

Childhood Friendship: Its importance and the Educator's Role

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ABSTRACT

Most of us intrinsically understand the importance of friendship in our lives, and although we may not spend time considering it, we are aware it is beneficial to our happiness and well-being. As educators, we are often conscious of the friendships that exist in our classrooms, and are particularly mindful of those students who have difficulties making friends. This literature review examines the reasons why friendship is so important to us, and in particular, to the well-being of our children. Furthermore, it highlights ways that we can meet our responsibilities as educators to support New Zealand students in developing and maintaining friendships.¹

Keywords:

friendships, well-being

Research paper

INTRODUCTION

If asked, most of us would have little difficulty in drawing up a list of our friends. We could likely apply descriptors such as 'best', 'special', 'casual', 'lifetime' or 'intimate' to some of these friends and not others. Further, we could answer questions about the characteristics of each of these friends, the circumstances of the formation of these friendships, or the ways in which these friendships have been important to us. The detail with which we could do this belies the little time we spend reflecting on our friendships and the ease with which we take them for granted. In part, this is because making friends is 'natural' for us as social beings. But at the same time we are all aware of some people who struggle to make friends, or keep friends. It is these differences that have led both philosophers and psychologists to examine the nature of human friendships, how they develop, and the purposes they serve.

Because children's friendships are a prominent feature of the social landscape of schools (Parr & Townsend, 2002),

¹ This paper was prompted by the master's thesis study of its first author who investigated happiness as a function of types of children's friendships (Taylor, 2015). Difficulties in obtaining full participation compromised analysis of the data preventing its inclusion here.

educators are concerned with questions about the developmental significance of friendship and its role in school learning and motivation, and this has led to educators examining their own role in fostering social relationships in children (Ladd, 1990; Rizzo, 1989; Zettergren, 2010). In New Zealand, the role of teachers in developing friendships has become a *responsibility* by virtue of its inclusion as a "key competency dimension" in the development of psychological well-being (KCP Curriculum Group, 2011).

This review examines the implications of childhood friendship for the happiness and well-being of students, and the ways that teachers can facilitate the development of student friendships.

HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING

Although teachers and parents are typically concerned with the development of *happiness* in their children, the psychological literature often conflates the terms 'happiness' and 'well-being' as closely related, if not interchangeable, concepts (Veenhoven, 2000; Veenhoven, 2013) because of the conceptual difficulty in separating them. Does happiness lead to (or cause) psychological well-being? Is *happiness* evidence of psychological well-being? Is psychological well-being a critical determinant of happiness? Although 'happiness' has more common usage and has had a longer history of research it, too, is extremely difficult to define (Exenberger & Juen, 2014; O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010; Seligman, 2008). As eloquently stated by Howard Mumford Jones, "happiness belongs to that category of words, the meaning of which everyone knows, but the definition of which no-one can give" (cited in O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010, p. 95).

Our conceptions of happiness and well-being are complicated by several different factors, in particular whether we are using the terms in a subjective or objective way. Subjectively, happiness may represent an individual's positive emotional rating of their overall quality of life, whereas objectively, happiness may be determined by the presence of certain factors in a person's life, such as having good health, freedom, and financial security (Exenberger & Juen, 2014; O'Rourke &

Cooper, 2010; The Children's Society, 2013; Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Lehto, 2013).

A popular model that attempted to knit together the intricacies of happiness and subjective well-being was that proposed by Diener (1984). Diener argued that well-being has three components, the first of which he identified as 'life satisfaction', or a person's evaluation of the factors that make up his or her life as a whole. The other two components of happiness that Diener (1984) proposed are positive affect, or an elevated level of high energy and pleasure, and negative affect, or an elevated level of unpleasant emotions and moods. Positive affect and negative affect in this view are not seen as opposite ends of the same spectrum, but as independent factors allowing, for example, the possibility that someone could have both low (or high) levels of positive and negative affect (Exenberger & Juen, 2014).

