Early Adolescent Peer Orientation and Adjustment During High School

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Children become increasingly influenced by their peers as they begin the transition into adolescence. This tendency peaks during the years of early adolescence and then gradually declines as children renegotiate their relationships with their parents and develop a mature sense of autonomy. But although most youths tend to rely on both their parents and peers for advice and support, some children emerge from early adolescence with a relatively stronger dependence on their age-mates. The long-term effects of this dependence likely depend on whether the orientation toward peers occurs at the expense of important aspects of children's lives, such as their acceptance of parental authority and their attention to their schoolwork. The implications of peer orientation may also be affected by the specific nature of adolescents' peer groups and the support of their families in later adolescence. In this study, we tested these predictions by examining the high school academic achievement and problem behavior of a group of adolescents whose orientation toward peers was first examined during early adolescence (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993).

Significant changes in children's social relationships take place as they make the transition from childhood to adolescence. Children increasingly spend unsupervised time with their friends and other age-mates, both in and out of school (Higgins & Eccles-Parsons, 1983; Simmons & Blyth, 1997). The time spent with peers often surpasses that spent with parents and other family members (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson & Richards, 1991). In addition to spending more time with friends, early adolescents become more concerned about peer acceptance and popularity. Their susceptibility to peer influence increases, and they begin to turn to friends more often for support and guidance (Berndt, 1979; Bixenstine, DeCorte, & Bixenstine, 1976; Gould & Mazzeo, 1982). At the same time, early adolescence begins a period of disengagement and distancing between children and their parents. Both children and their parents report less closeness and cohesion with one another during these years (Collins, 1990; Collins & Russell, 1991; Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). Given these changes in children's social relationships, some observers have speculated that children actually exchange a dependency on parents for a dependency on peers during the transition to adolescence (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

For most adolescents, the apparent preference for peer relationships over those with their parents does not last very long. Children's susceptibility to peer influence peaks at approximately 12-13 years of age and declines through middle and late adolescence (Berndt, 1979; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). The relationships between children and their parents are not abandoned, but rather are renegotiated to accommodate the increasingly mature adolescent (Collins, 1990; Eccles, Buchanan, Midgley, Fuligni, & Flanagan, 1991; Steinberg, 1990). By providing their children with a developmentally appropriate amount of control over their own lives and personal decision making, parents retain their critical roles as important sources of comfort, support, and advice into late adolescence and adulthood (Kandel & Lesser, 1972; White, Speisman, & Costas, 1983). Most youths eventually develop a healthy degree of interdependence with their parents and their peers, relying on both for guidance in their everyday lives and in making decisions for the future.

Although most children and their parents successfully manage the transition to adolescence, some do not. Numerous studies have documented how the failure of some families to effectively adjust their relationships leads some early adolescents, already in a period of heightened attachment to peers, to detach somewhat from parents and place even greater importance on their peer relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1987; Condry & Simon, 1974; Devereux, 1976; Steinberg, 1987). When early adolescents do not believe that they are
afforded supportive opportunities for autonomy in their relationships with their parents, they become more dependent on peer relationships. For example, Devereux (1970) observed that adolescents who believe their parents to be excessively restrictive and controlling tend to turn more to their peers for advice and support. Yet a complete lack of parental control and support also leads adolescents to be more dependent on their peers. Those from permissive and neglectful homes tend to be less likely to seek advice from their parents and more likely to be influenced by their friends (Bronfenbrenner, 1967; Cordry & Simon, 1974; Steinberg, 1987).

In analyses from earlier waves of the longitudinal study described in the current article, we found evidence for the association of both excessive psychological control and inadequate behavioral control with early adolescents' orientation toward peers (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). Early adolescents who perceived no increase in opportunities for decision making between the sixth and seventh grades tended to seek less advice from their parents and more from their friends about personal problems and future plans. In addition, early adolescents who felt that their parents did not relax their power assertion tended to orient toward peers to such an extent that they were willing to forgo their parents' rules, their schoolwork, and even their own talents to be popular with their friends. In contrast, those who perceived high levels of parental monitoring and supervision of their behavior were less likely to ignore parental rules and schoolwork for the sake of keeping their friends.

