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Children's Friendship Development: A Comparative Study

SeonYeong Yu, Michaelene M. Ostrosky, & Susan A. Fowler
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

Establishing friendships is an important developmental goal of early childhood, but little research has addressed ways in which parents support the friendship development of their young children with disabilities. The purpose of this survey study was to explore the support strategies that parents use to facilitate their children's friendships. Forty mothers of preschool-age children completed surveys. Both groups of mothers (parents of children with and without disabilities) reported using similar strategies to support their children's friendship development. However, mothers of children with disabilities engaged directly in the children's play far more frequently than did mothers of typically developing children.

Introduction

Establishing friendships is an important developmental goal of early childhood (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002). Friendships established during the preschool years create valuable contexts to learn and practice skills essential to children's social, cognitive, communicative, and emotional development (Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Connor, 2007). Friendships also benefit children by creating a sense of belonging and security and by lessening stress (Geisthardt, Brotherson, & Cook, 2002; Overton & Rausch, 2002). In addition, successful friendships in early childhood contribute to children's quality of life and are considered important to life adjustment (Overton & Rausch, 2002; Richardson, & Schwartz, 1998).

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Given the importance of peer relationships, the leading international organizations in early childhood education and early childhood special education—the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC)—have recommended practices that highlight social interaction as a critical component of early childhood practices (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005). Such practices include the need to create child-focused environments that foster positive relationships among peers, between children and caregivers, and between parents and caregivers (Sandall et al., 2005).

Although making friends may seem to be a natural result of human interaction, both research and professional experience suggest that young children with disabilities often experience difficulties developing peer relationships and friendships. Making friends involves many complex verbal and nonverbal social interactions and requires the skilled use of social perception and self-regulatory behaviors (DeGeorge, 1998). However, many young children with disabilities show uneven and insecure growth in social interactions and often fail to resolve conflicts with peers in appropriate

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ways (Guralnick, Hammond, Connor, & Neville, 2006). As a result, children with disabilities tend to be less accepted and often rejected by peers who perceive them as less socially competent (Geisthardt et al., 2002).

Although young children with disabilities often experience limited success in developing friendships, this does not mean that friendships do not exist for them (Freeman & Kasari, 1998). Some researchers have studied and described the characteristics of friendships between children with and without disabilities (Lee, Yoo, & Bak, 2003; Siperstein, Leffert, & Wenz-Gross, 1997; Staub, Schwartz, Gallucci, & Peck, 1994; Turnbull, Pereira, & Blue-Banning, 1999). Interest in the friendships of children with disabilities has increased along with the inclusive education movement (Taylor, Peterson, McMurray-Schwarz, & Guillou, 2002). Researchers have subsequently suggested various ways to support children's social interactions and facilitate friendships between children with and without disabilities (Danko & Buysse, 2002; Gordon, Feldman, & Chiriboga, 2005).

Role of Parent Support in Friendship Development

Children develop socially and emotionally through interactions and relationships with others. Thus, it is reasonable to explore children's social development in the context of family. The literature in child development provides an important context for understanding parent-child and child-peer relationships (McCollum & Ostrosky, 2008). McCollum and Ostrosky, in a review of family support for their young children's peer-relationships, suggested three pathways related to how parents support the development of peer relationships for their young children. Parent support may be achieved by (1) positive parent-child interactions; (2) parents' roles as supervisors, coaches, and advisers during children's play; and (3) parents' roles as providers of social opportunities.

Researchers in child development have explored a linkage between young children's attachment security with their primary caregivers and their positive interactions with peers (Clark & Ladd, 2000; Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardif, 2001; Youngblade & Belsky, 1992). For example, Youngblade and Belsky (1992) investigated linkages between parent-child relationships and children's friendships. They recruited 73 married couples who were expecting their first child. The researchers collected data when children were 1, 3, and 5 years old. A probe at age 1 examined attachment security between the parent and child using the Ainsworth and Wittig (1969) *Strange Situation Scale*. A probe at age 3 measured parent-child interactions during one-hour play sessions. A probe at age 5 assessed children's friendships. The results indicated that secure parent-child relationships led to positive friendships, whereas more negative parent-child relationships (i.e., those marked by negative affect, intrusiveness, or disobedience) led to less positive and less connected friendships.

