# Why it's good for kids to have friends from different socioeconomic backgrounds

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Friendships that bridge across social class—"cross-class friendships"—can minimize middle school academic achievement differences that are based on the level of parents' education, according to

research from the UCLA School Diversity Project.

As scholars of adolescent development, we examined academic achievement differences among 4,288 middle school students in California based on their parents' education level.

Seventeen percent of parents or guardians of students in our sample did not receive a high school diploma, 12% had a high school diploma or equivalent, 28% attended some college, 23% had a four-year college degree and 20% had a graduate degree.

Students' academic achievement was assessed using GPAs, scores from the state standardized test, and academic engagement as reported by teachers in the sixth grade and again the following year.

To assess cross-class friendships, students listed the names of their good friends in their grade and we compared the parental education levels of mutual friends. About half of all students in the sample had at least one cross-class friendship in sixth grade.

Consistent with past research, when students did not have cross-class friends, we found that academic achievement tended to be lower among students whose parents had no college diploma relative to students whose parents had a college degree.

However, some achievement differences were reduced with cross-class friendship. For example, grades, standardized test scores and academic engagement did not differ among students whose parents had a high school versus college diploma when these students had at least one cross-class friend.

Friendships are often left out of the conversation when scholars and schools think about how to improve student performance. But teens can

gain valuable knowledge and know-how from their friends, including homework assistance and study strategies.

Our results suggest cross-class friendships may in part help level the academic playing field during the middle school years, when socioeconomic achievement disparities can widen. Middle school is also a time when preteens and teens become increasingly independent from their parents and rely more on friends.

Our data do not tell us why cross-class friendships may function as an academic equalizer. But it is possible that when teens from different socioeconomic backgrounds become friends, they learn from one another new insights and valuable skills that can support academic success.

It's important to recognize that several of these achievement differences did not vary with cross-class friendship. For example, achievement differences among students whose parents did not have a high school diploma and those whose parents had a college degree were not altered by cross-class friendship. Further studies are needed to investigate why this may be.

Based on current findings, we also do not know how cross-class friendship may diminish achievement differences. For example, one question to consider is whether they create more opportunities for young people to talk about their study strategies and homework approaches.

And, given our focus on middle school, we do not know whether our findings extend to elementary or high school.

Some of the next steps for our work include focusing on how schools shape students' ability to form and maintain cross-class friendships.

Just as greater school ethnic diversity has been shown to promote the formation of cross-ethnic friendships, school socioeconomic diversity likely facilitates cross-class friendships. That is, when students from different backgrounds share classes, they are more likely to become friends.

We believe investigating this topic is critical in light of increasing socioeconomic segregation in U.S. public schools, which may constrain opportunities for students to engage in friendships with peers from different backgrounds and contribute to achievement gaps.

We also hope to investigate possible social outcomes associated with cross-class friendship. For example, just as cross-ethnic friendships improve attitudes toward other ethnic groups, cross-class ties, we believe, may play a critical role in reducing negative class-based stereotypes and promoting mutual understanding among young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

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