Compared to our knowledge about what produces a strong dependence on peers, however, we know less about the implications of this orientation for adolescents' long-term development. It is well-known that friendships are critical sources of guidance and support throughout adolescence, and a lack of peer relationships has been shown to be associated with maladjustment (Savin-Williams & Berndt, 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987). Yet the orientation toward peers that we and others have observed in previous studies is different from the existence of healthy and supportive relationships with friends. Peer-oriented adolescents are those who place such strong importance on friendships that they seek advice exclusively from friends rather than parents, become particularly susceptible to peer influence, and sacrifice things like schoolwork and their own abilities to keep and be popular with their friends (Bronfenbrenner, 1967; Devereux, 1970; Fuligni & Eccles, 1993; Steinberg, 1987).

Even considering the critical importance of friendships, the question remains as to the developmental impact of a dependence on peers that occurs at the expense of other important aspects of children's lives. On the one hand, detachment from parents leaves adolescents without critical support and guidance and can result in a poor sense of self-worth and other adjustment difficulties (Ryan & Lynch, 1969). On the other hand, recent evidence has suggested that friendships may actually compensate for poor family relationships. For example, Gauze, Bukowski, Aquan-Assee, and Sippola (1996) observed that early adolescents who reported low levels of family cohesion but close and supportive friendships demonstrated levels of self-worth and social competence equal to those of adolescents from more cohesive families.

Given the risks of detaching from parents and the benefits of supportive peer relationships, the long-term implications of early adolescents' peer orientation should depend on the specific type of adolescents' dependence on their age-mates. Adolescents who simply tend to seek advice from their friends more than from their parents may actually receive an adequate amount of support and assistance. Adolescents already depend on their friends for support with personal and social difficulties to a greater degree than they depend on their parents (Gould & Mazzeo, 1982). An exclusive use of peers for advice, while depriving adolescents of adult guidance, does not necessarily mean that youths will exhibit academic and behavioral problems. In contrast, as we observed in an earlier article, some early adolescents turn to their peers to such a degree that they reject parental authority and exhibit a willingness to accede to peer pressure (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). A small proportion of early adolescents in our study indicated a willingness to act dumber, let their schoolwork slip, and break their parents' rules to make and keep friends. These adolescents appear to be quite malleable in the face of peer pressures to engage in risky activities and may be on a path toward increasingly severe delinquent behavior and eventual academic difficulties (Bogenschneider, Wu, Raffaeli, & Tsay, 1999; Brown, Claessen, & Eicher, 1986; Steinberg, 1987).

Peer association and family relationships during later adolescence should play important roles in the long-term implications of peer orientation during early adolescence. In particular, these factors could serve as important mediators of the negative impact of an extreme orientation toward peers. Distinct peer crowds begin to form during the high school years, and adolescents' preexisting attitudes and behaviors can
determine whether they associate with peers that accept or reject adult institutions and authority (Brown, 1990). The apparent willingness of adolescents with an extreme orientation toward peers to break parental rules and let their schoolwork slip, along with their tendency to engage in substance use and delinquent behavior (Bogenschneider et al., 1999; Brown et al., 1986), may lead these youths to associate with peers who engage in risky behaviors. This association with deviant peers, in turn, could reinforce the adolescents’ prior orientation toward risky behavior and lead the youths to engage in greater problem behavior and to exhibit lower academic achievement during high school.

Similarly, an extreme orientation toward peers during junior high school may lead to poorer family relationships during high school. The rejection of parental authority that accompanies an extreme orientation toward peers likely creates more distant and less supportive relationships between adolescents and their parents (Bogenschneider et al., 1999). Changing established patterns of family relationships can be difficult, particularly during periods of developmental transitions such as adolescence (Minuchin, 1985). As a result, early adolescents who exhibit a strong dependence on their age-mates may be more likely to have more distant family relationships with their parents during later adolescence. A lack of supportive family relationships, in turn, may be associated with poorer adjustment during the high school years.

Finally, it is important to examine whether the effects of early adolescent peer orientation vary according to adolescents’ gender. Girls are more likely to rely on their friends as sources of support and guidance than are boys (Gould & Mazzeo, 1982). Girls also show a greater tendency to seek advice from friends rather than parents about personal problems and future plans (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). Boys, on the other hand, are less able to resist antisocial peer pressure and are more willing to ignore their parents’ rules, schoolwork, and their own talents to keep and be popular with their friends (Berndt, 1979; Fuligni & Eccles, 1993; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). In addition, male peer groups are more likely to engage in problem behavior and to be in opposition to achievement-related endeavors (Brown, 1990). Given these gender differences in the nature of adolescents’ peer orientation and peer groups, the long-term implications of early adolescent peer orientation may be worse for boys than for girls.

