Children's Friendships: Shifts Over a Half-Century in Perspectives on Their Development and Their Effects

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Provocative ideas about the nature, development, and effects of children's friendships were included in the lectures of Harry Stack Sullivan, which were edited and published in the 1950s. Sullivan emphasized the love, intimacy, and collaboration found in the close friendships that children form around 8 to 10 years of age. Later research has shown that close friendships have both a positive dimension, with features such as intimacy, and a negative dimension, with features such as rivalry. However, close friendships do not emerge suddenly at 8 to 10 years of age. Rather, the closeness of children's friendships increases gradually during middle childhood and adolescence. Recent studies suggest that having close, high-quality friendships increases children's success in the peer social world. Having high-quality friendships could magnify the positive or negative influence of friends with positive or negative characteristics, but this hypothesis needs to be evaluated more thoroughly in the future.

The decade of the 1950s, when the Merrill-Palmer Quarterly was founded, was far from a golden age for research either on friendships or on the broader topic of peer relationships. No article with some form of friend or peer in the title was published in any MPQ volume in the entire decade. Moreover, the same neglect of peer relationships characterized the rest of the field of child development during the 1950s. That decade's edition of the landmark Manual of Child Psychology (Carmichael, 1954) included no chapter on peer relationships and only a few paragraphs in other chapters on popularity, friendship, and the peer group. Even in those cases, most of the references were to studies published in the 1930s or 1940s rather than to contemporary research.

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A half-century later, research on peer relationships is clearly in the mainstream of the field of child development. Between 2000 and 2002, more than a dozen articles in the MPQ had forms of friend or peer in their titles. An entire special issue on peer influences in childhood and adolescence was published the previous year (Urberg, 1999). Likewise, the latest edition of the now retitled Handbook of Child Psychology includes a chapter on peer relationships that is more than 80 pages long (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998).

Not surprising, this special issue includes several commentaries about some facet of peer relationships. My focus is on the closest of children's peer relationships, those with their best friends. I consider three questions about friendships: what best friendships are like in childhood and adolescence, how these friendships change with age, and what effects they have on children's and adolescents' development. In addressing each question, I briefly review early writings on the question, present some major conclusions that derive from recent research, and then discuss some issues that remain to be resolved in future research. That is, I examine the past, present, and possible future of research on children's friendships.

What Are Best Friendships Like?

Although child development researchers largely ignored children's friendships during the 1950s, an important theoretical statement about these friendships was published during the decade. Students of Harry Stack Sullivan, a neo-Freudian psychiatrist, edited and published The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry based on lectures that Sullivan gave shortly before his death in 1949. In these lectures, Sullivan (1953) traced the development of individuals from infancy to adulthood, and he tried to explain adult personality in terms of earlier social relationships. Most important, he attempted to answer each of the questions about children's friendships that I stated earlier. Research during the following decades has shed light on several of his answers, showing the accuracy of some but casting doubt on others. Consequently, a careful examination of his writings can clarify how perspectives on children's friendships have shifted over the past half-century and what issues remain unresolved.

Sullivan argued that friendships are particularly crucial during a phase of life that he called preadolescence, the years just before the onset of puberty. Sullivan's initial statement about preadolescent friendships is provocative and has been widely quoted. He said that the beginning of preadolescence is marked by the appearance of "a spe-
specific new type of interest in a particular member of the same sex who becomes a chum or a close friend” (Sullivan, 1953, p. 245; italics original). He described this new interest as follows:

All of you who have children are sure that your children love you; when you say that, you are expressing a pleasant illusion. But if you will look very closely at one of your children when he finally finds a chum—somewhere between eight-and-a-half and ten—you will discover something very different in the relation—namely, that your child begins to develop a real sensitivity to what matters to another person. And this is not in the sense of “what should I do to get what I want,” but instead “what should I do to contribute to the happiness or to support the prestige and feeling of worth-whileness of my chum.” So far as I have been able to discover, nothing remotely like this appears before the age of, say, eight-and-a-half, and sometimes it appears decidedly later. (pp. 245–246)