Research within the child development literature also has assessed how parents manage their children's social lives directly (Finnie & Russell, 1988; Ladd & Golter, 1988; MacDonald & Parke, 1984; Mize & Pettit, 1997). For example, parents determine the timing and circumstances under which their children have social contact with peers outside the family. Parents also directly and indirectly provide their children with access to peers or social opportunities for peer interaction. In this regard, Ladd and Golter (1988) examined the relationship between parents' management of peer contacts and the quality of peer relationships. They used telephone interviews and written logs to identify how 50 parents managed their preschool children's peer relationships. Data on children's peer relationships were obtained through observations, peer sociometric ratings, and teachers' assessments. The results showed that parents who initiated higher levels of peer contact had children with more consistent playmates. Parents' roles in supporting friendship development also have been explored within special education. Special education researchers have mainly focused on parents' perspectives toward their children's friendships and on ways for parents to facilitate interactions, while researchers in child development have been interested primarily in parent-child interactions, parent supervision of their children's peer interactions, and how parents provide social

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opportunities for peer interactions (McCollum & Ostrosky, 2008).

Research regarding parents' perspectives about the friendships of their children with disabilities indicates that parents consider friendship development of their children with disabilities to be very important (Guralnick, 1999; Overton & Rausch, 2002; Staub et al., 1994). For example, Overton and Rausch (2002) interviewed nine mothers of children with disabilities, ages 5 to 11 years old, about important goals for their children's social development. The mothers reported that they considered having a best friend or a close friend to be a very important aspect of children's social development and well-being.

Some research has indicated how parents of children with disabilities can facilitate their children's friendships. For example, Turnbull and colleagues (1999) interviewed four Hispanic mothers of children with disabilities, ages 7 to 19 years old, and reported that the mothers had actively facilitated friendships by seeking out friendship opportunities for their children and providing interpretations and accommodations for successful friendships. Examples of support strategies shared by the mothers included advocating for inclusion in neighborhood schools, making accommodations for partial participation in the general curriculum, supporting participation in community activities, encouraging others to accept their children with special needs, and facilitating a Circle of Friends group that met every other week in the school to increase social activities.

Geisthardt and colleagues (2002) investigated the friendships of 28 children with disabilities, ages 3 to 10 years old, through family interviews, home observations, and written questionnaires. The parents of children with disabilities reported that they assisted their children's development of friendships by initiating and supervising play. They also improved opportunities for play by getting to know their neighbors, inviting children to parties, arranging play dates for their children with classmates, structuring the physical environment, facilitating interactions with siblings and cousins, and facilitating the formation of positive attitudes of the peers' parents toward their children with disabilities.

McCollum and Ostrosky (2008), in a chapter of the book *Social Competence of Young Children* (Brown, Odom, & McConnell, 2008), discuss ways that parents support peer relationships and the friendships of their young children with disabilities. The authors also offer suggestions for social opportunities that parents can provide their children. For example, parents of young children with special needs can organize play dates, attend playgroups with the children, and help them to attend birthday parties as contexts for interacting with typically developing children. Parents also can encourage their children to participate in community events such as free concerts, sports activities, faith-based activities, events at museums, and camps.

Limitations of Research Related to Parental Support for Friendships

Research and practice in special education have emphasized the cognitive and behavioral skills of children with special needs. Facilitating friendships has not been emphasized in educational programs (Freeman & Kasari, 1998; Richardson & Schwartz, 1998). In the 1990s, research and practice in special education began placing more emphasis on the development of friendships that go beyond basic social interactions between children with and without special needs (Richardson & Schwartz, 1998).

