

# Study finds young people from poorer families make fewer friends

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A new study has found that children growing up in low-income families have fewer opportunities to make friends and to socially integrate at school. Researchers from the University of Zurich and the University of

Stockholm examined data from over 200 school classes in Sweden and reached this conclusion.

Having friends at school is important for adolescents' development and it shapes their [social skills](#) later in life. Teenagers who feel well integrated in their school class have better mental health and higher grades—which has a knock-on effect on their later careers.

A study led by the University of Zurich set out to examine whether parental income influences [social relationships](#) in the classroom. The researchers analyzed data—obtained from surveys and administrative databases—relating to 4,787 Swedish children aged 14 and 15 in 235 school classes. They also analyzed the [young people's](#) friendship networks.

The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Social Networks*. They reveal that adolescents from [low-income families](#) are less socially integrated than their peers from higher-income families, irrespective of the school's socioeconomic context.

## **Income and status influence friendships**

Lead author Isabel Raabe from the Department of Sociology at the University of Zurich said, "We found that pupils from poorer households are less likely to be chosen as friends and therefore have fewer friendships than those from higher-income households." Surprisingly, this is still the case in [school classes](#) with a large number of students from poor households. Families in the bottom 20 percent of the Swedish income range were classified as poor.

"We were surprised that even within low-income groups, parental income matters. This could imply that [social status](#) with corresponding attributes such as fashionable clothes or participation in popular leisure

activities is important when forming friendships," said the sociologist.

One explanation for the "friendship gap" could be that young people from poorer families have less money available for sports or hobbies and therefore have fewer opportunities to make friends outside of school. Another possibility is that they are facing greater psycho-social stress due to poverty or difficult family situations, which affects their behavior. This could render them less attractive as friends.

## **Network of friends**

The study also investigated this hypothetical question: would this friendship gap automatically diminish if income did not play a role in friendship formation at school? However, as Raabe said, "we were only able to explain around a third of the friendship gap through differences in parental income."

The researchers believe that there are other mechanisms in the social network that exacerbate existing differences in integration, for example, popularity. If you already have a lot of friends, it's easy to make new ones because people tend to strike up friendships with the friends of their friends—i.e. each individual friendship can potentially lead to more friends. But if poorer people have fewer [friends](#) to begin with, the likelihood of them finding new ones is reduced.

According to Raabe, this can become a vicious cycle, as discrepancies in the number of friendships become even more pronounced and put young people from low-income households at a disadvantage when they embark on higher education or careers.

To counteract this trend, schools could create more opportunities for youths to forge new friendships. "For example, teachers could take the socio-economic mix into account when planning seating arrangements

and groups for project work, or schools could offer mixed-class afternoon activities and sports," Raabe suggests. After all, ensuring [equal opportunities](#) for children from all social backgrounds is a public responsibility.

**More information:** Isabel J. Raabe et al, Down and out? the role of household income in students' friendship formation in school-classes, *Social Networks* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socnet.2023.12.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2023.12.003)

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