

**BEST FRIENDS, WORST ENEMIES**  
FRIENDSHIP DEVELOPMENT, POPULARITY AND  
SOCIAL CRUELTY IN CHILDHOOD

**Michael Thompson, Ph.D.**  
[www.michaelthompson-phd.com](http://www.michaelthompson-phd.com)

**I. Introduction:** Adults, both parents and teachers, can become anxious and feel helpless to influence the social lives of children. Children's friendships and their social cruelty to one another can feel like a world closed to adults. There are things that adults can do; and there are things that adults cannot do.

**II. Friendships are important for emotional well-being**

- A. You are at risk in later life if you don't have good friendships in childhood.
- B. Hartup: effective communication, modulate aggression, sexual socialization and moral values.
- C. Piaget and Sullivan: moral development and self-worth

**III. Friendship and group popularity are not the same.**

|                   |                                       |                    |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| <u>Friendship</u> | <u>Friendship or group acceptance</u> | <u>Peer group</u>  |
| affection         | instrumental aid                      | sense of inclusion |
| intimacy          | nurturance                            |                    |
| reliable alliance | companionship                         |                    |
|                   | enhancement of worth                  |                    |

**IV. The Nature of Popularity**

- A. Criteria for popularity
- B. Status hierarchy: alpha males and alpha females.
- C. Categories of children: very popular, accepted, ambiguous, neglected, controversial, rejected-submissive, rejected-aggressive.
- D. Making a living in the middle of the pack
- E. The cycle of popularity.

**V. The Rules of the Jungle: Group Life and Cliques**

- A. Law #1: "Be like your peers"
- Law #2: "You must belong to a group"
- Law #3: "Be in---or be out"
- Law #4: "Find a place in the social hierarchy"
- Law #5: "You must play a role"
- B. The Human need for rites and initiation, the tendency towards hazing and humiliation

**VI. Stages of Friendship**

- A. Birth to three years: parallel play
- B. Early childhood: ages 3-7

- The underlying theme or concern is maximizing the level of enjoyment and satisfaction in play. Dogged persistent effort to coordinate play.
- C. Middle childhood: 8-12
  - belonging and social acceptance
  - gender segregated peer groups
  - popularity and power hierarchies
- D. Adolescence: Who am I?
  - honest, open, intimate self-disclosure
  - discussion of relationships, cross-gender relationships

## VII. Victims and Bullies

- A. Portrait and characteristics of victims and bullies.
- B. Types of unpopular children
  1. rejected-aggressive
  2. rejected-submissive
  3. neglected
  4. controversial
- C. So-called bullies and rejected-aggressive children are confused with one another.

## VIII. What should parents do if they have a child who may be a victim?

- A. Use the teachers as consultants and allies. Find out if it is true.
- B. **Don't interview only for pain, interview for coping and strategies.**
- C. Support and encourage a child's friendships.
- D. Engage in physical training and sports.
- E. Consider therapy: social skills training, individual and family therapy.

## IX. What should schools do?

- A. Schools ethos must take a stand against excessive exclusion or bullying
- B. Schools must have a clear code of conduct
- C. Teachers need to have relationships with children that allow kids to seek help.
- D. Teachers must feel they are trained to handle bad dynamics or bullying
- E. Teachers can serve as coach (not a critic) of a child with difficulty.
- F. School and parents must be a team (Concentric circles of community)

## X. What works to help victims and break up bad groups?

- A. Cooperative learning, cooperative games
- B. Peer initiation, peer reinforcement and peer modeling
- C. Social skills interventions
- D. Parent involvement (circles of community)
- E. **Super-ordinate goals.** Community service, mutual dependence (common enemy, common mission)