

Study finds same-race friends help teens connect to school

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In diverse schools, friends of the same race or ethnicity are influential in shaping teenagers' sense of belonging, finds new research by a multidisciplinary team including Cornell's Adam Hoffman, an expert in

psychology and human development.

Though "same-ethnic" [friends](#) exert more influence, the researchers found other friends also contribute to how connected to [school adolescents](#) feel—a key indicator of [teens'](#) well-being.

The findings highlight opportunities for school administrators and guidance counselors to promote programs seeking to build [friendships](#) among and between [ethnic groups](#), and to tap influential students to help promote [belonging](#) within their friend networks at a diverse school.

"This finding speaks to the power of peers and friendships as [influencers](#) on belonging," said Hoffman, assistant professor in the cross-college Department of Psychology and in the College of Human Ecology. "We have these embedded social networks that are influential in the school lives of teens, and we can harness these networks of friendships to help bolster positive attitudes, motivation and emotions towards school."

Hoffman is a co-author of "Belonging in Diverse Contexts: Sociability Among Same-Ethnic and Cross-Ethnic Peers," published in a special issue of *School Psychology* focused on social network analysis to assess students' academic and personal outcomes.

A growing body of evidence has pointed to peers' important role in shaping school belonging, typically defined as how accepted, respected and supported students feel in their classrooms, cafeterias and clubs, the researchers said.

The new study, conducted over a year at two diverse U.S. high schools, goes beyond suggesting a correlation between friendships and belonging, they said, to show direct influence by friends.

In surveys spanning three semesters at the two schools located in

suburban areas of the Midwest and Southwest, the scholars surveyed a total of nearly 4,500 students in grades 9-12, who represented eight different ethnic and racial groups.

The students listed up to 10 friends that they hung out with and talked to most at school. They also reported how connected they had felt to school during the previous 30 days, using a five-point scale to answer questions such as "I feel safe in my school," "I am happy in my school" and "I feel close to people at this school."

Analyzing how the friend networks and belonging changed over time, the scholars observed friends' influence beyond other key factors that could influence teens' belonging, such as having many friends in school, being embedded in close-knit friend networks, academic achievement, and parental education.

"All friends were influential in fostering school belonging for these teens," Hoffman said. "But we found that the kids who were matched on race, those friendships were more influential in their school belonging compared to cross-ethnic friendships."

That makes sense, Hoffman said: It's a time in young people's development when peers' influence grows relative to that of parents. And teens with similar [social identities](#) and backgrounds are likely to share common experiences that could facilitate belonging.

School belonging is an important outcome for teenagers, the researchers said, related to their academic achievement, motivation, mental health and general well-being.

"It's kind of a bellwether of how kids are doing in general," said Hoffman, director of the Promoting Resilience and Identities in Development (PRIDE) Lab, which focuses on understanding how social

identities can be leveraged to promote positive youth development.

Research has shown school belonging tends to decrease in mid-adolescence, so influence by friends of the same or different ethnicities could be helpful or a risk factor, the authors said, depending on whether it encourages or discourages a sense of belonging.

The scholars said their work provides a more precise and nuanced understanding of who influences school belonging, but more research is needed to understand how friend influence works and to examine schools with different diversity levels. School belonging is an understudied subject, they said, but increasingly important to investigate as U.S. schools grow more diverse.

"Facilitating both cross-ethnic and same-ethnic friendships would be beneficial for teens," Hoffman said, "helping to foster school belonging and make sure teens feel like they're in a positive, happy and secure place."

More information: J. Ashwin Rambaran et al, Belonging in diverse contexts: Sociability among same-ethnic and cross-ethnic peers., *School Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/spq0000480](https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000480)

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