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Anti-Bully? Sure -- But What About Pro-Friend?

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It only takes one.

Just one friend, that is, to reduce a child's chances of being bullied, and, if he is bullied, of developing depression as a result. These findings are rarely mentioned in discussions about bullying.

And we are currently awash in such discussions, a good thing, considering the recent suicides at least partly connected to bullying episodes and the outpouring of stories detailing less tragic (yet still painful) incidents across the country. The most effective bullying prevention programs include empathy and basic social-skills training, and work to change the culture of a school until aggressive treatment toward others goes against the norm of the all-powerful peer group.

But how about teaching kids how to create and keep friendships? Illuminating friendship could not only protect kids from becoming aggressors or victims, but would also redirect them away from the narrow realm of bullying and toward the wide-open pursuit of solid friendships, with broad implications for their health, happiness, and success throughout life.

We tend to think that friendship "just happens" – and it does for kids who are naturally good at reading facial expressions, for instance, or inserting themselves seamlessly into games-in-progress on the playground. These socially savvy kids then learn more about friendship "on the job" while those who can't make friends in the first place miss the chance to develop friendship maintenance skills. Soon they find themselves on the downward spiral of social isolation.

"Friendship should be taught in school," says [Mara Brendgen](#), a professor of psychology at the University of Quebec. "Especially when we work with victims and bullies, the main goal needs to be teaching them the skills to develop positive friendships. Caring for a friend can translate into caring for peers more generally."

Brendgen laments that research on both the positive and negative effects of different kinds of friends on bullies and victims has not trickled down into popular consciousness. Her own research confirms the "just one friend" finding that first surfaced in the '90s. She also found that children will emulate the socially (as opposed to physically) aggressive behavior of their friends, even if they don't have a genetic tendency toward aggression. Friends are more influential than genes when it comes to engaging in malicious gossip, name calling, and excluding other children.

For kids ages 5 to 7, having a physically aggressive friend increases their risk of being physically aggressive, unsurprisingly. But when the quality of the friendship is very good, the negative influence is mitigated. "Children who have a close bond with a friend are more secure and have less reason to be aggressive," Brendgen says. "They learn through such a bond to be more sensitive." The message for parents here is that if your child grows close to an aggressive child, it's better to nurture the relationship rather than discourage it.

Though victims who have aggressive friends tend to become more aggressive in reaction to being bullied, they are still less likely to get depressed than friendless victims.

Kids (including aggressive ones) who have "pro-social" friends -- those who demonstrate a mixture of empathy and leadership behavior – are at less of a risk of becoming a victim, bully, or both, than those who don't. Pro-social friends can diffuse conflicts, Brendgen says, by telling bullies to back off in a nice way, or by finding solutions to problems before emotions escalate. They model both how to react without blowing up and how to avoid provoking a bully in the first place.

Close friendships are particularly important to vulnerable children, whether or not they have been bullied. [In a new paper](#), Brendgen and colleagues conclude that 4th grade boys and girls with at least one quality friendship display fewer symptoms of depression, even if they have a genetic predisposition toward the condition.

Whereas the basic social skills dispensed in some bully prevention programs include making eye contact and saying "please" and "thank you," more specific friendship skills that could be taught, says Brendgen, include listening carefully to what others have to say, speaking one's mind calmly, talking to other children about being disappointed or angry without letting those feelings fester, and even learning how to be interesting to others and how to come up with fun games that others will want to play.

Such lessons – along with ones on the relationship between friendship, aggression, and depression for parents and teachers – would reduce bullying, ease the primal pain of isolation, and instill in children a more conscious and active attitude toward the

cultivation of friendship. Schools should prepare children for the future; reams of research have shown (and our own experience quickly confirms) that being able to build and sustain social support is the key to a meaningful and productive life.

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