In an attempt to clarify these relationships, Seligman (2002) developed a model of "authentic happiness" with a focus on achieving life satisfaction. In this model, general happiness has three domains. The first is the hedonic, or positive emotion domain, with its roots in Freudian principles. The second is engagement, a state of flow where there is a "loss of self-consciousness, where time stops for you, and you are 'at one with the music'" (Seligman, 2008, p. 20). The third is based on living a meaningful life, in which people recognise that their strengths can be used to be a part of, and to serve a purpose for, something bigger than themselves. According to this model, happiness can be measured in terms of life satisfaction on a scale, and the overall objective of authentic happiness theory is to increase life satisfaction.

As evidence of the complexity in dealing with the relationships between these concepts, the same author has recently completely reworked his original theory (Seligman, 2011). Here, the concept of happiness is reduced to the element of positive emotion, merely one piece of the puzzle that makes up subjective well-being. Engagement and meaning, accomplishment, and positive relationships are the other puzzle pieces identified as independently contributing towards overall well-being (Seligman, 2011).

Another model that identifies smaller contributing factors to the larger concept of well-being is Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998). This Māori model of health and wellness views the four dimensions of te taha wairua (spiritual health), te taha hinengaro (mental health), te taha whānau (extended family health), and te taha tinana (physical health) as being equally fundamental to one's general well-being. Unlike Seligman's recent theory involving independent 'elements', Durie's four dimensions are viewed as being closely interconnected, each influencing the other three as well as overall well-being (Durie, 1998).

These models of happiness and well-being demonstrate the complexity of the notions, and although a precise definition may not be obtainable, happiness is undoubtedly an important part of our lives, and a condition that we, as humans, strive to attain. Like Seligman's 'elements', easier to determine than a definition of happiness are the factors associated with it. Numerous studies have explored how demographic, personality, and other variables affect the happiness levels of children (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Exenberger & Juen, 2014; Holder & Coleman, 2008; O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010). The last two of these studies, conducted in Canada and Australia respectively, both found that social factors, life outcomes, and aspects of personality all correlate relatively highly with childhood happiness, whereas demographic factors have a significantly lower correlation. O'Rourke and Cooper (2010) noted that happier students are likely to be more included, popular, and optimistic. They concluded that this knowledge "provides classroom teachers with an understanding of what constitutes happiness and the beginnings of a model for interventions in primary classrooms" (p. 106).

Whether we view the terms as synonymous or not, in preparing students for their journey through school as well as their future thereafter, it is of the utmost importance that we strive for maximum levels of happiness and well-being for them while in our care. This is more than simply a responsibility for educators to fulfill their legal obligations (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2007; New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2002, 2011; New Zealand Teachers Council, 2009). One factor that we can focus on, in working towards the goal of increased childhood happiness and well-being, is friendship.

FRIENDSHIP

Perhaps the main feature of friendship is its reciprocity. It cannot exist within one person's intentions and actions towards another; it must include voluntary and mutual choice, understanding, and interaction between two people (Blieszner, 2014; Rizzo, 1989; Sharabany, 1994; Sullivan, 1953; Zettergren, 2010). Being selected and liked by a peer does not make you friends; a genuine friendship relation demands that you "like and select him or her too" (Zettergren, 2010, p. 164).

As well as being reciprocal, there are other qualities that humans seem to instinctively understand and expect of friendship. For example, when adolescents and adults are asked to define friendship or to describe the nature of their friendships, it is typically seen as a relationship based on affection, trust, companionship, respect, care and commitment (Blieszner, 2014; Nicholson & Townsend, 2011; Zettergren, 2010). In short, friendships are mutual, close and informal relationships in which we feel that we are supported. As noted in the opening

paragraph, these are not ideas that we often consciously think about but appear, none-the-less, to be deeply ingrained in us.

These expectations are not necessarily the province of older children, as even young children have clear and advanced understandings of friendship. Rizzo (1989) found that, when children as young as five years old were interviewed about their friendships, they appeared to have internalised concepts of friendship that included many of the qualities mentioned by adults. When the children in his study attempted to determine the existence of friendships in their lives, they used a process in which they compared their “internalised concept [of friendship] with specific features of interactions with frequent playmates” (Rizzo, 1989, p. 113). Furthermore, in their interactions with their peers, these children were likely “to act in accordance with this concept when with their friends, and to object when their friends failed to act in accordance with the concept” (Rizzo, 1989, p. 113).