The current study is a follow-up to our previous analyses of the associations between changes in parent-child relationships and peer orientation during early adolescence (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). In this article, we describe analyses assessing the long-term consequences of early adolescents’ orientation toward their peers for their adjustment during high school. The relations of two types of peer orientation during the 7th grade with problem behavior and academic achievement in the 7th, 10th, and 12th grades were estimated. In addition, we examined the extent to which the long-term associations between peer orientation and adjustment were mediated by peer association and family cohesion in high school.

Method

Sample

The data used in this study were collected from a total of 1,253 adolescents who participated in a multiwave longitudinal study of adolescent development (the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions). All of the adolescents participated in the study during the seventh grade while they attended school in nine predominantly White, lower middle to middle income districts in southeastern Michigan. The sample was fairly evenly divided by sex, with 54% girls and 46% boys.

Students in six of the original nine school districts participated in the study in the 10th grade, yielding a 10th-grade longitudinal sample of 803 adolescents. A total of 370 of these students also took part in the study in the 12th grade. At that time, they were joined by 450 additional students who participated during the 7th grade but not during the 10th grade. Approximately one half of these additional 450 students attended school in the three districts that were skipped at the 10th grade, whereas the others were students who were in the six participating districts but did not take part during the 10th grade themselves. In total, 12th-grade longitudinal data were available for 820 youths from the nine original school districts. The additional 450 students were included in the 12th-grade sample because they increased the reliability of the estimated associations of early adolescent peer orientation with adolescents’ adjustment 5 years later.
Measures

The adolescents completed self-report questionnaires administered during school hours in the spring of their 7th-, 10th-, and 12th-grade years. The questionnaires focused on many issues considered important during adolescence, such as family and peer relationships, achievement motivation, future expectations, self-concept, and values. In addition, students' course grades were obtained from their academic records at the end of the school year in all three grades.

Peer orientation.

To account for the possibility of both positive and negative types of peer orientation, we used two measures to assess early adolescents' orientation toward peers in the seventh grade. The first scale, peer advice seeking, tapped the extent to which adolescents turned to their friends for personal and instrumental support. Students used a 5-point scale (1 = mostly to my parents, 2 = more to my parents than to my friends, 3 = to my parents and to my friends about the same, 4 = more to my friends than to my parents, and 5 = mostly to my friends) to respond to the following items: "When I want to talk about my future job plans or educational plans, I talk _____"; "When I want to talk about which school courses to take, I talk _____"; and "When I want to talk about a personal problem, I talk _____." These items, instead of forcing adolescents to choose between parents and peers, allowed for a range of relative differences in the extent to which early adolescents turn to parents and peers for advice. In addition, instead of considering parental and peer influence to be antagonistic to one another, the advice-seeking items allowed adolescents to indicate by selecting the midpoint of the scale that they relied on both parents and peers equally for advice.

A second, more negative type of peer orientation, which we labeled extreme peer orientation, was also measured. Students used a 7-point scale to respond to the following four items: "How much does the amount of time that you spend with your friends keep you away from doing things you ought to do?" (1 = takes away no time, 7 = takes away a lot of time); "Would you act dumber or less talented than you really are in order to make someone like you?" (1 = definitely no, 7 = definitely yes); "It's okay to let your schoolwork slip or get a lower grade in order to be popular with your friends" (1 = never, 7 = always); and "It's okay to break some of your parents' rules in order to keep your friends." (1 = never, 7 = always). Agreeing with these items suggested that the adolescents placed such high importance on their relationships with their peers that they would sacrifice their talents, school performance, and parents' rules to maintain these relationships.

As reported in Fuligni and Eccles (1993), principal-components analysis of the seven items from both scales, followed by an oblique rotation, supported the existence of two distinct types of peer orientation. Scales were constructed by taking the mean of the individual items, which resulted in a minimum score of 1 and a maximum score of 5 for advice seeking and a range from 1 to 7 for extreme peer orientation. Both scales possessed adequate internal consistency (advice seeking = .73; extreme peer orientation = .62) and showed a modest relation to one another ($r = .17, p < .001$). The validity of the scales was demonstrated in the previous article by their longitudinal relations with adolescents' adjustment to school, parental monitoring, parental strictness, and adolescents' opportunities for decision making in the family.

Academic achievement.

Students' level of achievement at school was measured in the 7th, 10th, and 12th grades by averaging students' grades in their mathematics and English courses. Grades were scored on a traditional letter scale, ranging from F to A+.

Problem behavior.

