*The Center for Research and Outreach*

# Putting Research to Work
## *for Families*

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*Focus:*
*Civilian*

## Girls' and Boys' Problem Talk: Implications for Emotional Closeness in Friendships

**SUMMARY:** Youth vary in their tendency to discuss problems and provide support in friendship, which can have important implications on relationship quality and emotional closeness among friends. This study explored gender differences in discussions about problems and friendship outcomes among youth. Findings show that there were gender differences in the level of participation, response to the problem, and friendship outcomes among the participants.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- While discussing problems, girls participated more than boys by talking about their own problems and friend-related problems. Girls provided positive responses (e.g., supportive statements, asking questions) and changed the subject during discussions about problems more than boys.
- Girls used humor as a response to discussions about problems more than boys in seventh grade. But, boys used humor more than girls in the tenth grade. Using humor as a response type was associated with feeling closer with a friend only among boys.
- While discussing problems, boys gave as much advice to their friends as girls.
- Positive response types such as agreement, supportiveness, and asking questions were associated with feeling closer to a friend over time. Negative response types such as changing the topic during discussion were associated with feeling less close with a friend over time.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS:

- Attend trainings to enhance ability to provide support to youth who are struggling with maintaining healthy relationships with peers
- Collaborate with organizations connected with youth to emphasize the importance of positively resolving conflicts during discussions

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM LEADERS:

- Encourage activities and curricula that provide opportunities for teamwork with same-gendered as well as opposite-gendered youth
- Disseminate information to youth regarding available community resources to deal with problems relating to peer pressure and unhealthy peer relationships

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS:

- Continue to support evidence-based programs that build and foster healthy relationships among peers during youth
- Recommend positive youth development training centered on the development of gender norms and gender identity

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Leveraging Evidence and Science into Practice

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## METHODS

- Data were obtained across three consecutive summers from seventh and tenth graders attending public school. Youth who participated were asked to choose a close friend who wasn't a relative and join the study along with them.
- Participants completed questionnaires and were asked to create a list of problems they were facing. Participants then discussed their problems with the friend for sixteen minutes.
- Participants provided self-report data on the emotional closeness felt with a friend prior to and nine months after the study concluded using two items from the Friendship Quality Questionnaire and two items from the Friendship Qualities scale.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were 628 seventh and tenth graders; 314 were tenth graders and 314 were seventh graders.
- The average age of the seventh graders was 13.01 years and the average age of the tenth graders was 16.03 years.
- Participants identified as 62.76% White, 29.21% Black, 3.73% Latino, 5.78% multiracial, and less than 2% as Native American, Asian, and Pacific Islander. In the study, the reported racial/ethnic makeup of the participants exceeded 100%.

## LIMITATIONS

- Participants' behavior in the research laboratory may be different from the way they usually interact with friends in school or other informal settings which could have impacted their self-reported emotional closeness data results.
- The feeling of closeness in friendship can vary depending on time spent with each other or support received from the friend; none of which were assessed. Therefore, it is unclear how these factors might have affected emotional closeness among participants.
- Since the assessment time points were only nine months apart, feelings of emotional closeness with a friend may not have had enough time to change.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Conduct longitudinal studies to examine association between responsiveness during discussions and emotion closeness with friends across the life span
- Investigate the impact of empathy and altruism on relationship satisfaction among friends
- Utilize assessment measures other than self-report, such as behavioral observations in different social settings (e.g., school and home) by diverse observers (e.g., parents, siblings, teachers, etc.)

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

**Design**
★★☆
**Appropriate**
Research Plan
and Sample

**Methods**
★★★
**Excellent**
Measurement
and Analysis

**Limitations**
★☆☆
**Several**

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
https://reachfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works