Sullivan explained the origins of close friendships in the preadolescent years by saying that they reflect “the coming of the integrating tendencies which, when they are completely developed, we call love, or, to say it another way, by the manifestation of the need for interpersonal intimacy” (p. 246). He clarified that intimacy means closeness, without specifying that which is close other than the persons. Intimacy is that type of situation involving two people which permits validation of all components of personal worth. Validation of personal worth requires a type of relationship which I call collaboration, by which I mean clearly formulated adjustments of one’s behavior to the expressed needs of the other person in the pursuit of increasingly identical—that is, more and more nearly mutual—satisfactions. (p. 246)

In these statements, Sullivan made two types of proposals about children’s friendships. First, he proposed that close friendships between children have several positive features, including sensitivity to another person’s needs and desires, intimacy, and efforts by the friends to make their interactions mutually satisfying. That is, he tried to describe what children’s friendships are like, at least during the preadolescent years and later. Second, he proposed that close friendships are first formed between 8 and 10 years of age. I consider this proposal in the next section of this commentary, after considering the accuracy of his description of friendships.
The Positive Dimension of Friendship Quality

Perhaps because Sullivan's disciplinary affiliation was psychiatry, developmental researchers ignored his ideas about children's friendships for many years. His book was not cited in a 1966 monograph on adolescence that included an extensive discussion of friendships (Douvan & Adelson, 1966), and it was not cited in the peer-interaction chapter in the 1970 edition of the Manual of Child Psychology (Hartup, 1970). But during the 1970s a few researchers began to test his hypotheses systematically (e.g., Mannarino, 1976), and by 1980 he and Jean Piaget were linked together as seminal thinkers on the development of peer relationships (Youniss, 1980).

The researchers who rediscovered Sullivan's writings emphasized his construct of interpersonal intimacy, but they usually defined intimacy more narrowly than he did. In particular, they adopted the definition of intimacy in contemporary social-psychological research, which emphasized the disclosure of personal and private information about the self (e.g., Rubin & Shenker, 1978). Thus, during the 1970s many researchers asked children open-ended questions about what makes a best friendship or what their own friendships were like. The children's responses were coded into categories for distinct features of friendship, and comments about the self-disclosure of personal thoughts and feelings among friends were placed in the category labeled intimacy (see Berndt, 1986).

Ultimately, however, these studies led back to the broader conception of closeness in friendship that Sullivan had proposed. They did so because researchers discovered that children expect close friendships to have all the positive features that Sullivan mentioned (Berndt, 1986; Youniss, 1980). Children expect friends to "contribute to their happiness" by helping and sharing with them. Children expect friends to "support their prestige and feelings of worth-whileness" by expressing their acceptance of them or enhancing their self-esteem in other ways. Children expect friends to be companions for one another in activities that are mutually satisfying.

As researchers were learning about the variety of positive features of close friendships, they were exploring various theories of close relationships. Some researchers noted that the positive features of children's friendships are similar to the positive features of supportive social relationships among adults (e.g., Berndt, 1989). Some researchers linked the features of children's friendships to Weiss's (1974) model of the provisions that can be obtained from involvement in social relationships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Others examined the connections between the emerging description of children's friendships
and prominent theories of other types of social relationships (see Furman, 1996).

After completing this empirical and theoretical work, researchers took on the methodological challenge of devising interviews and questionnaires to assess the positive features of specific friendships. Several of the measures have now been described in research reports. A consistent finding in these reports is that most children who describe their best friendships as high in one positive feature, such as intimacy, describe those friendships as high in other positive features too. Therefore, a composite score for all positive features has often been used to assess a positive dimension of friendship quality (Berndt, 1996, 2002). The availability of valid measures of this dimension has been vital to the field, because these measures have been used to test various hypotheses about friendships. In particular, these measures have been crucial for examining how friendships change with age and how the quality of children's friendships affects their social adjustment and development.