Some previous research on the topic of friendship development suggested that peer interactions and friendships of children with disabilities occur more frequently in integrated or inclusive programs compared to specialized programs (Buysse, 1993; Guralnick, Connor, & Hammond, 1995; Stainback & Stainback, 1987). Interestingly, much of the research on young children's peer interactions and the friendships of children with disabilities has focused on preschool settings rather than on more natural contexts such as homes and neighborhoods (Geisthardt et al., 2002;

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Guralnick, 1999; Turnbull et al., 1999).

The purpose of this study was to extend the literature by increasing our understanding of how parents facilitate their children's friendships. The study was designed to explore the support strategies that parents use to assist their children in developing peer relationships and friendships. An analysis of whether these support strategies differed between parents who had a preschooler with a developmental delay and parents who had a preschooler who was typically developing also was included. The following research questions were addressed:

- What are the characteristics of young children's peer relationships, as reported by parents, and do they differ between children with and without disabilities?

- What strategies do parents report using to support their children's friendship development, and do they differ between parents of children with and without disabilities?

- What child characteristics (gender, sibling, and severity of disabilities) influence their peer relationships (according to parents), and do these differ between children with and without developmental delays?

Method

Participants

Mothers who had preschool children between the ages of 3 and 6 years old were asked to participate in this study. Forty-six participants were recruited from five classrooms in two public preschool programs in central Illinois. (University Institutional Review Board procedures do not permit researchers to contact public school principals, but principals are informed about pending research projects and may contact researchers about projects in which they are interested in participating. Principals of two schools contacted the first author about this study.) From the initial group of 46, a total of 40 mothers were selected in order to form two groups: 20 mothers who had a child with an identified disability or developmental delay and an Individualized Education Program (IEP), and 20 mothers who had typically developing children without a diagnosed disability. The researcher matched mothers who had typically developing children and mothers who had preschoolers with developmental delays based on specific demographic information (i.e., ethnicity, age, marital status, education level, and/or family income).

Demographic information for both groups of mothers is presented in Table 1. All pairs were matched on at least two demographic variables. The groups were first matched according to ethnicity, and then efforts were made to match on family income, maternal age, educational level, and/or marital status. Each group included 10 African American, 9 Caucasian, and 1 Asian participant. Half of the mothers ranged in age from 20 to 30 years. The remainder were over 30 years old. Slightly more than 50% of the participants were married. About 62% of the mothers reported their educational level as high school or some college, and over half of the participants indicated that their annual income was below $25,000. The results of a chi-square analysis revealed no significant associations on demographic variables between the mothers who had typically developing children and the mothers who had children with developmental delays.

Table 1
Mothers' Demographics*

Characteristic	Mothers of Typically Developing Children (*n* = 20)	Mothers of Children with Developmental Delays (*n* = 20)
Ethnicity		
African American	10	10

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Asian	1	1
Caucasian	9	9
Age		
20 to 30 years old	11	9
31 to 40 years old	6	8
41 to 50 years old	3	2
Over 50 years old	0	1
Marital status		
Married	9	13
Single	10	7
(Missing data)	(1)	
Education		
High school	3	6
Some college	9	7
College or graduate degree	8	7
Annual income		
Below $25,000	12	9
$25,000 to $50,000	3	4
$51,000 to $75,000	1	2
$76,000 to $100,000	3	1
Above $100,000		4
(Missing data)	(1)	

*Note: The values represent frequency data.

In the group of 20 typically developing children, 14 were male. Their mean age was 52 months, with a range from 40 to 71 months. Eleven of the children with developmental delays were male, and the mean age in this group was 50 months, with a range from 43 to 60 months. A t-test analysis showed no statistically significant differences between the two groups regarding the children's gender and age. (See Table 2 for demographic information on the children.)

Table 2
Children's Demographics*

Characteristic	Typically Developing Children (n = 20)	Children with Developmental Delays (n = 20)
Gender		
Boy	14	11
Girl	6	9
Age		
3 years old	8	6
4 years old	7	11
5 years old	4	2
6 years old	1	0
Mean age	4.3 years (52 months)	4.2 years (50 months)

*Note: The values represent frequency data.

