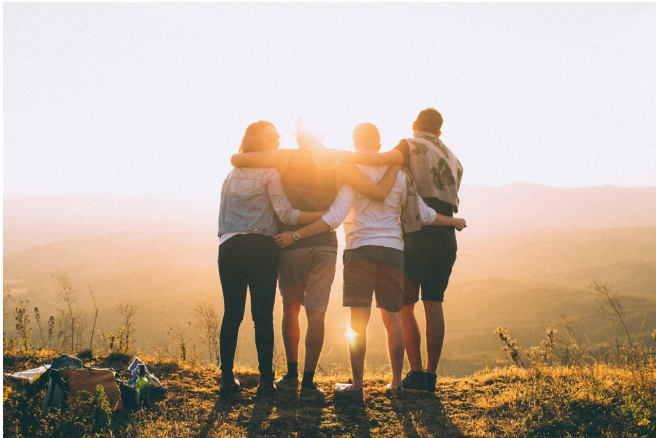


Friendship strengthens mental resilience of adolescents with unpleasant childhood experiences

24 November 2020, by Rianne Lindhout



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

As young people's friendships improve, their mental resilience also increases. This is according to research conducted by Anne-Laura van Harmelen, Professor of Brain, Safety and Resilience at Leiden University.

Children who have had unpleasant [childhood experiences](#) often tend to develop mental problems later in life. They are more likely to suffer from depression or anxiety and they experience a lower level of well-being. Unpleasant experiences include abuse, neglect, divorced parents or financial or psychological problems at home. For a previous study, Van Harmelen and her colleagues repeatedly interviewed a group of more than 1,200 young people between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. They also interviewed one of their carers, usually their mother, about their childhood experiences and their [mental state](#).

For the now-published study on the relationship between mental [resilience](#) and friendship, Van

Harmelen gave all 1,200 young people a resilience score. "If their [mental health](#) was much better than you would expect given their childhood experiences, they were given a high score." She related this score to the quality of the [friendships](#) that the children reported. "We saw that greater resilience strongly correlated with better quality friendships. This was even more pronounced for fourteen-year-olds than for seventeen-year-olds."

Stronger friendships, greater resilience

While these results reveal a link between friendship and resilience, they do not prove that friendship affects resilience. That proof came following the next step in Van Harmelen's research: she investigated changes in friendships and resilience that young people reported between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. If their resilience had increased during that period, they also reported having stronger friendships. If their resilience had decreased, the quality of their friendships had also decreased, for example due to moving house or arguments.

Social isolation due to lockdowns can reduce resilience

We used to think that resilience was a character trait, something you more or less possess. Now it seems that this isn't quite the whole story; friendships have a positive influence on resilience. How can society use this information? Van Harmelen: "We shouldn't underestimate the importance of social contacts for [young people](#). Some people laugh it off, but [social isolation](#) as a result of lockdowns can have long-term effects on the mental resilience of vulnerable adolescents. So it's very good that the Dutch government is prioritising keeping schools open."

This new knowledge stresses the importance of [friendships](#) among [young people](#). We should do more to encourage them. "There are many interesting intervention methods that can help children with their interpersonal relationships. So far, there's a lack of interventions specifically for adolescents who have had unpleasant [childhood experiences](#), and who therefore need to build up their [resilience](#)."

Provided by Leiden University

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