

Children's Attention and the Challenges of Close Friendships

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Context

Having satisfying relationships with friends – and with the right friends – is very important not only for children's personal adjustment, but also for their success at school. Children without friends lose out on opportunities to develop their social skills and risk losing interest in school. In order to make and keep friends, children have to master several skills: They have to communicate effectively, pay attention to their friends' wishes and needs, maintain self-control and play according to the rules. Very little is known about the exact ways in which children's attention and impulse control may influence interactions with existing or potential friends.

Goals

In this study, we looked at how the attention and impulse control of 7 to 13-year-olds affected the communication with their friends and their ability to make and keep friends. In order to learn about this, we needed the participation of children with different levels of attention and impulse control, from very good to very poor attention/impulse control skills.

Description

Each child invited his/her best friend to participate in the study. During the two one-hour sessions, friends completed short questionnaires on their friendships, participated in several activities and played games together. First, we asked the friends to choose together a game that they would play at the end of the session. Next, the friends decided how best to share 5 trading cards between themselves. Then, they played a competitive car-race game against each other. Finally, they played together the game they had chosen at the start of the session.

Who Participated?

133 children and their friends (74.4% boys) were eligible to participate in our study and were included in our final analyses. Among these, 87 had poor attention and/or impulse control skills. All participants were between 7 and 13 years old (the average age was 10.33 years old); we did not restrict the age of the chosen friends.

What did we Find?

The results presented on the next page are those of the first research session. The data from the second sessions are still being analysed.

The friends of children with poor attention skills were also rated by their parents and teachers as having poorer attention skills than those of the friends of children who were better at focussing their attention. Although these may often be the only friends of children with poor attention skills, these friends may not always be the best influences.

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Children with poor attention skills perceived less intimacy and more conflict in their friendships than did children with good attention skills. The friends of children with poor attention skills perceived less intimacy (but not more conflict) in their relationships than did the friends of children with good attention skills. Regardless of attention levels, most children in the study were nevertheless satisfied with their friendships. However, children with poor attention skills and their friends were less satisfied in their friendships than were children with good attention skills and their respective friends.

Children with poor attention skills made more legal and illegal moves during the car race. When asked to share cards with their friends, children with poor attention skills made more self-centered and more insensitive proposals than children with good attention skills. Children in the low attention group also made fewer sensitive proposals and were less likely to ask their friends' preferences than were children with good attention skills. Children with poor attention skills were also more likely than children with good attention skills to dominate their friends while deciding how to share cards. In selecting a game to play at the end of the session, children with poor attention skills made more insensitive proposals and refused their friends' proposals more often than did children with good attention skills.

Globally, these findings are consistent with other studies showing that children with poor attention skills are less able than other children to understand a social situation from another person's perspective. These shortcomings may make it difficult for them to form and maintain friendships with other children who are models of effective ways of relating to others.

The Importance of the Project

Our results indicate beyond any doubt that children with poor attention and impulse control skills need help in the area of friendship. Most interventions currently used to improve their social relationships are unfortunately not usually very effective. We believe that the results of our study will be helpful in eventually leading to new ways of helping children with poor attention/impulse control skills who do not have any friends, do not keep their friends or do not have the right friends.

You can find more information about our research team and studies can be found at <http://irpcmh.uqo.ca>

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