Survey

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An eight-page survey titled "Parent Perceptions of Preschoolers' Friendships" was developed by the authors based on a review of the research literature on preschool children's friendships. (See Appendix A for a list of studies that informed the survey's development.) The survey consists of 38 questions and is divided into four sections: (1) child information (i.e., date of birth and gender), (2) children's social networks, (3) mothers' social networks and strategies used to support their children's friendships, and (4) family information. The survey comprises several types of questions, including multiple-choice responses, single-choice responses, short answers, and open-ended questions. The total time to complete the survey was estimated to be 20 minutes.

A draft of the survey was reviewed by two faculty members in early childhood special education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The survey was piloted with two mothers—one with a typically developing preschooler and one with a preschooler with a mild developmental delay. Feedback from the mothers and faculty members was incorporated into a revision of the survey. The research protocol and survey also were reviewed and approved by the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board for Research.

Data Collection Procedures

Using email, the researcher briefly explained the study to principals in three local preschool programs. The principals of two programs agreed to help recruit participants from their centers. One of the principals emailed all classroom teachers who served children with IEPs in the center to ask if they would assist with recruitment. Four teachers agreed to the principal's email request. The other principal suggested a classroom teacher who served children with IEPs in the early childhood center. This teacher agreed to assist with recruitment. Thus, a total of 5 teachers sent packets of materials to approximately 100 parents.

Each packet contained the survey and a consent letter. The parents were asked to return completed surveys to their child's teacher. A waiver of informed consent was used so that participants who completed and returned the survey were not asked to return the consent letter. All participants who completed a survey were provided with a $5.00 gift certificate to show appreciation for their time and participation. The researcher visited the five classrooms once a week for approximately 2 months to collect returned surveys. Surveys were accepted in the order in which they were received until the researcher had collected enough responses to match 20 mothers of typically developing children and 20 mothers of preschoolers with IEPs on at least two demographic variables.

After the first mailing of approximately 100 surveys, 34 surveys were collected. From these, 24 were matched across the two groups. To find additional matches for the remaining surveys, three more preschool teachers at these two centers were contacted to seek their assistance. They were asked to recruit more typically developing African American children and Asian children, as well as more Caucasian children with IEPs. The three teachers agreed to send home packets of materials to several children who met these specific demographic criteria. Ultimately, 46 surveys were collected from which 40 surveys could be matched; this resulted in 20 surveys in each group.

Data Analysis

To ensure participants' confidentiality, each survey was given a numeric code when the survey data were entered into SPSS. A graduate student majoring in special education double-checked data entry for accuracy (data were entered 100% correctly). The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to assess associations between the two groups of mothers. To examine responses to the two open-ended questions, all responses were typed into MS Word files. The responses were read and reread several times by the three authors to analyze participant comments.

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Results

Characteristics of Young Children's Peer Relationships

One of the most interesting findings of this study is that the friendship and play opportunities for children with developmental delays were similar in many ways to those of children considered typically developing. Nearly every mother reported that her child had playmates (90% or more in both groups), and more than half of the respondents indicated that their child had a close friend. The two groups of mothers did not report differences in the number of playmates with whom their children interacted on a regular basis. However, a chi-square analysis revealed a significant association in the number of play dates between the two groups (χ^2 = 10.656, p < .05). Interestingly, children with developmental delays had more play dates than their typically developing peers. This was the only statistically significant association between the two groups of children.

Nearly all mothers reported that their children had both male and female playmates, and the majority of respondents indicated that playmates tended to be the same age as or older than the target child. However, parents of children with developmental delays were more likely to report that their children also played with younger children. The majority of parents in both groups reported that their children did not play with peers with developmental delays. (See Table 3 for additional characteristics of target children's playmates.)

