

Students who are born earlier in the year have fewer friends

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Were you among the youngest students in your class? If the answer is yes, you might have felt at a disadvantage compared to your older classmates, and a host of scientific studies has shown that you were right feeling that way.

For example, there is evidence that the youngest students in a class tend

to perform less well than older classmates and struggle with otherwise joyous sport activities. These relatively younger students are also more frequently bullied and are less likely to cover leadership roles in school activities.

New international research—the result of a collaboration between researchers from Tulane University and Ghent University—has studied about 400.000 adolescent students, between 10 and 17 years of age, from 31 European countries, and found that these relatively [young students](#) have a weak social network, as well. That is, the youngest students in a class have fewer friends and prefer to interact with them through technological devices (for example, with online chats) rather than meeting them face-to-face in after-school activities.

This finding might be mediated by the aforementioned higher likelihood of low school performance, being bullied and taking up leadership roles.

"This result is not a simple statistical curiosity. Weaker [social relationships](#) could imply worse development of social skills and relationships in the long-term, and thus affect well-being and success in the labor market. It also feeds worse satisfaction with students' life, which is a good predictor of their life-dissatisfaction at an adult age. Building on the result from our research, future studies should dig deeper into this time evolution and its economic impact," says Stijn Baert, professor at Ghent University.

For decades, classes have been formed by putting together students who have at most one year difference in age. An intervention aimed at reducing this age gap is an intuitive solution to the disadvantages experienced by the youngest classmates, but it is costly and complicated. What could we do?

"While there is no doubt that more research is needed to find a possible

solution, popular wisdom might provide some relief to the youngest classmates' social life. For example, in some countries, the schooling system puts students in the same class who were born from September to August of the following year, whereas their youth soccer teams group players born from January to December of the same year. That means that, in these countries, who is among the youngest students in school could be among the oldest players in youth soccer teams. So we believe that, in these countries, relatively young students' participation to sports activities may help them form and enjoy stronger social relationships, which could counterbalance their disadvantageous situation at school. Further research should definitely investigate whether this strategy actually works," says Luca Fumarco, a postdoc fellow at Tulane University.

More information: Luca Fumarco et al. Relative age effect on European adolescents' social network, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* (2019). DOI: [10.1016/j.jebo.2019.10.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2019.10.014)

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