Conflicts and Rivalry: The Dark Side of Friendship

For several years, researchers focused exclusively on the positive features of children's friendships, not even mentioning that close friendships can have negative features. However, the occurrence of negative interactions between friends was implicit in Sullivan's (1953) comments about the emergence of close friendships. He implied that before preadolescents find a close friend, their interactions with peers are governed by the question, "What should I do to get what I want?" That is, children's actions are motivated by self-interest rather than concern for others.

When children motivated by self-interest interact, conflicts between them are inevitable. Moreover, these conflicts are unlikely to disappear when children enter the preadolescent years. The existence and persistence of conflicts between friends have now been thoroughly documented (e.g., Laursen, 1996). In addition, items about the frequency and intensity of conflicts have been included in instruments to assess friendship quality (see Furman, 1996).

Sullivan described another type of negative interaction among peers as occurring early in the elementary school years. He suggested that competition with peers can become so pervasive during these years that for some children it becomes a central trait. In his words, "one sees a competitive way of life in which nearly everything that has real importance is part of a process of getting ahead of the other person." In the worst cases, "getting the other fellow down becomes the outstanding pattern in the integration of interpersonal relations" (p. 232).
“Getting the other fellow down” can be defined as the goal of rivalry. When children describe friendships, they acknowledge that friends sometimes engage in intense rivalry (Berndt, 1986). Thus, rivalry must be regarded as another negative feature of friendship. Although few measures of friendship quality include items to assess the degree of rivalry between friends, when both rivalry and conflicts between friends are measured, scores for the two are strongly correlated. The correlation suggests that these features define a negative dimension of friendship quality. Somewhat surprisingly, scores for the negative dimension of particular friendships are not strongly correlated with those for the positive dimension of the same friendships. Stated differently, friendships that are high in positive features may be either high or low in negative features.

All of the current measures of friendship quality include more items for assessing positive friendship features than for assessing negative friendship features. This imbalance is troubling because it may reduce researchers' ability to find out how children are affected when their friendships are high in negative features. More generally, the negative dimension of friendships deserves more careful attention than it has received thus far. To guide future research, this dimension would benefit from the in-depth theoretical analysis that the positive dimension has already received. Researchers should no longer overlook or minimize the significance of the dark side of friendships.

**How Do Best Friendships Change With Age?**

When Sullivan (1953) presented his lectures about personality development, almost nothing was known about the development of children's friendships. Thus, Sullivan was charting new territory when he proposed that close friendships first emerge when children are between 8 and 10 years of age. As mentioned earlier, the first empirical research on Sullivan's proposals focused on his statements about intimacy in friendships, but most researchers defined intimacy in terms of the self-disclosure of personal thoughts and feelings. Many studies showed that elementary school children, when asked open-ended questions about friendships, rarely mention intimate self-disclosure between friends. But during the adolescent years, comments about friends' intimate self-disclosure are frequent (Berndt, 1986).

Initially, these findings led researchers to conclude that Sullivan was incorrect about the age period in which close friendships emerge (e.g., Berndt, 1982). Rather than emerging during the preadolescent years, close friendship seemed to emerge in early adolescence. This
conclusion seemed more doubtful in later decades, as data became available from research with structured interviews and questionnaires that provided information about other features of friendship besides intimacy. Mean scores on other positive features rarely showed the same increase between childhood and adolescence as scores for intimacy did. In one study, for example, boys judged companionship with friends as equally great in the 2nd, 5th, and 8th grades (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987).

Even when the mean scores for specific features of friendship changed significantly with age, the age changes were modest rather than dramatic. Thus as the research data accumulated, few investigators echoed Sullivan's words that “something very different” becomes apparent in friendships around 8 to 10 years of age—or at any other age. Instead, researchers began to draw conclusions about gradual increases in friendship quality during childhood and early adolescence (e.g., Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). This shift in perspectives on the age changes in friendships was likely accelerated by the decrease during the same period in developmental researchers' acceptance of all theories of developmental stages (e.g., Flavell, 1982).

