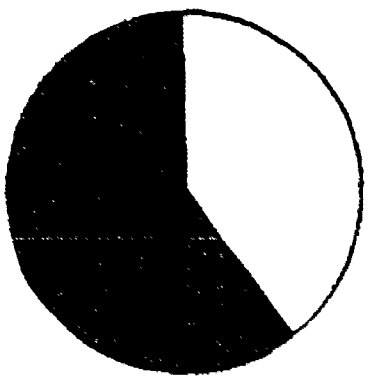
High accepted

44.4%



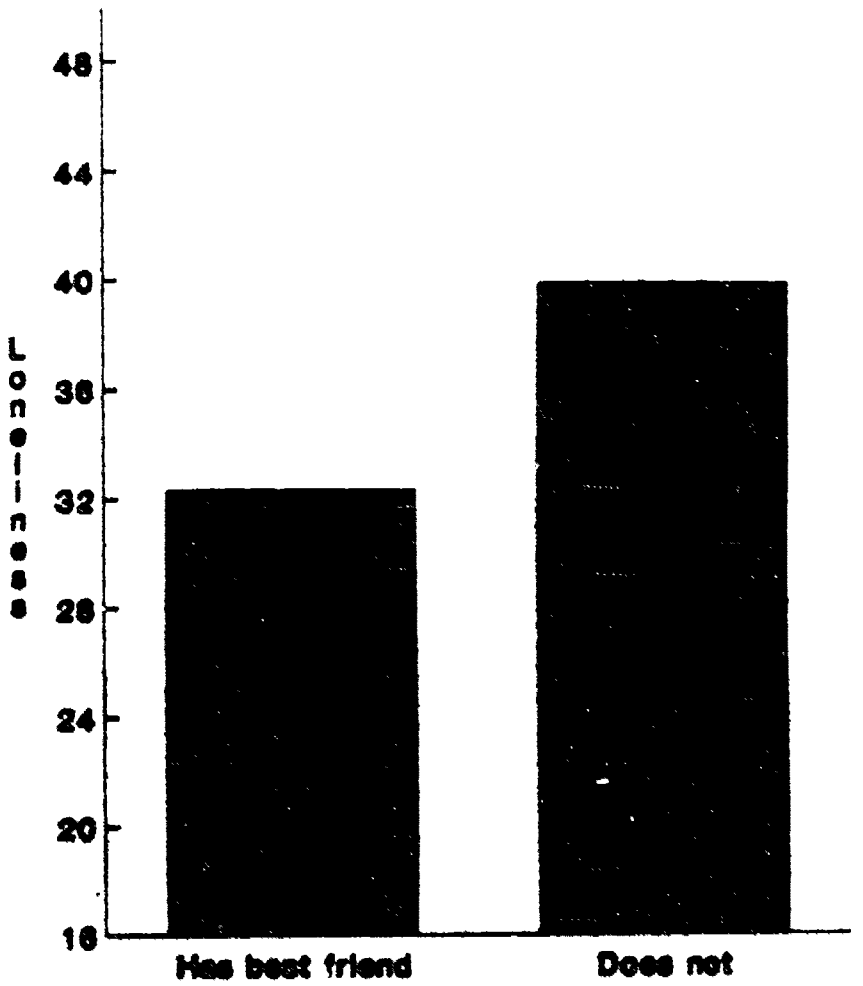
Average accepted

60.0%

