

Mean or nice? These traits could make or break a child's friendships

9 February 2021, by Gisele Galoustian



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Not all friendships are created equal. Some friends get along; others struggle to avoid conflict. Conventional wisdom holds that the tenor of a friendship with someone who is nice differs from that with someone who is mean, such that the former discourages negative interactions whereas the latter aggravates them. Although it is logical to assume that children who are mean have friendships characterized by growing strife and that children who are nice report little of the same, these assumptions have not yet been tested in the real-world friendships of children.

Researchers from Florida Atlantic University's Charles E. Schmidt College of Science are the first to conduct a [longitudinal study](#) to examine the extent to which being "nice" ([prosocial behavior](#)) and being "mean" (relationally [aggressive behavior](#)) shape changes in friend perceptions of their relationship. Using a longitudinal framework, researchers examined over time associations between individual attributes and perceptions of relationship quality in 120 same-gender friendships among children in fourth, fifth and sixth grades.

The researchers examined whether one friend's nice and mean behaviors anticipate changes in the other friend's perceptions of relationship [negativity](#)

(expressions of anger, conflict, and annoyance) across a period of one to three months. Being mean was defined as classmate reports of relational aggression, including the intentional use of exclusion and gossip to harm others. Being nice was defined as classmate reports of [prosocial behavior](#), including providing assistance and treating others fairly. Findings from the study were published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

The results confirm the widespread assumption that one child's behavioral traits drive the other child's friendship experiences. Children with mean friends described increases in relationship negativity over time, whereas children with nice friends reported that relationship negativity declined. It is perhaps not surprising that relational aggression forecast greater negativity. Being mean is antithetical to expectations of how friends should behave and is likely viewed as a violation of trust. No one wants to be treated ill by a friend. Less obvious is the finding that one friend's nice behavior and forecast decreases in the other [friend's](#) perception of negativity in the relationship. Prosocial behaviors assuage hurt feelings, meet needs for support, and increase the rewards of companionship, all of which should inhibit expressions of negativity. Prosocial children may also be adept at conflict resolution, which can help them defuse problems before they erupt into conflict.

"These findings matter because friendship difficulties threaten socio-emotional adjustment in children as well as their ability to maintain friendships," said Brett Laursen, Ph.D., lead author and a professor of psychology in FAU's Charles E. Schmidt College of Science, FAU Broward Campuses. "We have long known that negative interactions with friends contribute to subsequent increases in psychological distress and difficulties at school. Friends who don't get along are soon former friends. Children who cannot seem to keep friends report increases in depression and

victimization. Conversely, prosocial behaviors are tied to the ability to make new friends and keep old ones. Put simply, behavioral tendencies that threaten friendships threaten well-being. Behavioral tendencies that protect friendships promote child adjustment."

Researchers focused on the late primary and early middle school years, a period when children spend increasing amounts of time with friends and when the closeness and significance of friendships grow commensurately. They studied stable reciprocated [friendships](#)—both [children](#) nominated one another as friends at both time points. Both friends rated negativity within the friendship at each time point. Classmates rated each child in terms of their prosocial behavior and relationally aggressive behavior.

More information: Olivia Valdes et al. Being nice and being mean: Friend characteristics foreshadow changes in perceptions of relationship negativity, *Journal of Research on Adolescence* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/jora.12604](#)

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

APA citation: Mean or nice? These traits could make or break a child's friendships (2021, February 9) retrieved 12 May 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-02-nice-traits-child-friendships.html>

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