Unfortunately, the decrease in acceptance of stage theories has been accompanied by a dramatic decrease in the investigation of normative development, or how children's thinking, behavior, and relationships typically change with age. Research on most topics in the area of social development, including peer relationships, is now focused almost exclusively on the exploration of individual differences rather than the description of normal development (see Rubin et al., 1998).

Determining the correlates and consequences of individual differences in friendship quality is obviously valuable, but further exploration of the normative development of friendships would also be valuable. In particular, more research is needed on the friendships of children in the preschool and early school years. Research on children of these ages is complicated by the children's inability to respond to the questionnaires used most often to assess friendship quality. But excellent research on preschoolers' friendships has been done with observational measures and with parent and teacher reports (see Howes, 1996; Kerns, 1996). Excellent research on preschool and kindergarten children's friendships has been done by interviewing these children about their friendships (e.g., Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996). More research of these types is needed to understand the age changes in young children's friendships.
Also needed are data on friendships near the end of adolescence and the transition to adulthood. It is unclear whether same-sex friendships continue to be very close and supportive during these years (Sharabany, Gershoni, & Hofman, 1981) or whether they become less close and supportive as the second decade of life ends (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends do increase substantially in closeness during the adolescent years (Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999), but the effect of this increase on same-sex friendships is unclear. One hypothesis implicit in many theories, including Sullivan’s (1953), is that same-sex friendships provide a foundation for but are later supplanted by romantic relationships.

Still, same-sex friendships remain important to most adults (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). How these friendships are coordinated with romantic relationships in late adolescence and in adulthood is not well understood. Some conflicts between the two types of relationships are certainly possible, but so are conflicts between two friendships—or two romantic relationships! More evidence on the usual connections between friendships and romantic relationships in late adolescence and early adulthood would help not only in understanding the development of personal relationships but also in evaluating deviations from the norm.

Finally, additional research on the development of children’s friendships would reduce the chances of a premature narrowing of focus. Most recent studies of individual differences in friendships have focused on the correlations of variations in friendship quality (e.g., Rose, 2002). Other studies have focused on whether a child has at least one reciprocal (or mutual) best friendship or on how many reciprocal friendships a child has (e.g., Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003).

Less often examined are the age differences in how friends typically interact with one another. Systematic observations of the differences between friends’ and nonfriends’ interactions were common in the 1970s and 1980s, as researchers tried to determine what is distinctive about friends’ interactions (see Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). But few studies involving direct observations of friends’ interactions have been reported recently (but see, e.g., Parker & Herrera, 1996), and those studies have rarely been designed to document how friendships normally change with age.

More research on the activities of children and their friends would also be desirable. Friends spend a significant amount of time conversing or socializing with each other, playing games or sports, going to movies, and participating in other leisure-time activities (e.g., Larson, Kubey, & Colletti, 1989). In addition, friends spend time doing home-
work and working on other school-related tasks together (Leone & Richards, 1989).

Knowing what friends do together may be extremely important in understanding how these friendships affect their behavior and development. For example, socializing with friends in settings not supervised by adults apparently contributes directly to delinquent behavior in adolescence (Osgood, Wilson, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). Not yet known is whether other types of activities with friends have desirable or undesirable effects on children’s and adolescents’ behavior.

Future investigations of friends’ interactions and friends’ activities could give researchers information essential for describing what best friendships are like and how they change with age. These investigations would add context and concreteness to studies of friendship quality or the number of reciprocal friends that children have. Without data on friends’ interactions and activities, measures of friendship quality and numbers of friends would remain as they are today, largely disconnected from their foundation in actual events. Consequently, more systematic investigation of friends’ interactions and activities should be a high priority.

