Personality development of the adolescent: peer group *versus* parents

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The aim was firstly to determine if peers and parents had a different impact on the personality development of the adolescent. A second aim was to determine if gender played a role in this regard. An empirical investigation was carried out involving 98 learners from Grades 8 to 11 (53 boys and 55 girls). The respondents completed instruments measuring parent-child relationship, relationship with peers, self-concept, and personality characteristics. The results indicated that the peer group, when compared with parents, had a stronger relationship with the personality development of the adolescent. This stronger relationship was more prominent in boys than in girls. Gender did, therefore, play a role.

Introduction and problem statement

It is clear from the literature that adolescence is a period during which great differentiation takes place on the social terrain (Rose, 2005:177). Although adolescents are still close to their parents, they spend increasingly more time with their friends. Their physical and emotional dependence on their parents decreases and they move closer to the peer group. During this time, the personality development of adolescents (specifically identity formation) reaches a crisis point, and the development of a unique and stable personality is often a very difficult aspect to deal with (Ryan & Deci, 2003:254). If adolescents move closer to the peer group during a period that their personality development reaches a watershed point, two questions must be asked. Firstly, to what extent does the peer group influence the personality development of the adolescent and secondly, is this influence stronger than that of the parents?

Harris published a book in 1998 in which she critically evaluates the nurture assumption, which she defines as the conviction held by some that parents are the most important people in their children's environment and have the greatest influence on their development, particularly their personality development. In the second part of her book, she discusses an alternative model, namely, the group socialization theory which views the peer group as the most important environmental factor influencing the personality development of adolescents. The peer group, according to her, has a stronger influence on the personality development of the adolescent than parents, brothers, sisters, family, friends, teachers, or any other adults. To a large extent, that which a person becomes is, therefore, a result of heredity and the person's relationship with the peer group and, to a lesser extent, a result of parent relationships.

The nucleus family can be regarded as a shared environment. While children in one home generally share the same income, education, parenting style, and so on, it does happen that children from one family develop dissimilar

personalities. Some researchers, such as Harris, attribute these differences to non-shared environments. A non-shared environment is situated outside the family and not all family members find themselves within that environment (Wilson, 1999:21-29). The peer group is a typical example of such a non-shared environment. Researchers who support Harris' theory argue that two brothers' personalities will differ as a result of their genetic composition and because they have different friends, and not necessarily because their parents raised them differently.

Harris (1995:477-479) argues that children often behave differently outside the home than they do at home. She argues that their personalities are largely influenced by their conduct outside the home, as adolescents consider the feedback from their friends as more important than that of their parents. This argument is in line with Noack's finding (1998:503-513) that parental pressure has a negative effect on the adolescent's academic achievement, while pressure to achieve from the peer group has a positive effect on the adolescent's academic achievement. Noack believes that parental pressure undermines the adolescent's autonomy, while positive pressure from the peer group is more subtle and is not, therefore, seen as a threat.

Harris was not the first to highlight the importance of the peer group (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). A number of studies confirm the importance of the peer group with regard to personality development. Budhall (1998:159) identified a strong relationship between social isolation among peers and low self-esteem in adolescents, while Bagwell, Newcomb and Bukowski (1998:140-153) concluded that rejection by the peer group in Grade 5 was still a significant predictor of social adjustment after a period of twelve years. Brendgen, Wanner, Morin & Vitaro (2005:579-594) found that in the case of girls, rejection by same-sex peers was related to an increase in depressed mood. Learners with a large social group are more self-assured and are less depressed (Parker & Asher, 1993: 611-621; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995:306-347; Ladd, Kockenderfer & Coleman, 1997:1181-1197).

The assertion that friends play a more prominent role than parents in the personality development of adolescents does not mean that parents do not have any role to play (Beckett, 2002:130). The fact that adolescents gradually detach themselves from their parents does not mean that they do not need their parents' emotional support. Parental support is critically important for adolescents in terms of emotional security and their ability to assert their independence during early adolescence. According to the results of Brendgen, Wanner, Morin & Vitaro (2005:579-594) problematic relationships with parents increase the possibility of a depressed mood during early adolescence. In an investigation conducted by Le Croy (Dacey & Kenny, 1994:245), it was found that those Grade 10 and 12 learners who had loving and healthy relationships with their parents had strong self-images and experienced fewer problems at school. Other researchers have reached similar conclusions in their research. Raja, McGee and Stanton (1992:471-485) and Vihjalmsson (1994:437-452) assert that the quality of the parent-child relationship is an

important predictor of the adolescent's psychological well-being, while Forgatch and DeGarmo (1999:711-724), as well as Crosnoe and Elder (2004:571-602), found that parents play a role in terms of the child's adjustment at school.

