

Why teens should treasure their friendships

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Adolescents with strong friendships experience fewer anxiety and depression symptoms, Ph.D. student Iris Koele discovered in her

research on high school students' social relationships. "As a psychologist, I include friends in the treatment plan: who do you call when things are not going well?"

Our entire lives, friendships are important, but during adolescence, they play an all-determining role. "On the path to adulthood and independence, adolescents become increasingly independent from their families and focus more on peers," explains developmental psychologist Koele.

"In this process, the nature of friendships also changes. Young children mainly enjoy playing together with their friends. Teenagers develop a greater need for intimacy in their friendships and seek more emotional and [social support](#) from their friends."

Treasuring teen friendships

On 26 March, Koele will defend her thesis "Treasuring teen friendships," in which she investigated the role of social relationships among young people and how they influence [cognitive processes](#) and mental health. "The way adolescents learn and how they develop mentally cannot be separated from the social context. I wanted to better understand this interaction in my research

Empathy requires effort

First, Koele investigated how young people's brains respond to reward or loss, in themselves and others. Participants aged between 13 and 23 played a shooting game in the fMRI scanner. In the game, they could earn financial rewards or lose money. They were also shown the performance of their peers.

The most striking result was that a social brain region, the TPJ area, showed more activity when young people observed the outcome of an unknown peer than that of a friend. This social brain region is involved in empathizing with the intentions and perspective of others, a process known as "mentalizing" in psychology. "During this mentalizing process, it's possible that these participants had to exert more effort with unknown peers than with friends, leading to increased activity in their social brain regions," Koele suggests.

Friendships and mental health

Koele also investigated the relationship between friendships and [anxiety](#) and [depression symptoms](#) in adolescents. For that research, she and her colleagues visited [secondary schools](#) for two years, administering behavioral tests and questionnaires in 13 first, second and third grades of havo and vwo. "We started visiting in November 2019. Fortunately, the students and teachers were so motivated afterwards that we were able to continue with the study online when the COVID pandemic broke out soon after."

In the study, she found that young people who experienced a lot of safety and little conflict in their friendships suffered less from anxiety and [depression](#) symptoms. "So a really good friendship is related to better mental health. Important, because young people in particular are at greater risk of anxiety and depression symptoms."

More focus on friendships

The insights from her Ph.D. are also practically applicable, Koele emphasizes. "There are already intervention programs with [social skills](#) training to reduce problems such as depression in young people. It would be a valuable addition to focus more on friendship quality here: teaching

young people to increase positive qualities such as safety, and reduce negative friendship qualities such as conflict.

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In psychological practice

Koele herself is already applying the results from her Ph.D. research in her work as a psychologist at FamilySupporters, where she treats adolescents with anxiety and depression symptoms. "My colleagues and I pay a lot of attention to the social network. We also involve parents, but adolescents often find it difficult to talk to them.

Hence, we also incorporate friends into the treatment plan: which friends can you call when things aren't going well? Or when you need distraction? Adolescents with depression symptoms often withdraw and take less initiative to see friends. And those experiencing anxiety often find it daunting to form and develop friendships.

"By expanding their social network, young people often feel better. We shouldn't underestimate how crucial that is. While professionals are undoubtedly valuable, they aren't seen every day and often only briefly. Friends, on the other hand, are always there."

Provided by Leiden University

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