Table 3
Frequency Data on Children's Peer Relationships

Characteristic	Typically Developing Children (n = 20)	Children with Developmental Delays (n = 20)
Children who have playmates	18	19
Children who have close friends	13	15
Playmates' Characteristics		
Gender		
Boy	17	16
Girl	16	18
Age		
Same age	17	15
Older by one year	13	15
Younger by one year	6	12
Have disabilities	4	7

In response to an open-ended question, a few mothers from both groups mentioned the following issues as interfering with play dates: busy schedules, finding time, scheduling around parent/child activities, and work. Only one mother of a child with developmental delays reported that other parents did not respond to her requests for play dates. She wrote, "Usually when I set up play dates, I never get a response or they simply say, 'No.' So he just plays at home, usually plays by himself."

The majority of mothers in both groups ranked their own home as the most typical setting for their children to play with a friend. However, mothers also identified other settings in the community as sites for play dates such as peers' homes, parks, McDonald's, and a playground at the mall. The locations for play did not differ significantly between the two groups of mothers. Interestingly,

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almost half of the parents in both groups reported that their child initially met his or her close friend at a place other than in the neighborhood or at preschool (i.e., parents' social groups, family events). Additional information about children's social opportunities is presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Descriptive Information on Children's Social Opportunities

Characteristic	Typically Developing Children (*n* = 20)	Children with Developmental Delays (*n* = 20)
Locations for play dates		
Your home	60%	55%
Playmates' home	30%	25%
Community sites	10%	20%
Place your child first met playmates or close friends		
Neighborhoods	24%	20%
Preschool	24%	18%
Church	3%	25%
Other	49%	37%
Activities your child has attended in the past 6 months		
Birthday party	80%	80%
Neighborhood playground	75%	55%
Play date	70%	80%
Potluck	55%	40%
Church-based program	55%	55%
Library activity	45%	40%
Community program	20%	45%
Other	80%	70%

Parents' Strategies for Supporting Their Children's Friendship Development

Both groups of mothers reported using similar support strategies to assist their children's friendship development. Over half of the mothers in each group noted that they and the parents of their children's playmates invited each other's children to play approximately the same number of times. The majority of mothers who had more than one child reported that they included the target child's brothers and sisters in the child's play. Only one difference appeared notable between the two groups of parents with regard to the support strategies that they reported using. Only one (5%) of the parents of typically developing children indicated that she joined in her child's play when peers were around, whereas 35% of the mothers of children with disabilities engaged in the play. This finding is worth further investigation, especially in terms of mothers' attitudes and desires to engage in direct play. Additional information about mothers' support strategies used to facilitate their children's friendship development is presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Percentage of Mothers Identifying Support Strategies Used to Facilitate Friendship Development

Support Strategies	Typically Developing Children	Children with Developmental Delays
Frequently Used Support Strategies		

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Talk to your child and his/her playmates about disagreements or arguments	95%	90%
Teach social behaviors like initiating play, sharing toys, and solving problems	95%	90%
Watch your child play with playmates	95%	85%
Help your child and playmates take turns, share, and help one another	65%	75%
Include siblings in the child's play	60%	50%
Infrequently Used Support Strategies		
Suggest activities to your child and his/her playmate or organize their play	30%	30%
Help other children understand your child's likes and dislikes	20%	30%
Help other children understand your child's abilities or needs	15%	20%
Join in the play when your child is playing with playmates	5%	35%
Support Strategies Showing Slight Differences between the Groups		
Provide informal opportunities for play	60%	30%
Discuss feelings like proud/excited/frustrated with your child	55%	70%
Help your child recognize nonverbal cues from his/her peers	55%	25%

Relationships between Child Characteristics and Friendships

Chi-square analyses indicated that across the 40 children, child characteristics such as gender and age were not associated with outcomes reported by parents such as having close friends, number of playmates, or number of play dates. The only factor that appeared to influence number of play dates was the absence of siblings. In this study, the majority of children (85% of typically developing children and 75% of children with developmental delays) had at least one sibling. Chi-square analyses revealed that children without siblings had more play dates than did children with siblings ($\chi^2 = 24.150$, $p < .01$).

