Significance of Peer Relationship Problems in Childhood

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In his 1917 sixteen-volume series *Practical Child Training*, educator R. C. Beery offered advice to mothers whose children have few friends and are reticent to approach others. Beery urged mothers to facilitate get-togethers with peers, such as backyard picnics that include the child's schoolmates, and to help the children "have a royal good time" (p. 1325). Beery also suggested what to do when a child is fearful about approaching other children: "If your child ever comes to you to bury his head in your skirts, you should not scold or make any scene, but simply appear to pay no attention to him" (p. 741).

Whatever the specific merits of his suggestions, Beery was responding to a sentiment expressed by parents and educators alike—namely, concern for children who have difficulty establishing ties with peers. In recent years, many psychologists and educational researchers have translated this concern into systematic programs of research. As a result, there now exists an extensive body of research on the origins, maintenance, and modification of low acceptance in the peer group (see Asher & Coie, in press, for a comprehensive treatment of this topic). From this research, it is clear that large individual differences can be found in children's degree of acceptance and friendship among their peers. Indeed, a distressingly large number of children are not liked by most of their classmates and have few, if any, friends (e.g., Coie & Dodge, 1983; Gronlund, 1959; Hymel & Asher, 1977). These individual differences in group acceptance and friendship tend to be relatively stable, even over extended periods of time (e.g., Coie & Dodge, 1983; Newcomb & Bukowski, 1984). Moreover, there is accumulating evidence that individual differences in peer acceptance are the consequence of variability in children's behavioral and social-cognitive competence (for recent reviews, see Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, in press; Dodge & Feldman, in press; Putallaz & Wasserman, in press).

Although wide variability in peer acceptance and social competence is not in doubt, the significance of such variability is less well understood. Reliable individual differences do not in and of themselves establish the importance of a phenomenon. The critical question is whether serious peer relationship difficulties have important negative implications for children's development and well-being. In this chapter, we will argue that concern for poorly accepted children is well placed because peer rejection has important
implications for children's short- and long-term social and emotional adjustment. In advancing this argument, we will draw upon three somewhat distinct literatures. First, we will make the conceptual argument that children having peer relationship problems miss out on important functions that friendships serve in children's lives. Second, we will draw upon an emerging body of empirical work indicating that poorly accepted children are lonelier and feel less satisfied not only with their peer relationships in general, but with the friendships that they do have. Finally, we will summarize another body of empirical work indicating that low-accepted children are at risk for serious later life problems, including dropping out of school, delinquency and criminality, and mental health disturbances.

The Functions of Friendships

In this section, we will highlight several of the myriad benefits that children derive from continuing, successful integration into the peer group. By focusing on how children benefit from their friendships, we hope to make clear the important experiences that are missed by children who are poorly accepted and lack friends. Over the years, a number of authors have suggested that children benefit in important ways from their friendships. One of the earliest of these authors was Harry Stack Sullivan (1953), who focused on the friendships of preadolescents. Sullivan proposed that friendship in the preadolescent period marks a watershed in children's developing capacity to participate in collaborative, intimate personal relationships. According to Sullivan, preadolescent friendships serve several related functions in children's lives: They offer children consensual validation of their interests, hopes, and fears; bolster children's feelings of self-worth; and provide affection and opportunities for intimate self-disclosure. In addition, Sullivan felt that friendships promote the growth of interpersonal sensitivity and serve as early models for later romantic, marital, and parental relationships.

In the three decades since Sullivan's formulation there have been several additional attempts to catalog the benefits of friendships (Asher, 1978; Duck, 1983; Furman & Robbins, 1985; Hartup & Sancilio, 1986; La Gaipa, 1981; Solano, 1986; Wright, 1978). On the whole, seven friendship functions appear with some regularity across various formulations: a) fostering the growth of social competence, b) serving as sources of ego support and self-validation, c) providing emotional security in novel or potentially threatening situations, d) serving as sources of intimacy and affection, e) providing guidance and assistance, f) providing a sense of reliable alliance, and g) providing companionship and stimulation. We turn next to a discussion of each.

Friendship and the Socialization of Social Skills

Developmental theories have long recognized that children's friendships may foster the development of specific competencies that may eventually be generalized to other interpersonal contexts, both current and future. Piaget is usually credited with drawing early attention to this, but Sullivan (1953) was perhaps the earliest theorist to write extensively about this possibility. In Sullivan's view, individuals progress through a series of developmental periods, which he called "epochs," each marked by the emergence of a specific social need that motivates them to prefer certain forms of social interaction and to seek out certain key social relationships (see Buhrmester & Furman, 1986, for an excellent summary of Sullivan's theory). According to Sullivan (1953), intimacy needs arise in preadolescence and promote the formation of close, same-sex friendships. This relationship represents for the child "a perfectly novel relationship.... Nothing remotely like this has