Adolescents' involvement in problem behavior during junior high and high school was tapped by averaging their standardized reports of involvement in six different activities: punching or pushing around another student, writing or drawing on school property, skipping class, bringing alcohol or drugs to school, drinking alcohol outside of school, and using illegal drugs outside of school. This measure is similar to other traditional self-report measures of adolescent problem behavior and possessed good internal consistency at
all three grade levels (as = .72-.74). The items have demonstrated their validity in previous research with their associations with parental permissiveness and family conflict, as well as with adolescents' lack of involvement in prosocial activities (Eccles & Barber, 1995; Meschke, Barber, & Eccles, 1994).

**Peer group association.**

In the 10th and 12th grades, adolescents reported on a 5-point scale ranging from none (1), through half (3), to all (5) the proportions of their friends who engaged in specific behaviors or possessed particular characteristics. The measure of achievement-oriented peers was based on the proportion of friends planning to go to college, being hard working, and doing well in school. The measure of problem-behavior-oriented peers included the following behaviors: regularly drinking alcohol, using drugs, and skipping class. Principal-components analysis, followed by an oblique rotation, supported the existence of these two distinct types of peer groups. These measures possessed adequate internal consistencies at both 10th and 12th grades (achievement-oriented peers, as = .71 and .74; problem-behavior-oriented peers, as = .69 and .77) and were moderately correlated with one another at each time point (rs = -.25 and -.26). The scales previously have been found to be associated with ability grouping and adolescents' involvement in school (Fuligni, Eccles, & Barber, 1995; Meschke et al., 1994).

**Family cohesion.**

Adolescents' feelings of closeness and cohesion with their families in the 10th and 12th grades were measured with a subset of items from the Cohesion subscale of the Family Adaptation and Cohesion Evaluation Scales II (Olson, Sprengle, & Russell, 1979). Using a scale ranging from almost never (1) to almost always (5), students responded to four items: "Members of my family are very close and get along well," "Our family enjoys doing things together," "Family members are supportive of one another during difficult times," and "Our family eats dinner meals together." This set of items possessed good internal consistency at both grade levels (as = .78 and .79), and the overall scale has been shown in numerous studies to be associated with a broad array of indicators of adolescents' adjustment (Grotevant & Carlson, 1989).

**Sample Differences and Attrition**

The 450 students who were added to the 12th-grade sample were similar to those who participated in both the 10th and the 12th grades in terms of their problem behavior, academic achievement, peer association, and family cohesion in the 12th grade. The two groups also did not vary in terms of their academic achievement, extreme orientation toward peers, and peer advice seeking in the seventh grade. Adolescents who took part only in the 12th grade, however, did report greater problem behavior and had lower grades in the seventh grade. Nevertheless, the associations between peer orientation and adjustment in the 7th and 12th grades did not vary across the two groups of youths. This fact, along with the great similarity between the two groups of adolescents, made us feel confident that the inclusion of the additional students did not substantively alter the results of the analyses.

The students who participated in the 10th or 12th grades received higher grades, exhibited less problem behavior, and reported lower levels of extreme peer orientation in the seventh grade than did the adolescents who dropped out of the study before high school. There were no differences, however, in the extent to which these different groups of adolescents sought advice from their peers in the seventh grade. The magnitudes of the differences in extreme peer orientation and problem behavior were small to moderate (ds = 0.18-0.35), and the differences in academic achievement were larger in size (ds = 0.51-0.61). Although this selective attrition should be kept in mind when interpreting the results of this study, the large size of the longitudinal sample ensured that the variables retained an adequate distribution and range for the analyses.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**
The means and standard deviations of the major variables are presented in Table 1. Overall, adolescents evidenced a somewhat low level of extreme peer orientation and tended to seek advice slightly more from parents than from friends while in the seventh grade. On average, adolescents received lower grades during high school than in the seventh grade. The standard deviations and ranges of problem behavior reveal that only a small proportion of adolescents at all three grades reported frequent involvement in school misconduct and substance use. During high school, students reported that more than half of their friends were achievement oriented, whereas approximately 30-40\% of their peers engaged in problem behavior. Adolescents also perceived a moderate amount of cohesion with their parents during high school, with the youths indicating slightly lower feelings of closeness in the 12th grade than in the 10th grade.

Tests revealed that boys tended to be more extremely oriented toward peers than did girls, who in turn sought advice from friends about their problems and plans to a greater degree than did boys (ps < .001). In terms of adolescents' adjustment, girls received significantly higher grades in both junior high and high school, and boys reported a greater involvement in problem behavior at all three grade levels (ps < .001). There were no gender differences in the proportion of adolescents' friends who tended to be either achievement oriented or involved in problem behavior in the 10th grade. Yet in the 12th grade, girls reported a greater proportion of achieving friends, whereas boys indicated a higher percentage of friends who were involved in problem behavior (ps < .001). Boys and girls reported an equal degree of closeness and cohesion with their families at both grade levels.