**How Do Best Friendships Affect Children’s Development?**

In Sullivan’s (1953) description of the preadolescent era, hypotheses about the nature of friendships are not always clearly distinguished from hypotheses about the effects of friendships. Perhaps for that reason, many later writers have interpreted his statements about children’s motivation “to support the prestige and feeling of worth-whileness of my chum” not as a description of one feature of close friendships but as a hypothesis about how these friendships enhance children’s self-esteem. Initial evidence consistent with this hypothesis came from correlational studies in which children and adolescents whose friendships were higher in positive quality also were higher in self-esteem (Berndt, 1996, 2002), but longitudinal studies have not provided support for the hypothesis.

Keefe and Berndt (1996) assessed 7th- and 8th-graders’ self-esteem and the quality of their friendships both in the fall and in the spring of the school year. Then these researchers examined whether the quality of the students’ friendships in the fall of the year was a significant predictor of the changes in their self-esteem during the year. The answer was a definite no. Although students’ self-esteem was positively correlated with the quality of their friendships in both the fall and the spring of the year, variations in friendship quality were unrelated to the
changes over time in students' self-esteem. Comparable results were reported in two previous studies (cited in Keefe and Berndt, 1996) and at least one subsequent study (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999).

Furthermore, an argument can be made that Sullivan did not believe good friendships would always enhance children's self-esteem. When talking about the effects of friendships, he said that children who have developed a habit of derogating others may with a close friend "discuss these other unpleasant people who don't seem to like them, in a fashion that is illuminating, both as to the real worth of the others and as to some of their own traits which may not be very endearing" (p. 253). He later summarized the beneficial effects of close friendships by saying,

one gets a look at oneself through the chum's eyes. To the extent that this is accomplished, the self-system concerned is definitely expanded, and its more troublesome, inadequate, and inappropriate functions are reduced to the point that they become unnecessary. (pp. 254–255)

Taken together, these comments cast doubt on the hypothesis that having close and intimate friendships inevitably makes children feel more positively about themselves. For individuals with an exaggerated sense of their own worth, conversations with close friends may have the opposite effect. Sullivan certainly believed that close friendships help children and adolescents form a more realistic and adaptive self-concept, but that hypothesis would be difficult to test with existing self-concept and self-esteem measures.

At other points Sullivan suggested that close friendships are important because they affect children's relationships with other members of their peer group. For example, he proposed that close friendships in childhood are a requirement for developing a "capacity for ease, [and] for maximum profit from experience, in carrying on the conventional business of life with members of one's own sex" (p. 248). He also proposed that self-centered children may, after forming a close friendship, become "very much less inclined to expect unlimited services from others, very much nearer the ideal of a good sport." These children then "become less objectionable to the prevailing preadolescent society and may actually get to be quite well esteemed in the gang [or friendship group]" (p. 252).

Findings consistent with these speculations have been reported for young children and for adolescents. In one study (Ladd et al., 1996),
kindergarten children who had high-quality friendships in January of the school year improved by the end of the year in their perceptions of all their classmates’ support. In another study (Berndt et al., 1999), 6th graders in their last semester of elementary school reported on the quality of their friendships, and their classmates rated their sociability and leadership. These reports and ratings were repeated after the students made the transition to 7th grade in junior high school. Students whose 6th-grade friendships were higher in quality improved after the school transition in their sociability and leadership as rated by classmates, but only if most of their 6th-grade friendships were stable over time.

Both of these studies suggest that close friendships can affect children’s and adolescents’ relationships with the rest of their peers. In particular, having supportive friendships may help students make positive contacts with other classmates. Those positive contacts may lead to positive relationships that are not as close as best friendships but that still enhance the students’ social adjustment in the world of peers. The importance of having friends who facilitate the formation of positive relationships with other classmates is confirmed by the evidence that high-quality friendships help students adjust after a school transition only if those friendships are stable. Apparently, those friendships form the center of a circle of positive peer relationships that widens over time. With the widening of this circle, students’ attitudes toward their classmates and their classmates’ attitudes toward them become more positive.