It is clear from the above research that parents do influence the personality development and behaviour of their children, but whether their influence plays a greater or lesser role, than that of the peer group, cannot be definitively determined. One reason for this is that much of the research conducted did not study the two groups simultaneously, and where this was done, there appeared to be discrepancies in the results. Another reason which makes it difficult to provide clear cut answers is the complex nature of the underlying relationship between parents and peers. Gauze, Bukowski, Aquan-Assee and Sippola (1996:2201-2216) maintain that children from families with high cohesion show a strong self-image, irrespective of friendship stability (acquiring or losing friends). However, friendship stability influences the self-image of the child in families with weak cohesion. Rodgers and Rose (2002:1024-1037) came to the conclusion from their research results that, in a divorced single-parent family, peer support moderated the effect of low parental support while Laible, Carlo and Raffaelli (2000:45-59) found that adolescents with a secure attachment to peers, but an insecure attachment to their parents, were significantly better adjusted than those with an insecure attachment to peers but a secure attachment to parents.

Meeus and Deković (1999:931-944) investigated the hypothesis that both parents and the peer group influence the personality development of the adolescent, but in different ways. The peer group's influence is the strongest during times of relaxation or recreation, while parental influence is the strongest in terms of school and career opportunities. In their research, which involved 2 777 adolescents, Meeus and Deković were unable to find support for the above hypothesis. According to them, the peer group has the strongest influence on the adolescent both generally and in terms of school-related matters. Asendorpf and Aken (2003:629-666) found that extraversion was related to peer relationships but not to family relationships. According to them family relations are a given, whereas peer relationships have to be constructed and the extrovert person happens to be more successful in such a construction process.

In research conducted by Tatar (1998:691-702), adolescents were asked to indicate which persons had had a meaningful influence on their lives. Adults were also asked to identify retrospectively which persons had influenced their lives meaningfully during their adolescent years. The sample comprised 360 adolescents and 395 middle-aged adults. The adults, when compared to the adolescents, attributed more negative characteristics to their parents and highlighted teachers as the group which had had the most meaningful influence on them. The adolescents highlighted friends as the most meaningful persons in their lives.

A variable which cannot be ignored is gender. Boys and girls differ with

regard to friends. Girls, in contrast to boys, have a more positive attitude to-
wards friendships and believe that they get more emotional support from their
friends (Patterson, Field & Pryor, 1994:579-600). They experience less group
pressure compared to boys (Fourie, 2001:183). With regard to the family
members it seems that having a supportive mother protected boys from the
effects of low-quality friendships and, in the case of girls, high friendship
quality buffered the effects of low maternal support (Rubin, Dwyer, Booth-
laForce, Kim, Burgess & Rose-Krasnor, 2004:326-356). Frey and Rothlisber-
ger (1996:17-31) maintain that adolescents generally view the mother as the
"emotional core" of the family because of her receptive and supportive role.
Fathers, in contrast, are seen as "crisis managers" who offer help in problem
situations. Adolescents view mothers as people from whom they can get social
feedback, while fathers are seen as more judgemental and less socially acces-
sible.

The following is clear from the above:

- There is relatively little research that looks simultaneously at the influ-
  ence of parents and the peer group on the personality development of the
  adolescent. More empirical research is needed before definite conclusions
  can be reached.
- Research focusing on parents and the peer group must take the underly-
  ing interaction between peers and adolescents and their parents into
  consideration. The reason for this is that the adolescents will rely more
  on the peer group for social support if their relationship with their parents
  is weak. According to Feldman and Wentzel (1990:439-454), the parent-
  child relationship is a significant predictor of the social impact which the
  peer group will have on the child. They assert that the adolescent (parti-
  cularly boys) will rely extensively on the support of the peer group when
  there are weak or dysfunctional bonds within the family.
- Gender must be taken into consideration. The role of social relationships
  in the personality development of boys may differ from that of girls.