Intimate (or Best) Friendship

Not only do we have a sophisticated understanding of what constitutes friendship, but we are also very aware of differentiations regarding types, or levels, of friendship. Most of us are very clear about our best friends, friends, casual friends, and acquaintances (Blieszner, 2014; Sharabany, 1994). Not only can we categorise our friends in relation to our entire friendship networks, but we also categorise our friends within specific contexts (Nicholson & Townsend, 2011). For example, children may have an overall best friend who is different from their classroom best friend and their sports team best friend. Similarly, adults may have a different ‘best friend’ at their work, their yoga class, and their book club. In other words, we have independent friendship systems and hierarchies for each of the numerous social contexts that make up our lives. Through interviews with older adults in New Zealand, it was found that some ‘best friends’ remain in spite of no contact for years and, in some cases, when they are no longer living (Nicholson & Townsend, 2011). Despite the extensive and complex natures of our friendship networks, most of us are very clear about what types of friendships we have with each of our friends.

Popularity

Friendship may also be viewed in terms of popularity. Popularity is independent of intimacy, and refers to the extent that you are perceived as a friend by those around you, even though this may not be reciprocated (Nicholson & Townsend, 2011). Looking at friendship from an evolutionary perspective, humans are social animals, and we evolved to seek out company and friendship for survival reasons. Although in evolutionary terms there were costs to making friends and forming

groups, such as the transmission of diseases and competition for resources, the benefits that our early ancestors gained from social interaction greatly outweighed the costs. These benefits included the sharing of knowledge, resources, and parenting duties (Griskevicius, Haselton & Ackerman, 2015). In addition, socialising with others was imperative if one was to gain social status and attract mates. Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly, our early ancestors were safer from predators in groups. In fact, the importance of peer sociability was sufficiently significant to human safety to have survived as brain structures that are activated today by both social rejection and physical threat (Griskevicius et al., 2015). From this perspective, the reasons why we seek out friendships and feel so good about having friends, and our natural abilities to mentally manage and categorise our friendships so efficiently, become clearer.

Development

A number of researchers have investigated human friendships in relation to childhood development. In earlier years, a focus on specific stages of friendship development led to relatively restricted views of the ways that children progress through steps of interacting and relating to their peers (such as the ‘chumship’ model of friendship development proposed by Sullivan in 1953). However, recent research suggests that friendship development is a more simultaneous progression of social skills and motivations. Smith (2013) noted that children as young as two years old “seek out others as companions, prefer to be with particular children, comfort each other and share feelings” (p.152). A New Zealand study by Dunn (2004) also highlights the significant social strengths of young children, demonstrating that four-year-old children are able to cooperate with their friends and understand their friends’ intentions (Smith, 2013).

In addition to maturational influences on friendships, the friendships themselves play an important role in development. In a study of the interactions of best friends, McChristian, Ray, Tidwell and LoBello (2012) found that friends in childhood are “valued resources” (p. 463) who assist in the attainment or mastery of age-related tasks and skills that are vital for development. Such tasks include perspective-taking, communication skills, skills of negotiation involved in sharing, coping with stress and rejection, the ability to suspend judgement until others have explained their point of view, and even simple turn-taking or following the ‘rules’ of informal debate. As noted by Seiffge-Krenke (1993), friends provide new perspectives from which students “discover their own power to co-construct ideas and receive validation” (p. 76). Although some of these skills may have been acquired initially through interactions with adults, particularly parents, friendships provide both the vehicle and the opportunity to practice, master and

use these skills and behaviours in ways not possible by any other means. McChristian et al. (2012) go so far as to suggest that some of these benefits are exclusive to peer friendships in that the skills are not accessible through the often unequal family dynamics governing children's relationships with their siblings and parents (McChristian et al., 2012).