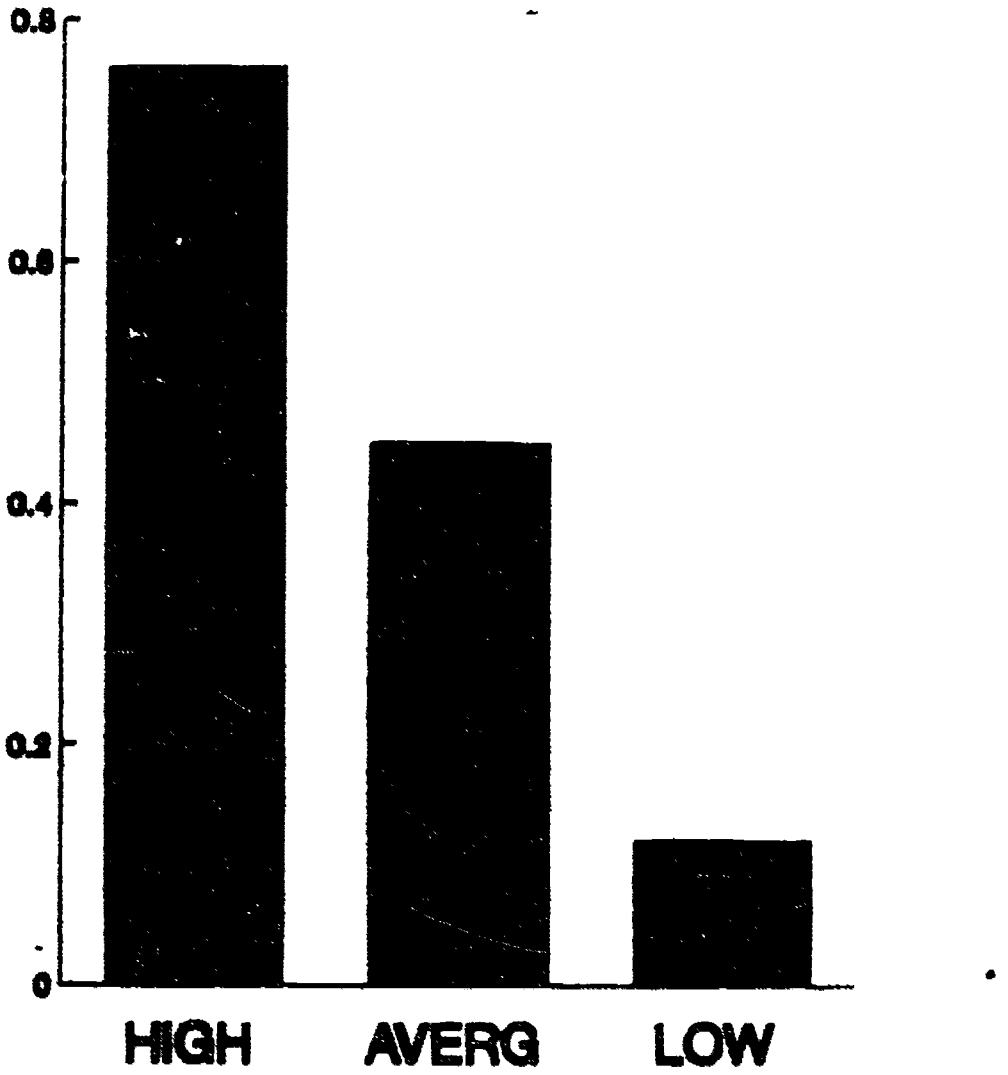


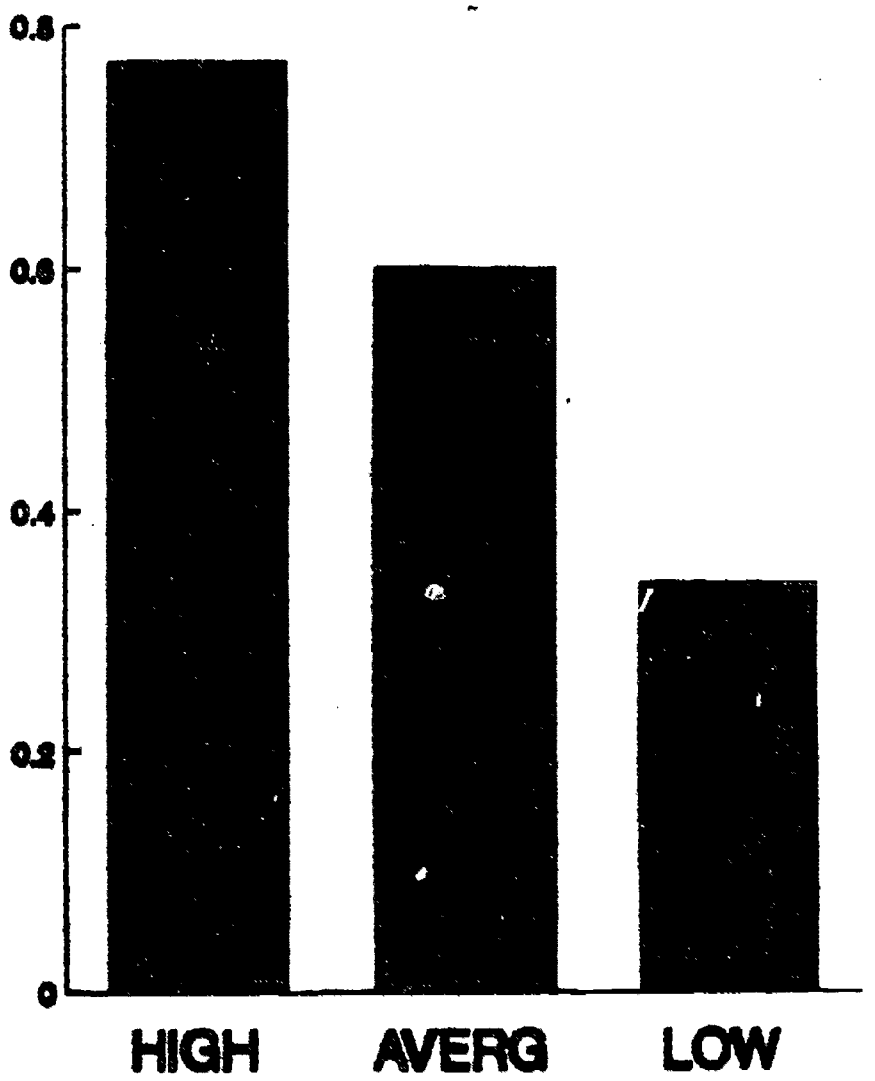
Low accepted

Loneliness among low accepted children with/ without friends