An empirical investigation was planned to investigate these omissions. Two
questions served as point of departure for the empirical investigation:

- Do peer relationships have a different kind of effect on the personality
  development of adolescents compared to their relationship with their
  parents?
- Does gender play a role in this regard?

Method of the empirical research
Sample
Owing to a number of school activities and other practical problems, certain
schools were approached but were unable to take part in the research project.
A West Rand high school in Gauteng was, however, willing to take part in the
project. One available school had therefore to suffice. The school represents
learners from an average socio-economic background. Grades 8 to 11 learners
were included in the sample. These learners were chosen randomly from a

table of random numbers and a total of 108 learners was involved. The number of learners in each grade as well as the gender of each learner is given in Table 1.

Table 1   Number and gender of the sample population

Grade	Boys	Girls	Total
8	23	16	39
9	9	16	25
10	9	11	20
11	12	12	24
Total	53	55	108

Measuring instruments
Parent-child relationship, relationship with friends and self-concept
A questionnaire developed by Fourie (2001:171) was used to measure parent-child relationship, relationship with friends, and the self-concept. The questionnaire comprised various sections.

• **Parent-child relationship**
This section consisted of three categories which measured learners' relationship with their parents in terms of authority, understanding, and trust. Landman, Roos and Liebenberg (1982:104) used the above relationships (pedagogic relationship structures) as a basis for the development of items for the stated categories.

Authority
Items relevant to this category attempted to determine, amongst other things, to what degree the adolescent experienced his parents' authority as unfair and how parents dealt with rules. There was a total of 13 items. Examples of items that measured the relationship between the adolescent and his parents in terms of authority were as follows:
My parents are often unfair.
My parents give reasons for the rules they enforce.

Understanding
In this category it was determined to what extent the adolescent's parents were interested in him and whether the adolescent believed that his parents understood him. In total there were 15 items. Examples of items that measured the relationship between the adolescent and his parents in term of understanding were as follows:
My parents don't really understand me.
My parents like to be informed about what is going on at school.

Trust
Items developed for this category attempted to determine if there was mutual
trust between the adolescent and his parents. There was a total of 15 items.
Examples of items were as follows:

    I can speak about confidential things to my parents
    My parents are suspicious about my comings and goings.

It was possible to obtain a parent-child relationship total by adding together
the items in the different sections. This total was used in the research.

- **Relationship with friends**

Items for this section of the questionnaire were compiled to establish to what
extent the adolescent was comfortable in his dealings with his friends and
how large the adolescent's circle of friends was. There was a total of 19 items.
Examples of items were as follows:

    I find it difficult to make friends.
    I prefer doing things on my own than in a group.

- **Self-concept**

A specific attempt was made in this section to determine to what extent the
adolescent was unsure of himself and whether he was acceptable to himself.
There was a total of 20 items. Some typical examples of items included the
following:

    I sometimes have doubts about who I am and what I am.
    I often feel that I can't do anything properly.

In answering the items in each section, the respondents were required to
award each item a number between 1 and 6. The scale used was as follows:

This is exactly how I   1   2   3   4   5   6   *This is absolutely not*
experience it   *how I experience it*

    Certain items were stated inversely, but the scoring was corrected during
the processing of the data. A high total score represented a good relationship
and a low total score a poor relationship.

    The number of items and the reliability coefficient (α) for each section are
provided in Table 2 (Fourie 2001:178).

Personality
The High School Personality Questionnaire (HSPQ) was used. This test was
developed in the USA by Cattel and Beloff and was adapted for South African
use for 12- to 18-year-olds. The HSPQ is a standardised questionnaire which
can be administered to a group during a class period. The aim of the test is
to obtain a general assessment of the personality. The HSPQ measures 14
separate personality characteristics which together comprise more or less the
total personality. This questionnaire was chosen because it is the most
general personality questionnaire for South African adolescents and because

Table 2 Number of items and the reliability coefficient (α) for each section of the questionnaire

Section	Number of items	Reliability coefficient (α)
Authority	13	0.75
Understanding	15	0.88
Confidence	15	0.91
Total parent-child relationship	43	0.95
Self-concept	20	0.86
Relationship with friends	19	0.78

it is both reliable and valid. The reliability of the different factors varies from 0.69 to 0.78 (Visser, Garbers-Strauss & Prinsloo, 1992:48).