Analyses also were conducted to determine whether the number of services provided to children with IEPs was related to friendship characteristics. Based on demographic characteristics, the 20 children with developmental delays were divided into two groups—11 children who received only speech and language therapy and 9 children who participated in more than one form of therapy such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, hearing therapy, special education, and behavioral support. Chi-square analyses indicated that mothers whose children received more than one type of therapy were more likely to report that they needed to help other children understand their child's likes and dislikes than mothers whose children received only speech and language therapy ($\chi^2 = 12.208$, $p < .05$). Another difference between the two groups of mothers was found in the frequency with which mothers reported that their children attended church-based programs: Children who received more than one type of therapy rarely attended church-based programs ($\chi^2 = 12.735$, $p < .01$).

Chi-square analyses also revealed that some family demographics such as maternal ethnicity, age, education, and family income were associated with support strategies used to assist their children's friendship development. For example, across the 40 mothers, Caucasian mothers were more likely to join in the play when their children were playing with playmates compared to African American or Asian mothers ($\chi^2 = 20.655$, $p < .01$). There also was a significant association between number of playmates and mother's age. Children whose mothers' age was between 20 to 30 years old had significantly more playmates than children whose mothers' age was over 30 years old ($\chi^2 = 15.084$, $p < .01$). Related to family income, mothers whose family income was below $25,000 were more likely to watch their child's play compared to mothers whose family income was above $25,000 ($\chi^2$

= 16.951, $p < .05$). Additionally, children whose mothers reported that their highest education level achieved was high school had more play dates than children whose mothers reported that their highest education level was a graduate degree ($x^2 = 21.770$, $p < .05$). Similarly, children whose mothers reported that their highest educational level achieved was some college had more playmates than children whose mothers' educational level included some graduate work ($x^2 = 27.387$, $p < .01$). However, there were no significant associations between marital status (e.g., married, single parent) and children's peer relationships.

In summary, the results of this study show that the two groups of mothers reported similar friendships and play opportunities for their children. Both groups of mothers reported using similar support strategies to assist their children's friendship development with one notable difference being the frequency with which they joined in their child's play with peers. Data also highlight a significant association in the frequency of play dates for children with and without developmental delays. Closer inspection of the data revealed that mothers whose children with IEPs received more than one type of therapy were more likely to report that they needed to help other children understand their children's likes and dislikes compared to mothers whose children received only speech and language therapy. In addition, analyses showed that family demographics such as mothers' age, educational level, ethnicity, and family income may influence children's peer relationships.

Discussion

This study was conducted to explore the nature of young children's peer relationships and the support strategies that parents use to assist their children in developing friendships. Based on survey responses from two groups of mothers, most of the children in this study were found to have at least one playmate (92.5%, $n = 37/40$) or close friend (70%, $n = 28/40$). This finding is consistent with previously reported research (Buysse, 1993; Guralnick, 1997). In Buysse's research, about 80% of parent participants ($n = 46/58$) reported that their young children with disabilities had at least one mutual friend. Guralnick also found that approximately 70% of children with disabilities ($n = 100/144$) had a best friend who did not have a disability.

Results from the current study also showed that the majority of mothers in both groups supported their children's peer relationships and friendships by providing their young children with social opportunities in venues such as potlucks, family events, birthday parties, and informal opportunities to play at the neighborhood playground. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Guralnick, 1997), no significant associations were found between the two groups regarding social opportunities, except for the number of play dates.

Several findings related to the number of play dates are worthy of discussion. Based on the chi-square analyses, children with developmental delays were reported to have more play dates than their typically developing peers. When children did not have siblings, they were reported to have more play dates compared to children who had siblings. Children whose mother's highest educational level was high school were reported to have more play dates compared to children whose mother's educational level included some graduate work. It is possible that children whose parents had higher educational levels were engaged in more organized activities such as dance, sports, or music lessons. However, these findings regarding the number of play dates and matched education (and other family characteristics) need to be examined with a larger group of participants in future research.

