

Factors That Facilitate and Hinder Friendship with Peers: A Qualitative Study Involving Early Adolescents

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Abstract : Background: The need and desire for connectedness and belonging to a peer group is a major concern in middle childhood. This is particularly true for the period of school transition when making and maintaining friendships is put to the test. Social relations are important for enhancing self-esteem, confidence, and mental health. Conflicts with peers and victimization mark challenges in the complex social environment of early adolescents. Thus, the promotion of supportive peer relationships is an important social goal. The current literature lacks an in-depth analysis of young people's experiences connected to making and maintaining friendships. Aim: This qualitative study aims to understand the factors that facilitate and hinder friendship and peer relations within the complex context of school transition. Methods: Youth engagement workshops at primary and secondary schools were conducted with 53 classes (N = 906 pupils; M age = 10.44; SD = .912) in 29 different schools across lower Austria. A big poster was created with the entire class, collecting early adolescents' ideas on ways they can support each other in the school environment. Then, students were divided into smaller groups and encouraged to share their personal experiences of friendship. Verbatim quotes from students were collected on observation sheets and sticky notes during the activities. A thematic analysis was conducted. Results: Early adolescents describe facilitating factors that allow them to connect with peers. These descriptions are mainly on a behavioral level and are relevant for face-to-face and digital contact, e.g., practical and emotional support, spending time together, pleasure and fun. Specific challenges such as offensive actions, betrayal, and lack of emotion regulation exist and need to be addressed if aiming to reduce barriers between peers. Conclusion: Knowing first-hand experiences, desires, and barriers for making and maintaining friends at the time of school transition will help researchers to develop preventive health programs that adequately address the needs and preferences of today's youth.

Keywords : youth voice, experts by experience, friendship, peer relations, primary-secondary school, transition

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