In addition to the links between friendships and the development of children's social skills there are also links to wider aspects of development, most notably to their psychological health and ability to learn (Buysse, Goldman & Skinner, 2003; Cranley Gallagher, 2013; Ladd, 1990; Pijl, Koster, Hannink & Stratingh, 2011; Rizzo, 1989). Some authors (e.g. Pijl et al., 2011) point out several benefits of childhood friendship, including an increase in the ability to cope with the social challenges and difficulties of school life. In addition to social life at school, academic performance has also been shown to be positively influenced by friendship at school (Buysse et al., 2003). It is for these reasons that researchers emphasise the importance of friendships among students in school settings, and the consequent role that teachers need to play in monitoring their students' friendships (Pijl, et al., 2011).

HAPPINESS, WELL-BEING AND FRIENDSHIP

It is reasonable to assume that having friends is positive and makes us happy, and that not having friends would be negative and would make us unhappy. This is generally a safe assumption in that many studies have shown a strong relationship between friendship and happiness (Blieszner, 2014; Demir, Jaafar, Bilyk & Ariff, 2012; Nicholson & Townsend, 2011; Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Lehto, 2012). Uusitalo-Malmivaara and Lehto (2012), investigated the effects of different social factors on levels of happiness and depression in over seven hundred 12-year-old Finnish children. It was found that, for both boys and girls, the presence of two or more close friends with whom one could share confidences was associated with high levels of happiness and a reduced risk of depression.

However, this assumption of a positive relationship between friendship and happiness and psychological well-being is confounded by the type of friendship. As noted earlier, friendship can be viewed as a function of *popularity* or *intimacy*. In an early study (Townsend, McCracken & Wilton, 1988), scores on two measures of psychological well-being (self-esteem and sex-role orientation) of Year 10 high school students were each separated according to four independent groups of students (low popular/low intimacy; low popular/high intimacy; high popular/low intimacy; and high popular/high intimacy). As expected, those children with a best friend demonstrated higher levels of self-esteem and more positive sex-role orientation than those without

a best friend. Interestingly, however, whether students were popular or not had no influence on their self-esteem or sex-role orientation. In brief, while intimacy was related to psychological well-being, popularity was not.

The somewhat surprising finding that positive well-being is associated with having a best friend, but not with being popular, has been replicated in other studies investigating different aspects of mental health conducted in New Zealand. For example, postgraduate student Laurie (1997) found similar results favouring intimacy but not popularity on well-being measures of loneliness and parental attachment in Year 10 adolescents' same-sex friendships.

A peculiarity across these New Zealand studies is that psychological well-being was least positive in the *'high popular/low intimacy'* group (rather than the *'low popular/low intimacy'* group, as might be expected), though not significantly. This trend for psychological well-being to be lower in children who are popular yet do not have a reciprocated best friendship remains to be explored, but, in summary, it is clear that close friendship is an important contributor to the well-being of children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

As educators and parents in New Zealand, we cannot take children's friendships for granted. Not only does a large body of international research evidence support the vital role that friendships play in enhancing school learning and motivation, but there is a need to be active in supporting those friendships as a critical element in the development of children's well-being as a stated key competency dimension in our national curricula (KCP Curriculum Group, 2011; Ministry of Education, 1996, 2007). It is not enough to simply provide opportunities for social interactions to occur, such as playtime, recreation breaks, and free periods. We need to deliberately structure ways to encourage positive social interaction, particularly the case for those children who show signs of not forming good relationships with their peers (Buysse et al., 2003).

In most cases, encouraging social interaction can be achieved unobtrusively or passively, such as by arranging classroom furniture in ways that enable eye contact, or using teaching methods such as cooperative learning that foster reliance between group members in the co-construction of knowledge for the completion of academic tasks. With newly-formed classes, or with children at risk of social exclusion, teachers might use more overt strategies, such as direct teaching in social skills. For children showing signs of difficulties forming friendships, Evans (2010) reviews a number of simple strategies that parents and teachers can use to foster social interaction with younger children, while Mychailyszyn et al. (2010) offer suggestions more suitable for older children and adolescents.

Another useful guide for teachers, developed by Reddy (2012), comes in the form of nine group play interventions that can be implemented with younger students (and modified for older students) to support them in making and maintaining classroom friends. Each of these interventions is designed as an enjoyable classroom game that targets different social skills known to be important in making and maintaining friends, including meeting others, initiating and maintaining conversation, listening, cooperation, teamwork, sharing about oneself, learning about others, and giving and receiving compliments (Reddy, 2012). The acquisition of these skills in non-threatening classroom environments not only promotes classroom friendships, but is the foundation for the formation of social relationships beyond and after the classroom.