**Junior High and High School Adjustment According to Peer Orientation**

The bivariate associations between the two types of peer orientation and adolescents' adjustment in the 7th, 10th, and 12th grades are presented in Table 2. Because of the large sample size, results were considered to be significant only at the p < .01 level. Adolescents who evidenced an extreme orientation toward peers in the seventh grade engaged in greater problem behavior and performed worse in school during both junior high and high school, though these associations tended to be modest in magnitude. Early adolescents who sought more advice from peers than from parents tended to have lower academic achievement in junior high school and to engage in more problem behavior in the 7th and 12th grades. In all cases, however, the correlations between advice seeking and adjustment were significantly smaller than the respective correlations between extreme peer orientation and adjustment (ps < .01).

Analyses of covariance with tests of equal slopes were conducted to determine whether any of the relations between peer orientation and adjustment observed in Table 2 differed for boys and girls. The only difference to emerge was in the association between advice seeking and academic achievement in the seventh grade: The association was significant in the negative direction for girls (r = -.20, p < .001) but not significantly different from 0 for boys (r = -.05, ns). All of the other associations between peer orientation and adjustment were similar for girls and boys.

**High School Peer Association and Family Cohesion According to Peer Orientation**

As shown in Table 3, adolescents with an extreme orientation toward peers in the 7th grade associated with deviant peers and felt less close to their families in the 10th grade and had more deviant and fewer achieving peers in the 12th grade. There were also associations between advice seeking and involvement with deviant peers in the 10th and 12th grades, though the correlation in the 12th grade was significantly smaller than the same correlation for an extreme orientation toward peers (p < .01). Advice seeking tended to be more closely related to family cohesion in both grades. Early adolescents who turned more to their friends than to their parents for personal problems and future plans felt less close to their families during high school.

**High School Adjustment According to Earlier Adjustment, Peer Orientation, Peer Association, and Family Cohesion**

Multiple regressions were conducted in which we estimated the relations between early adolescents' peer
orientation and their academic achievement and problem behavior during the 10th and 12th grades after controlling for these same indicators of adolescents' adjustment in the 7th grade and for the youths' gender. Additional regression analyses tested whether adolescents' peer association and family cohesion mediated the relation between peer orientation and high school adjustment. To test for mediation, we added the main effects of peer association and family cohesion to the original multiple regression equations in two additional steps. As suggested by Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998), we determined whether mediation was occurring using two criteria: (a) the amount of reduction in the original effect of peer orientation that was attributable to a mediator and (b) the significance of the indirect effect of peer orientation through a mediator. Once again, results were considered significant only at the $p < .01$ level.

**Tenth-grade problem behavior and academic achievement.**

Regression analyses predicting adjustment in the 10th grade as a function of an extreme orientation toward peers in the 7th grade are presented in Table 4. An extreme orientation toward peers during junior high school predicted adolescents' academic achievement and problem behavior even after we controlled for these indicators of adjustment in the seventh grade (see columns 1A and 2A). Students with an extreme orientation toward peers reported greater involvement in problem behavior and evidenced lower academic performance 3 years later in the 10th grade.

The results presented in columns 1B and 2B suggest that the long-term implications of an extreme orientation toward peers were mediated by adolescents' peer association during high school. The significant effects of deviant peers suggest that this aspect of adolescents' peer groups, rather than a lack of achieving peers, accounts for the negative implications of an extreme orientation toward peers. To determine the magnitude and significance of the indirect effects of extreme peer orientation through deviant peers, we conducted two additional regression analyses in which we estimated the effects of extreme peer orientation on deviant peers after controlling for seventh-grade problem behavior or achievement and for gender. These estimates ($\beta = .12$ for problem behavior; $\beta = .15$ for achievement) were then multiplied by the effects of deviant peers shown in columns 1B and 2B ($\beta = .51$ for problem behavior; $\beta = -.13$ for achievement). The resulting indirect effects ($\beta = .06$ for problem behavior; $\beta = .02$ for achievement) were significant at $p < .01$ and represented 60% and 22% of the original effects of extreme peer orientation on problem behavior and achievement, respectively, shown in columns 1A and 2A.