Procedure
The questionnaire was completed during school hours by each respondent in the sample. The questionnaire was not completed simultaneously by all the participants. The possibility did therefore exist that respondents from one grade, who had already completed the questionnaire, may have discussed the questionnaire with respondents from another grade. But since this question- naire did not measure achievement, any discussion by the participants was unlikely to have an influence on the results.

Instructions were read aloud to the respondents before they completed the questionnaire. The participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions about any areas of confusion both before, and during completion of, the questionnaire. The respondents were asked to mark their answers on the questionnaire. The information collected in this way was then coded for computer analysis.

Results
Pearson Product-Moment correlations were calculated between the 14 perso- nality factors of the HSPQ and the different relationships in order to deter- mine to what extent the self-concept and personality of adolescents were related to their relationship with their friends and parents. The information is provided in Table 3.

It would appear from the information in Table 3 that there was no signi- ficant correlation between adolescents' relationships with their friends and parents and self-control (Q3). Self-control is indicative of strong willpower, discipline and social correctness.

The personality factors which correlated significantly with adolescents' relationships can be divided into three categories:

Table 3   Correlation coefficients between the personality factors and the adolescents'
relationships with their parents and friends (N = 108)

	Relationship with friends	Relationship with parents
Personality factors		
A. Cordiality	0.35**	0.12
B. Abstract thoughts	0.21*	0.01
C. Emotional stability	0.48**	0.40**
D. Irritability	−0.36**	−0.17
E. Dominance	0.19*	−0.01
F. Carelessness	0.27**	0.05
G. Conscientiousness	0.18	0.23**
H. Social boldness	0.49**	0.31**
I. Soft-heartedness	0.23**	0.07
J. Individualism	−0.25**	−0.02
O. Tendency towards guilt	−0.39**	−0.34**
Q2. Self-sufficiency	−0.24**	0.03
Q3. Self-control	0.13	0.09
Q4. Tension	−0.26**	−0.27**
Self-concept	0.82**	0.59**

*$p < 0.05$;   ** $p < 0.01$

Category 1: The first category comprised those personality factors which corre-
lated significantly with friends and parents. These personality factors were:

Emotional stability   (friends $r =$ 0.48;   parents $r =$ 0.40)
Social boldness   (friends $r =$ 0.49;   parents $r =$ 0.31)
Tendency towards guilt (friends $r = $ –0.39;   parents $r = $ –0.34)
Tension   (friends $r = $ –0.26;   parents $r = $ –0.27)

The correlation coefficient for the above personality traits was significant on
the 0.01 level. The following could be deduced from the data: a good relation-
ship with parents and friends related positively with emotional stability and
social boldness. Emotional stability was indicative of high ego strength. Such
people were emotionally mature, realistic, calm and responsible. Social bold-
ness pointed to people who were jovial, friendly, frank and participatory. Al-
though social boldness correlated significantly with friends and parents, the
correlation with friends was significantly higher compared to that of parents
(0.49 *vs* 0.31).

A good relationship with parents and friends correlated negatively with
feelings of guilt and tension. Feelings of guilt pointed to anxiety, self-reproach
and a tendency towards depression. Such people were irritable and tended to
fret. Tension pointed to people who were irritable and frustrated.

Category 2: The second category comprised those personality factors that
correlated significantly with parents but not with friends. The only personality

factor in this category was conscientiousness ($r = 0.23$; $p < 0.01$). Conscientious people were morally judgemental, rule-bound, and orderly.

Category 3: The third category consisted of those personality factors that correlated significantly with friends but not with parents. The largest number of personality factors (eight) fell into this category. The following personality factors correlated positively with the relationship with friends: cordiality ($r = 0.35$), carelessness ($r = 0.27$), soft-heartedness ($r = 0.23$), abstract thoughts ($r = 0.21$) and dominance ($r = 0.19$). Cordiality pointed to a good-natured and co-operative person who willingly paid attention to others. Carelessness was indicative of an open-hearted, spirited, expressive and sometimes impulsive person. Soft-heartedness pointed to a person with a gentle and sensitive nature who was indulgent of others. Abstract thinking pointed to a good intellectual ability and general insight, while dominance was indicative of a stubborn, rebellious and arrogant attitude.