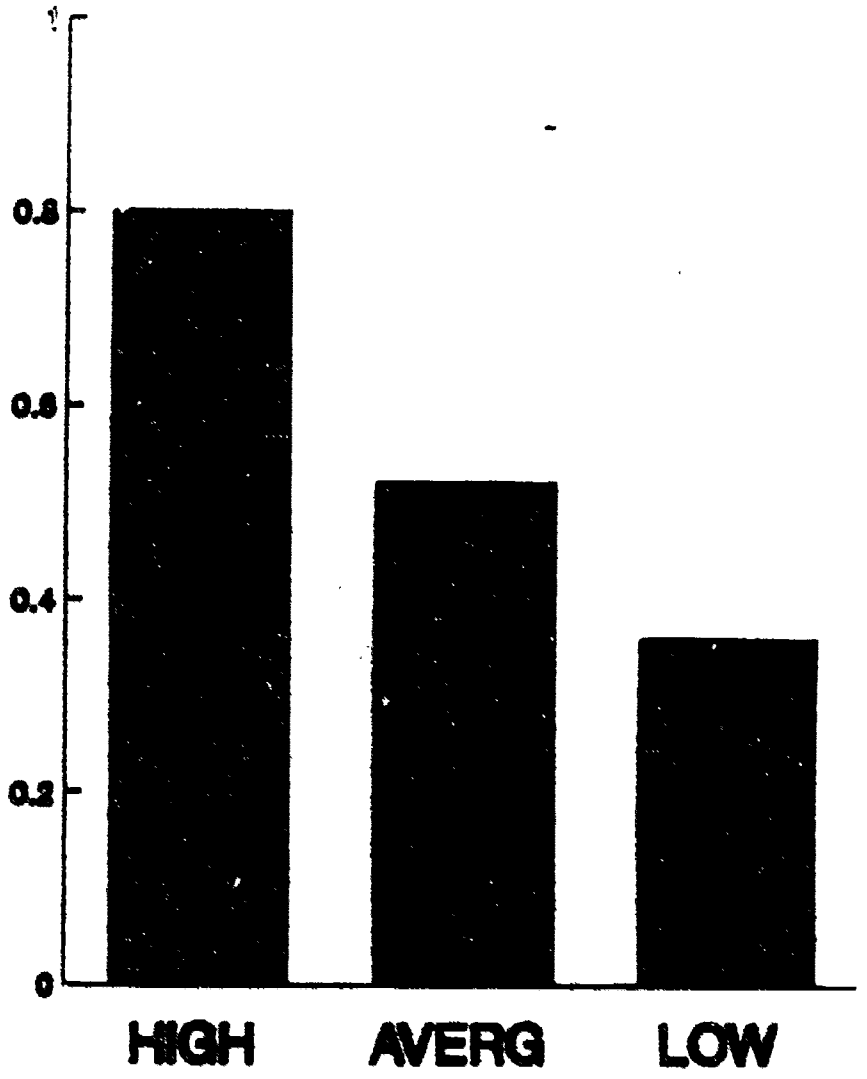


Conflict resolution

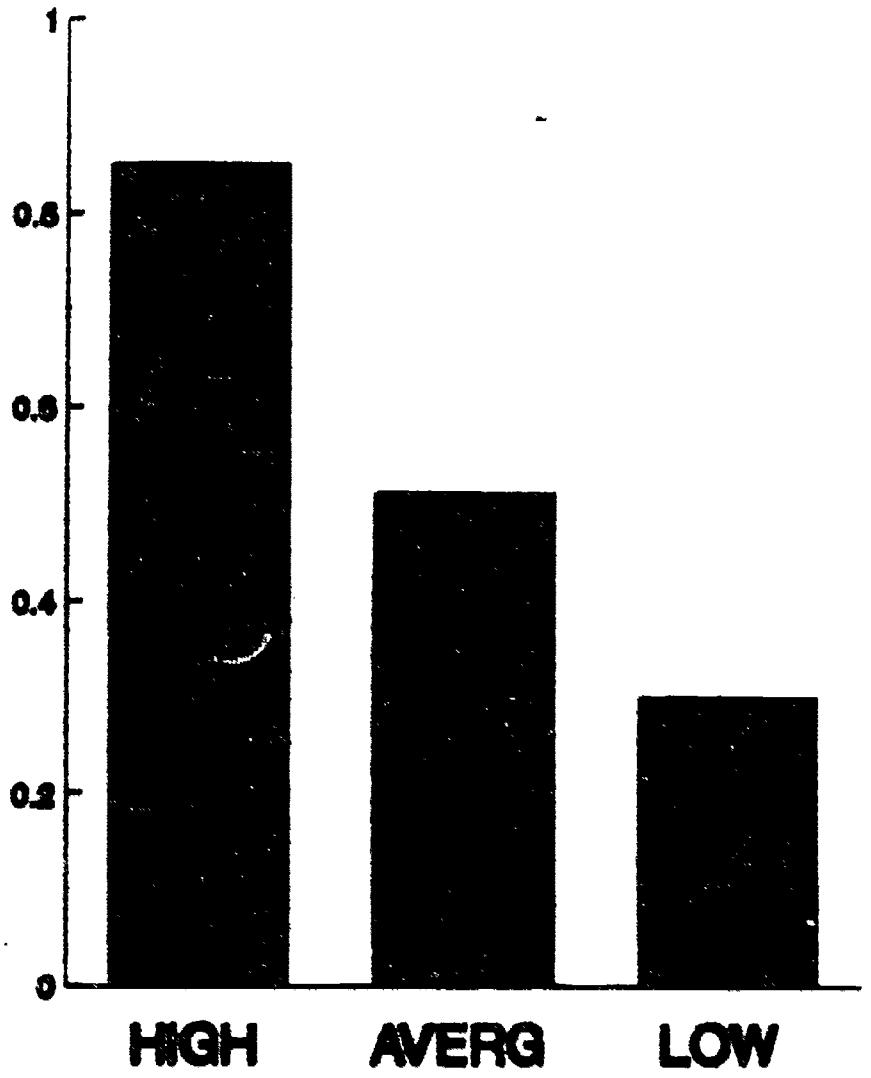



Intimacy
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0
HIGH
AVERG
LOW

Self-validation



Loyalty



Prosocial support
(6th grade only)