The addition of family cohesion to the regression equations did not change the already reduced effects of an extreme orientation toward peers (columns 1C and 2C). Given the lack of significant bivariate correlations between advice seeking and 10th-grade adjustment in Table 2, no regression analyses were conducted with this aspect of peer orientation.

**Twelfth-grade problem behavior and academic achievement.**

An extreme orientation toward peers predicted involvement in problem behavior in the 12th grade even after we controlled for problem behavior in the 7th grade (see Table 5). As was seen in the 10th grade, this long-term relation was mediated by an involvement with deviant-oriented peers (column 1B). To determine the magnitude and significance of the indirect effect of extreme peer orientation through deviant peers, we conducted an additional regression analysis in which we estimated the effect of extreme peer orientation on deviant peers after controlling for seventh-grade problem behavior and gender. This estimate ($\beta = .16$) was then multiplied by the effect of deviant peers shown in column 1B ($\beta = .51$). The resulting indirect effect ($\beta = .08$) was significant at $p < .001$ and represented 62% of the original effect of extreme peer orientation on problem behavior shown in column 1A. The addition of family cohesion to the regression equation did not change the already reduced effect of an extreme orientation toward peers (column 1C).

In contrast to what was observed at the 10th grade, however, an extreme orientation toward peers did not predict academic achievement in the 12th grade above and beyond adolescents' achievement during junior high school ($\beta = -.06$, ns). In addition, seeking advice from peers in the seventh grade did not have negative implications for adolescents' problem behavior in the 12th grade after we controlled for problem behavior in the seventh grade ($\beta = .08$, ns). Given the lack of significant long-term relations, no mediational analyses were conducted.
Discussion

Despite the increase in susceptibility to peer influence that occurs during early adolescence, the majority of children progress through the teenage years with a healthy interdependence with both parents and peers. Nevertheless, a proportion of children seem to emerge from early adolescence with a relatively stronger orientation toward their age-mates. The results from this study suggest that the long-term implications of such an orientation depend on the specific type of dependence on peers. Of the two types of peer orientation examined in this study, an extreme attachment to peers appeared to have the most negative implications for adjustment. Youths who were willing to forgo their parents’ rules, their schoolwork, and their own talents in order to keep and be popular with their peers exhibited greater problem behavior and lower academic performance in the seventh grade. These adolescents also reported greater problem behavior in the 10th and 12th grades and evidenced lower academic achievement in the 10th grade compared with youths who had similar levels of adjustment during junior high school. In contrast, a tendency to seek advice from peers more than from parents during junior high school had no long-term implications for adolescents’ adjustment.

The placement of peer acceptance above personal talents, schoolwork, and parental authority appears to leave youths with few of the protective factors that would traditionally curb their risk-taking behavior and enhance their performance at school (McCord, 1990). Adolescents with this orientation may also feel the need to be conspicuous in their problem behavior and underachievement in order to elicit and maintain the approval of their friends. Such attitudes and behavior are what likely lead adolescents with an extreme orientation toward peers to associate with peers who engage in problem behavior and who are less likely to work hard in school and to plan to go to college, a process referred to as peer selection (Brown, 1990). Although an extreme orientation was related to both types of peer association, having a higher percentage of delinquent friends emerged as the more important factor in accounting for the relation between extreme peer orientation and adjustment during high school. The proportion of adolescents’ friends who drank alcohol, used drugs, and skipped class was a powerful predictor of problem behavior and a smaller correlate of academic achievement. The proportion of adolescents’ friends who were achievement oriented did not show a relation with adjustment that was independent of the youths’ association with deviant peers.

In contrast to possessing an extreme orientation toward peers, seeking advice from friends more than from parents about personal issues and future plans showed no long-term negative impact on adolescents’ adjustment during high school after we controlled for prior levels of adjustment. In the seventh grade, early adolescents who discussed their problems with friends more than with parents performed less well in school and engaged in more problem behavior. The difference in problem behavior, however, did not become any greater over time, and the difference in achievement disappeared by the high school years. Despite feeling more emotionally distant from their families in the 10th and 12th grades, early adolescents who sought advice more from peers than from parents appeared no worse than other adolescents in terms of their problem behavior and academic achievement after we controlled for their earlier levels of adjustment. In addition to apparently receiving the necessary support from friends, those who sought advice from peers did not become involved in delinquent peer groups during high school to the same extent as did adolescents who possessed a more extreme peer orientation. The smaller relation between advice seeking and later association with deviant peers likely contributes to the relatively innocuous effects of seeking advice from friends more than from parents about personal problems and future plans.

