

Study suggests boys and girls not as different as previously thought

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Although girls tend to hang out in smaller, more intimate groups than boys, this difference vanishes by the time children reach the eighth grade, according to a new study by a Michigan State University psychologist.

The findings, which appear in the *Journal of Social and [Personal Relationships](#)*, suggest "girls and [boys](#) aren't as different as we think they are," said Jennifer Watling Neal, assistant professor of psychology.

Neal's study is one of the first to look at how girls' and boys' peer networks develop across grades. Because children's peer-group structure can promote negative behaviors like bullying and positive behaviors like helping others, she said it's important for researchers to have a clear picture of what these groups look like.

"Although we tend to think that girls' and boys' peer groups are structured differently, these differences disappear as children get older," Neal said.

The reason may have to do with an increased interaction with the opposite sex.

"Younger boys and girls tend to play in same-sex peer groups," Neal said. "But every parent can relate to that moment when their son or daughter suddenly takes an interest, whether social or romantic, in the opposite sex."

The question of whether girls hang out in smaller groups than boys is controversial, with past research providing mixed results.

Neal examined peer relationships of third- through eighth-grade students at a Chicago school and found that [girls](#) in the younger grades did, indeed, tend to flock together in smaller, more intimate groups than boys.

But that difference disappeared by the eighth grade. While the size of boys' peer groups remained relatively stable, girls' peer groups became progressively larger in later grades.

Neal said further research is needed to confirm the results by examining a single group of children over time.

Provided by Michigan State University

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