Interestingly, about 40% of the mothers in each group reported that their child met his/her close friends at "other" places (i.e., parents' social groups and family events) rather than through schools or in neighborhoods. This finding is related to, and extends, several previous research studies addressing how parents' social networks influence children's peer relationships and friendships.

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Ladd and Golter (1988) reported that children whose parents initiated more peer contacts had larger peer networks, as reflected by the number of peer contacts and the number of play companions in the neighborhood. Turnbull and her colleagues (1999), in a qualitative study, reported that parents purposefully arranged contacts with other family members and friends to provide social opportunities for their children and to support friendship development. In a literature review of young children's friendships, Richardson and Schwartz (1998) also noted that parents' social networks can have direct and indirect effects on their children's peer relationships. Direct effects include the various social interactions that children experience with network members, while indirect effects include the support that is provided to parents by social network members (i.e., parents' social groups, family gatherings, participation in community programs). This finding indicates a need for more research to better understand the impact of specific parental social networks on children's friendship formation.

The participating mothers in the current study reported that, compared to other support strategies, they infrequently used some support strategies, such as suggesting activities to their child and his/her playmates or organizing the children's play. The mothers also were less likely to join in the child's play with his/her playmates in comparison to using other strategies. In other words, study participants supported their children's friendship development, but only a small percentage of the mothers used more directive strategies, such as suggesting play activities or entering into their child's play. However, those mothers who did so were most likely to have a child with a disability. These strategies were considered "directive supervision" to support friendship development by McCollum and Ostrosky (2008). Given the social skill difficulties that children with disabilities may have, indirect supervision may not be the most effective way for parents to support children's friendships. Parents may need to assume a more interactive and directive role in their children's play. Younger preschoolers in particular may be more likely to benefit from direct supervision by parents than older children (Bhavnagri & Parke, 1991).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations must be considered when evaluating the findings from the current research. First, the findings were based exclusively on parent report. Data did not include an analysis of the quality of children's friendships and parents' facilitative roles. For example, the majority of study participants reported that their children had at least one playmate or close friend. However, having a close friend or a playmate does not guarantee the existence of "true friendships" between children; sociometrics, behavioral observations, and interviews were not conducted to analyze children's perceptions of friendships. These measures would have provided more breadth and depth about specific characteristics of children's peer relationships.

Second, in the current study, no attempt was made to control for severity of disability. As a result, the majority of children with IEPs had mild developmental delays. Therefore, the findings have limited generalizability for preschoolers with more significant needs. A challenge for future research will be to examine issues related to the nature of young children's friendships and parent supports for friendship development when children have more severe disabilities.

Third, this study was based on survey responses from a small number of parents, so the findings have limited generality to other parents of preschoolers. This small sample size resulted in insufficient cell sizes on several chi-square analyses. It was not possible to identify specific characteristics about the groups, even when there were significant group differences. For example, this study showed that several family demographics were associated with children's peer relationships. However, it was difficult to ascertain specific associations between the variables and generalize these results to other families who have preschoolers. Therefore, future research that includes a larger sample size is needed.

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To date, although friendship development of young children with disabilities has been increasingly considered an important area of research, there are limited studies showing how parents support their children's friendship development. Researchers need to extend this important line of research by exploring associations between parents' social networks and children's friendship development. Researchers also need to investigate possible linkages between parent-child relationships and peer relationships when a child has a disability, paralleling research that has been conducted with typically developing children (Clark & Ladd, 2000; Youngblade & Belsky, 1992). Studies such as these might provide insight into ways to promote peer relationships during the early years of life.

In this study no significant relationships were found between children's characteristics (e.g., gender or age) and their friendships. Future research should examine child characteristics such as gender, age, disability, and behavioral characteristics to see whether these influence children's friendship development. Additionally, family demographics such as mothers' age, education level, presence of a relative with a disability, and social economic status should be investigated with a larger sample size.