Some teachers have found 'positive peer reporting' effective in improving the social environment of classrooms. This simple method designed, in part, to reduce negative 'tattle tails', involves encouraging students to be aware of positive social behaviours in their classmates and reporting them to the teacher (Sulkowski, Demaray & Lazarus, 2012). The teacher then rewards the students who engage in positive behaviours. Used judiciously, this appears to be a simple, convenient and effective technique for increasing social involvement and improving peer social support and relationships for students (Moroz & Jones, 2002; Smith, Simon & Bramlett, 2009).

In New Zealand, a school's set values offer teachers a pro-social culture that can act as a platform from which they are able to teach their students about social skills that support the forming and maintaining of friendships (Ministry of Education, 2008). A school's values direct a focus on the expected behaviours of children, and a variety of lessons and learning tasks can be targeted to these. For example, the value of 'respecting others' offers a teacher opportunities to establish classroom rules, give explicit instructions, and set learning tasks around empathy, inclusion, and pro-social behaviours, with the aim of improving the quality of social interactions between students and supporting their friendships.

Underlying the strategies and suggestions discussed above are a number of principles that govern support for the development of social relationships, and Cranley Gallagher (2013) has captured these principles in a pyramid model (Figure 1). Designed for teachers, the model shows how additional, more intrusive, layers of support may be necessary to support the skills of friendship development of different children. At the base level, support constitutes setting up the classroom environment in a way that encourages positive and safe relationships, using such techniques as modelling caring behaviours, and establishing expectations and rules for respectful and kind interactions with others.

At the second level of the pyramid, attention shifts to the teacher's capacity to provide explicit instruction in social-emotional skills to all children in the class, as well as further small group instruction for children who require additional help and practice with these skills. At the top of the pyramid, attention shifts to those students with high social needs. Cranley Gallagher (2013) notes that this level requires personalised strategies and monitoring for individual children, and this support will depend upon the broader ecological factors impacting on these social behaviours. It is important as educators to remember that a child's difficulties in forming and maintaining friendships may stem from a variety of complex factors, such as family disturbance, cultural differences, or a lack of sleep, and that personalised strategies should address these factors. While this tiered model appears simple, it provides a powerful framework for examining how we might best ensure that all New Zealand students develop in ways that increase their levels of happiness and well-being.

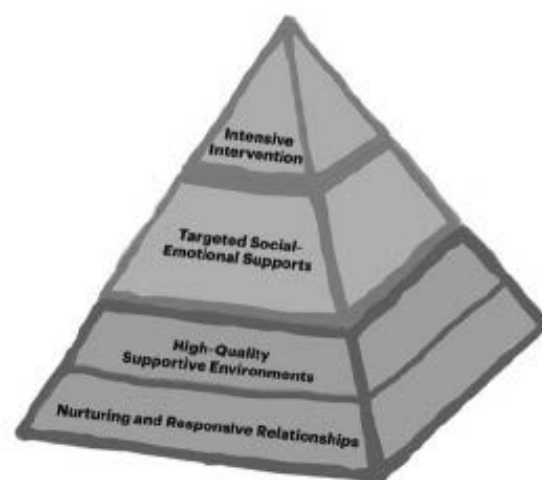


Figure 1. A pyramid model for supporting friendship development (Cranley Gallagher, 2013).

CONCLUSION

"If you have two friends in your lifetime, you're lucky. If you have one good friend, you're more than lucky" (Hinton, 1997).

From many perspectives, friendship is fundamental to the quality of our lives as human beings. While the evolution of our social relationships may lie in the simple needs for safety and comfort, research has shown the complexity of the ways in which our friendships have a fundamental influence on our happiness and well-being. Educators play a critical role in ensuring that children develop positive social relationships, not just because research has shown that such relationships enhance academic learning and motivation at school, but because the development of friendships is intrinsic to greater happiness and well-being in children and, ultimately, to us all.

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