Gender differences in the implications of peer orientation for adjustment were few, and they emerged only in the seventh grade for the patterns of adolescents’ advice seeking. Yet these gender differences disappeared by the high school years, indicating that seeking advice from peers was not associated with long-term academic and behavior problems for either boys or girls. The lack of gender variation in the long-term implications of an extreme orientation toward peers suggests that such a dependence on peers can be equally detrimental for boys and girls. Girls engaged in less problem behavior and had higher achievement in high school than boys, but girls who sacrificed developmentally positive aspects of their lives for the sake of peers were worse off than their same-sex peers to the same extent that boys with the same orientation were.

The results of this study highlight the importance of taking a differentiated view of the implications of peer dependence and peer influence during adolescence. Close, supportive friendships are critical determinants of healthy development through childhood and adolescence (Parker & Asher, 1987). In addition, evidence is
beginning to emerge that such relationships with peers may actually compensate for what adolescents perceive as inadequate relationships with their parents (Gauze et al., 1996). Yet the extent to which adolescents rely on and are influenced by their peers, independent of whether they possess close friendships, appears to be associated with later adjustment. Previous studies have shown that adolescents who appear to be more susceptible to peer pressure tend to engage in more problematic behavior (Berndt, 1979; Bogenschneider et al., 1999; Brown et al., 1986). Similarly, adolescents in this study who were willing to forgo schoolwork, parental rules, and their own abilities for the sake of friends exhibited more academic difficulties and greater problem behavior.

It should be emphasized that there was no evidence from this study that peers per se have negative implications for the development of children and adolescents. Rather, the findings suggest that individual differences in the importance that adolescents place on their friendships, and the lengths to which they will go to maintain those relationships, should be taken into account when considering the role that peer relationships play in development. Simply relying on friends more than parents for advice and support does not seem to have a negative effect on development. But children who become so dependent on their peers that they give up other positive aspects of their lives, or who can be easily pressured to engage in problem behavior, appear to be at some risk for adjustment difficulties during adolescence.

Interestingly, family cohesion demonstrated relations with high school problem behavior independent of the effect of adolescents' association with deviant peers. Though not reported in this article, the relations between family cohesion and problem behavior before we controlled for deviant peers were approximately twice as large. These results suggest that part, but not all, of the link between family cohesion and problem behavior can be attributed to the fact that adolescents with low levels of cohesion are more likely to become involved in deviant peer groups. Nevertheless, cohesion remains important such that among youths involved with deviant peers, those with closer families tend to be less involved in problem behavior.

Our use of self-report measures of various constructs should be considered when interpreting the results of this study, but the use of these measures should not have affected the substantive nature of our findings. Self-report measures of problem behavior are commonly considered to be equally valid or even more valid than objective measures, especially when the measures include behaviors that often go undetected by authorities and other adults (see Brown et al., 1986). Adolescents' reporting of their friends' characteristics may have resulted in an inflated relation between association with delinquent peers and adolescents' problem behavior, but strong relations have also been reported for problem behavior when the peers' characteristics have been independently assessed (e.g., Bauman & Fisher, 1988). In addition, the use of self-reports instead of independent assessments should not have affected the estimates of the interactive effects between peer orientation and peer association. Similarly, the use of self-reported family cohesion should not have unduly influenced the results.

The magnitude of the observed associations should also be considered when interpreting the results of this study. The bivariate associations between extreme peer orientation and later adjustment fell between what are commonly considered to be "small" and "moderate" effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). The conditional effects in the regressions tended to be smaller, but even they were consistent with the effect sizes of other commonly accepted predictors of adolescent adjustment (e.g., authoritative parenting: Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991).

The extent to which the findings of this study may generalize beyond European American adolescents remains to be determined. Other youths, such as those with Asian and Latin American backgrounds, often come from families that place more emphasis on parental authority and less importance on adolescent autonomy (Fuligni, 1998). A willingness to reject parental authority for the sake of peers may have more negative implications for these youths because it would represent a greater violation of cultural norms. In addition, an extreme orientation toward peers could be more consequential for adolescents who live in poorer neighborhoods that have fewer extramural resources to assist youths.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine whether adolescents may in some cases emphasize, rather than downplay, positive aspects of their lives in order to keep and be popular with their friends. Given the diversity of peer cultures and crowds, it is possible that the peer orientation of some adolescents may be manifested in efforts to heighten academic achievement and a reluctance to engage in risky behavior. Our measure of extreme peer orientation captured youths' willingness to hide rather than exhibit positive aspects of their
lives. Future studies that included more prosocial types of peer orientation could provide a fuller picture of the dynamics of peer dependence during adolescence.