The personality factors which correlated negatively with the relationship with friends were irritability ($r = -0.36$), individualism $(r = -0.25)$ and self-sufficiency ($r = -0.24$). An irritable person was impatient, officious and very taken up with himself. The person with a high score in terms of individualism withdrew, was pernickety and sometimes querulous. Self-sufficiency was indicative of autonomy and social independence.

A high positive correlation ($r = 0.82$) was obtained between the adolescent's relationship with the peer group and his self-concept. A moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.59$) was obtained between the adolescent's relationship with his parents and his self-concept. Where the adolescent's relationship with friends explained approximately 67% of the variation in the self-concept, his relationship with parents explained significantly less of the variation in the self-concept (34%).

To determine the possible effect of gender, similar correlations such as those given in Table 3 were calculated for boys and girls in the same sample. The correlations are given in Tables 4 and 5.

Boys
When the information was analysed, in the same way as for the joint group, it appeared that six personality factors did not significantly correlate with the adolescent boy's relationship with his parents or friends. These factors were abstract thoughts, dominance, conscientiousness, soft-heartedness, a tendency towards guilt and self-control.

Only two factors fell into Category 1 (the personality factors which correlated significantly with friends and parents). These personality factors were:
Emotional stability   (friends $r = 0.47$;   parents $r = 0.38$)
Tension   (friends $r = 0.27$;   parents $r = -0.26$)
The personality factors which correlated significantly with parents but not with friends fell into Category 2. No such factors were identified.

Table 4 Correlation coefficients between the personality factors and the adolescent boys' relationships with their parents and friends (N = 53)

	Relationship with friends	Relationship with parents
Personality factors		
A. Cordiality	0.28*	0.12
B. Abstract thoughts	0.20	−0.02
C. Emotional stability	0.47**	0.38**
D. Irritability	−0.39**	−0.07
E. Dominance	0.24	−0.04
F. Carelessness	0.41**	0.13
G. Conscientiousness	0.00	0.01
H. Social boldness	0.36**	0.16
I. Soft-heartedness	0.08	−0.07
J. Individualism	−0.37**	−0.16
O. Tendency towards guilt	−0.25	−0.09
Q2. Self-sufficiency	−0.34**	−0.12
Q3. Self-control	−0.07	−0.07
Q4. Tension	−0.27*	−0.26
Self-concept	0.81**	0.59**

* $p < 0.05$;   ** $p < 0.01$

Table 5 Correlation coefficients between the personality factors and the adolescent girls' relationships with their parents and friends (N = 55)

	Relationship with friends	Relationship with parents
Personality factors		
A. Cordiality	0.37**	0.10
B. Abstract thoughts	0.08	0.01
C. Emotional stability	0.47**	0.41**
D. Irritability	−0.32**	−0.22
E. Dominance	0.19	−0.05
F. Carelessness	0.10	−0.01
G. Conscientiousness	0.30**	0.40**
H. Social boldness	0.64**	0.40**
I. Soft-heartedness	0.05	0.12
J. Individualism	−0.18	0.07
O. Tendency towards guilt	−0.56**	−0.54**
Q2. Self-sufficiency	−0.03	0.18
Q3. Self-control	−0.27	0.20
Q4. Tension	−0.29*	−0.28*
Self-concept	0.85**	0.59**

* $p < 0.05$;   ** $p < 0.01$

The personality factors which correlated significantly with friends but not with parents fell into Category 3. The largest number of personality factors (six) fell into this category. They were carelessness ($r = 0.41$), social boldness ($r = 0.36$), cordiality ($r = 0.28$), irritability ($r = 0.39$), individualism ($r = –0.37$) and self-sufficiency ($r = –0.34$).

In the case of boys, there was a very high positive correlation ($r = 0.81$) between the relationship with the peer group and the self-concept. A moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.59$) was obtained between the relationship with the parents and the self-concept.

Girls

In the case of girls, there were seven personality factors which did not show any significant correlation with the relationship with parents or friends. Four of these factors, namely, abstract thoughts, dominance, soft-heartedness, and self-control did not show significant correlations in the case of boys either. The other three factors, namely, carelessness, individualism, and self-sufficiency correlated significantly with friends in the case of boys but not in the case of girls.