Obviously, the findings of these two studies need to be replicated in future research. Nonetheless, they are broadly consistent with other evidence of positive effects of close friendships on children’s peer relationships. For example, having loyal friends reduces the chances that elementary school children will be victimized by their classmates (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999). One goal for future research should be to determine how the quality of children’s friendships affects their relationships with other peers. Stated differently, identifying the processes responsible for these effects is essential. An equally important goal is to explore the limits of these processes, the situations in which having high-quality friendships does not improve some important element of peer relationships.

As noted earlier, best friendships also have a negative dimension, and the limited available data suggest that highly negative friendships can be very damaging. In one study (Berndt & Keefe, 1995), 7th and 8th graders reported on the levels of conflicts and rivalry in their three closest friendships. Students who described their friendships as higher in these negative features were higher in self-reported disruptive behavior in the fall of the school year, and their level of disruptive behavior
increased during the year. Surprisingly, the increase in disruptive behavior was greatest for students who also perceived their friendships as high in positive features. These results suggest that negative interchanges with friends are especially likely to lead to negative interchanges with other peers and teachers when students also view their friendships as intimate and supportive.

Finally, it's important to keep in mind that children are affected by other aspects of their best friendships besides their quality. Hartup (1996) argued that the developmental significance of friendships cannot be fully understood unless researchers distinguish the effects of friendship quality from the effects of having (reciprocal) friends at all and the effects of the identity (or characteristics) of those friends. For example, one effect of not having friends during the early years of elementary school is to increase children's anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003).

Research on the identity of children's friends typically examines the characteristics on which children are similar to their friends and the degree to which this similarity reflects the friends' influence on one another. Many studies have established that friends influence important attitudes (e.g., students' attitudes toward school), socially relevant behaviors (e.g., adolescents' drug use), and many other characteristics of great significance for children's and adolescents' adjustment and development (e.g., students' academic achievement) (Berndt, 1999; Berndt & Murphy, 2002).

A full review of the effects of having friends and of the influence of friends' characteristics would be impossible in this brief commentary. The preceding discussion of the effects of friendship quality would be seriously incomplete, however, if the possibility of interactions between friendship quality and friends' characteristics was ignored. Many theories of social influence include some form of what can be called the magnification hypothesis, which asserts that the influence of a friend's characteristics is magnified when a child's relationship with that friend is higher in quality. In social learning theory, for example, the hypothesis is that children will learn more from observing a friend's behavior if they have a more positive relationship with that friend (Bandura, 1977).

The magnification hypothesis may seem like common sense, but it implies that interventions to improve the quality of children's friendships may have negative effects on children's behavior and adjustment if their friends' characteristics are negative. These interventions may be harmful because they may increase the degree to which children are influenced by their friends' characteristics and so develop more nega-
tive characteristics themselves. Even interventions not intended to improve children's friendships may have negative effects if they lead to the formation of high-quality friendships among children high in antisocial behavior (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999).

Not all theories of social influence include a version of the magnification hypothesis. In particular, theories of social support (see Berndt, 1989, 2002) include a hypothesis that supportive social relationships are beneficial regardless of the characteristics of the supporters. These theories imply that high-quality friendships should always have positive effects on children's behavior and adjustment. Stated more formally, the theories imply that the effects of friendship quality should not interact with the influences of friends' characteristics. Evidence consistent with these theories and inconsistent with the magnification hypothesis has been obtained in a couple recent studies (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Poulin, Dishion, & Haas, 1999), and a third study provided only equivocal support for the hypothesis (Berndt et al., 1999).

Nevertheless, additional tests of the hypothesis are needed, for both theoretical and practical reasons. If future studies provide no support for the hypothesis, some general theories of social influence will need to be revised. If future studies support the hypothesis, interventions that bring together groups of at-risk children will need to be designed to ensure that they do not foster or strengthen friendships among these children, because doing so would magnify their negative influence on one another.