A critical task during early adolescence is for children to begin developing a healthy sense of autonomy within their relationships with their parents and their peers. Children who perceive either excessive psychological control or inadequate behavioral control within their families at this time may enter the adolescent years with a stronger orientation toward their peers than other children. Youths who manifest this orientation by seeking out friends for advice and support appear to be fine during high school. Those who exhibit an extreme orientation toward peers, however, tend to become involved in delinquent peer groups and to have more difficulty during high school. Though the small magnitude of the long-term effects of peer orientation suggests that such an orientation does not completely determine the future adjustment of early adolescents, the findings of this study do highlight the need to take into account individual differences in children’s dependence on age-mates when considering the significance of peers for adolescent development.

Footnotes

1

The significance of the indirect effect (A?B?C) was computed using the standard error derived from the formula provided by Kenny et al. (1998): \( b_{2s}a + a_{2b} + sa_{2b} \), where \( a \) = path from A to B, b = path from B to C, sa = SE of a, and sb = SE of b.

References:


27. Meschke, L. L., Barber, B. & Eccles, J. S. (1994, March). Drinking, drugs, depression and rebellion:


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### Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Peer Orientation, Adjustment, Peer Association, and Family Cohesion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme peer orientation</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer advice seeking</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>14.61</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>4-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>14.06</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>4-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>10.39</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>4-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.41-0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.61-0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.66-0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association with achieving peers</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th grade</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association with deviant peers</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th grade</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th grade</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>1-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1-7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The estimates for peer orientation and the indicators of seventh-grade adjustment are for the entire sample (N = 1268-1346), whereas the other estimates include only those students who participated at the respective grade levels (n = 789-820).

### Table 2
Associations of Peer Orientation With Problem Behavior and Academic Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer orientation</th>
<th>Problem behavior</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>7th grade</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>12th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme orientation</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.14**</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.08**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice seeking</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.08**</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The estimates for peer orientation and the indicators of seventh-grade adjustment are for the entire sample (N = 1268-1346), whereas the other estimates include only those students who participated at the respective grade levels (n = 789-820).

### Table 3
Associations of Peer Orientation With Peer Association and Family Cohesion During High School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer orientation</th>
<th>10th grade</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>12th grade</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Achieving peers</td>
<td>Deviant peers</td>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
<td>Achieving peers</td>
<td>Deviant peers</td>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
<td>Achieving peers</td>
<td>Deviant peers</td>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Extreme orientation | -.04 | .16** | -.15** | -.04** | .22** | -.17** | - .04 | .09 | -.29** |
| Advice seeking      | .02 | .16** | -.26** | -.01 | .09** | -.20** |

Note: N = 770-836.

\[
\sqrt{(b^2s_a^2 + a^2s_b^2 + s_a^2s_b^2)},
\]
Table 4.
Tenth-Grade Adjustment as a Function of Seventh-Grade Adjustment, Extreme Peer Orientation, Peer Association, and Family Cohesion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>10th-grade problem behavior</th>
<th></th>
<th>10th-grade academic achievement</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1A</td>
<td>1B</td>
<td>1C</td>
<td>2A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th-grade adjustment</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme orientation</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.08*</td>
<td>-.10**</td>
<td>-.10**</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving peers</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviant peers</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>-1.08**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
<td>.12**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.77**</td>
<td>.77**</td>
<td>.77**</td>
<td>.77**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The estimates listed in the table are standardized regression coefficients (beta). Columns 1A through 1C and columns 2A through 2C represent two hierarchical regression analyses in which Steps A through C included only those independent variables for which estimates are presented. "Seventh-grade adjustment" refers to the seventh-grade level of either problem behavior or academic achievement.

Table 5.
Twelfth-Grade Adjustment According to Seventh-Grade Adjustment, Extreme Peer Orientation, Peer Association, and Family Cohesion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>12th-grade problem behavior</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1A</td>
<td>1B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th-grade adjustment</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme orientation</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.36**</td>
<td>-.11**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving peers</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviant peers</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.903</td>
<td>.903</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The estimates listed in the table are standardized regression coefficients (beta). Columns 1A through 1C and columns 2A through 2C represent two hierarchical regression analyses in which Steps A through C included only those independent variables for which estimates are presented. "Seventh-grade adjustment" refers to the seventh-grade level of either problem behavior.

* p < .05, ** p < .01.