Implications for Practice

Results from the current study revealed that several children did not have any playmates or close friends. While most of the mothers who participated in this research reported having assisted in their children's friendship development by using various support strategies, only a small number of mothers engaged in more active roles such as suggesting play activities or joining in their children's play. Providing parents with additional information and coaching them on how to successfully support peer interactions may be needed by some families.

Early childhood educators have a responsibility to understand friendship development from a parent's perspective and to support parents in helping their children develop positive peer relationships. Teachers and parents can collaborate to identify contexts that might help create relationships between children and also identify strategies that might support skill development so all children realize the benefits afforded from having friends.

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Author Information

SeongYeung Yu was an early childhood special education teacher in Korea before starting her doctoral program. She is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Special Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, focusing on early childhood special education. Her research interests include young children's friendships and positive attitude development toward peers with disabilities.

SeonYeong Yu
College of Education
University of Illinois
1310 South Sixth Street
Champaign, IL 61820
Email: yu20@illinois.edu

Michaelene M. Ostrosky, Ph.D., is department head and Goldstick Family Scholar in special education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Dr. Ostrosky has been involved in research and dissemination related to social communication interventions, social-emotional competence, challenging behavior, and transitions. Currently, she is a co-principal

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investigator on an IES grant addressing attitudes of kindergarten children toward their peers with disabilities. Dr. Ostrosky is a former editor of *Young Exceptional Children*.

Susan Fowler's research focuses on the lives of young children (birth to age 8) and their families. She has examined both programmatic and policy factors that influence family involvement in the delivery of services to their young children who are developmentally delayed, as well as the factors that influence professionals in their delivery and coordination of services. Her research fits three clusters: development of guidelines and practices to help communities and programs coordinate delivery of services to young children and families, particularly as they leave one service system for another; research and development of intervention strategies to enhance language, social, and cognitive development in young children; and increasing our understanding of the roles that cultural and linguistic diversity may play in family's participation in services.

Appendix A
Research That Informed Each Survey Question

Survey Question Topic	Buysse, 1993	Geisthardt et al., 2002	Guralnick, 1997	McCollum & Ostrosky, 2008	Ladd & Golter, 1988	Turnbull et al., 1999
Child's Social Networks						
3. Have playmates			✔			
4. Number of playmates			✔		✔	
5. Number of play dates		✔	✔		✔	
6. Time spent time with playmates	✔		✔		✔	
7. Characteristics of child's playmates (e.g., gender, age, & disability)	✔		✔			
8. Most common place for play dates	✔		✔		✔	
9. Have a close friend	✔		✔			✔
10. Characteristics of close friends (gender & age)	✔		✔			
11. Quality of the relationships with close friends			✔			✔
12. When child first met close friends			✔			
13. How long child has known close friends			✔			
14. Presence of disability by close friends	✔		✔			
Mothers' Social Networks and Supports for Their Children's Friendships						
15. Activities child attended within the last 6 months	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔
16. Invitations to play					✔	
17. Presence of sibling (s)				✔		
18. Sibling(s) involved in child's play	✔			✔		✔

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19. Difficulties setting up play dates	✔					
20. Difficulties experienced	✔					
21. Informal opportunities to play		✔				
22. Watching child's play with friends	✔		✔	✔	✔	
23. Suggesting activities or organizing children's play			✔	✔		
24. Helping taking turns, sharing, and helping one another				✔		
25. Talking about a disagreement or argument that child had with friends				✔		
26. Joining in child's play with friends				✔		
27. Discussing feelings like proud/excited/frustrated with child				✔		
28. Helping other children understand child's likes and dislikes	✔					✔
29. Helping other children understand child's abilities or needs	✔					✔
30. Teaching children behaviors like initiating play, sharing toys, and solving conflicts				✔		
31. Helping child recognize nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and pointing				✔		

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