Finally, evidence on the magnification hypothesis is scanty because researchers who study friends' influence have rarely assessed the quality of these friendships. Conversely, researchers who study friendship quality have rarely assessed the characteristics of the friends. Bridging the gap between these two research traditions might reveal interactions between friendship quality and friends' characteristics that are different from those implied by the magnification hypothesis. For example, one study indicated that high-quality friendships seemed to reduce adolescents' tendencies toward shy and withdrawn behavior even when their friends were high in shyness and social withdrawal (Berndt et al., 1999). This kind of protective effect of high-quality friendships can only be identified if interactions between the effects of friendship quality and the influence of friends' characteristics are evaluated in future research.

A Final Look Back and Look Forward

It is gratifying to see how dramatically knowledge about children's friendships, their development, and their effects has increased during
the past half-century. Systematic research on children's friendships was virtually absent in the 1950s but is extremely vigorous today. Sullivan's writings on friendship, published in the 1950s, have proved to be a rich source of ideas for developmental researchers, but the limitations of his work should not be overlooked. His writings actually belong to the prescientific era of scholarly work. His statements about children's friendships derived primarily from his reading of previous psychiatrists' writings and his own practice of psychiatry. In the half-century since his book was published, researchers have supplemented rational analysis of previous writings with experimental tests of hypotheses in explicit theories; researchers have discounted conclusions based on one individual's clinical practice in favor of conclusions based on sophisticated statistical analyses of data from large samples of children. In short, the increase in knowledge of children's friendships has resulted largely from the application of the latest and best methods of psychological science.

Will the next half-century be a golden age for research on children's friendships? Trying to make predictions 50 years into the future would be foolish, but the near-term challenges facing researchers are clear. A large body of research has established what the most important positive features of children's friendships are, and reliable and valid measures of an overarching positive dimension of friendship quality have been devised. This research has also established that scores on measures of this positive dimension increase from middle childhood into at least middle adolescence.

However, less is known about conflicts and rivalry in friendships. These features are elements of an overarching negative dimension of friendship quality that needs more careful theoretical analysis. In addition, the measures used to assess the position of particular friendships on this dimension need more thorough validation. To fully describe the development of friendships in childhood and adolescence, researchers also need to give more attention to the earliest friendships among preschool children and to the changes in same-sex friendships in late adolescence, when romantic relationships become more common and significant.

Another challenge for future research is charting the developmental changes in friends' interactions and in the activities in which they engage when they are together. Researchers have been very successful in defining and measuring friendship quality and the degree to which children have reciprocal best friendships. But in recent years, researchers have seldom directly observed the age changes in friends' interactions and seldom obtained information about the age changes in friends'
activities. Yet these interactions and activities are the reality out of which children construct their judgments about who their best friends are and what the quality of those friendships is. Consequently, research on friends' interaction and activities is needed to complete the picture of how friendships develop.

Finally, recent studies strongly suggest that close friendships do not have a significant effect on children's general self-esteem, but the quality of these friendships can affect children's success in forming positive relationships with the rest of their peers. Conversely, having friendships high in conflicts and rivalry can reinforce a negative pattern of social interaction that becomes the pattern for interactions with other peers and with teachers. Still more alarming is the hypothesis, implicit in many theories of social influence, that friendships high in positive features can have negative effects on children's behavior by magnifying the negative influence of friends whose attitudes and behaviors are socially undesirable. The magnification hypothesis describes a possible link between two traditions of research on friendship, one focusing on the quality of friendship and the other focusing on the influence of friends' characteristics. Partly for this reason, and partly because the hypothesis has great theoretical and practical significance, determining the validity of that hypothesis should be given a high priority. If researchers in the future can meet this challenge and the others outlined above, the next few decades will be a golden age for research on children's friendships.

References