Four factors fell into Category 1 (the personality factors which significantly correlated with friends and parents). These personality factors were as follows:

Emotional stability	(friends $r = 0.47$;	parents $r = 0.41$)
Conscientiousness	(friends $r = 0.30$;	parents $r = 0.40$)
Social boldness	(friends $r = 0.64$;	parents $r = 0.40$)
Tendency towards guilt	(friends $r = 0.56$;	parents $r = 0.54$)

The personality factors which correlated significantly with parents but not with friends fell into Category 2. As was the case with the boys, no personality factors were identified.

The personality factors which correlated significantly with friends but not with parents fell into Category 3. In the case of girls only two personality factors fell in this category, namely, cordiality ($r = 0.37$) and irritability ($r = –0.32$).

In terms of self-concept, the results of boys and girls were similar. There was a very high positive correlation ($r = 0.85$) between the relationship with the peer group and the self-concept. There was a moderate correlation ($r = 0.59$) between the relationship with the parents and the self-concept.

Discussion of the results and recommendations

Two questions were initially posed as the point of departure for the empirical study. The questions could be answered as follows. Peer relationships had a different kind of effect on the personality development of adolescents compared to their relationship with their parents. Gender played a role in this regard.

The results showed that the relationship with friends correlated significantly with 12 of the 14 personality factors. The relationship with parents correlated significantly with five factors. The relationship with friends *per se* cor-

related significantly with eight of the personality factors, while the relation-
ship with parents *per se* correlated significantly with only one factor.

The relationship with friends and with parents correlated significantly
with self-concept, but the correlation of the former was significantly higher
than that of the latter.

These results supported Harris' (1998) assertion that in the personality
development of adolescents, peer relations are a more important factor than
relationship with parents. The results also concurred with the findings of
Tatar (1998:691-702), Meeus and Deković (1999:931-944), and Laible, Carlo
and Raffaelli (2000:45-59), referred to earlier.

Gender played a role. It would appear that the relationship with the pa-
rents correlated to a lesser degree with boys than with girls. In boys, the
relationship with parents correlated significantly with only two personality
factors, compared to five factors in girls. In both gender groups, the relation-
ship with the peer group correlated significantly with more personality factors
than the relationship with parents. In boys, the relationship with friends and
parents correlated the strongest with emotional stability (emotional maturity,
realistic, calm and responsible). In girls, it was social boldness (jovial, friendly,
jovial and participatory).

In terms of self-concept, it would appear that there were no gender dif-
ferences. In both cases, the relationship with friends correlated more strongly
with the self-concept than with the relationship with parents.

When the deduction was made that the relationship with the peer group
compared to the parent-child relationship correlated more strongly with per-
sonality development, it did not imply that parents played no role in this
regard. Many parents, who feel that their parental role is disrespected, would
view the peer group as a threat and consequently prevent the child from
participating in peer group activities. This can have negative consequences for
the adolescents' social and personality development, since they must learn to
make responsible choices and to behave in an acceptable manner. The peer
group creates an environment for them to exercise socially responsible beha-
viour. There are naturally peer groups and associated activities that would be
of concern to any caring parent, but there are also other groups which can
add constructively to the personality development of the child.

The results confirmed that parents were neither the only, nor the most
important, role players in an adolescent's life. Instead of parents withdrawing
or forcing their influence on the child, contact with other role players such as
the peer group should rather be encouraged. Parents should not superficially
take note of their child's friends, but should make an effort to get to know
them. If the peer group strongly relates to the personality development of the
adolescent, as indicated in this and similar studies, then parents can ap-
proach the peer group in certain situations to convince their children to
change their behaviour and adopt more appropriate behaviour.

One way in which schools can assist parents is by measuring the social
profile of children, just as they measure their intelligence or interests. Child-
ren's character and behavioural traits are linked to their social actions and

they would be better understood in the classroom and at home if this information is available.

Finally, extensive research has already been done on the positive effects of parental involvement (Forgatch & DeGarmo, 1999:711-724). In the light of the present findings, it is recommended that more research be done into the positive influences of peer group involvement. The focus in much of the research already conducted has been on the negative influence of the peer group, but the peer group does have a supportive role to play. And until more information is available on the supportive role of the peer group, educators will not be able to use it to their advantage.

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