

## **“Mental Health and the Impact of Friendship”**

**Ian Adkins**

**Bowling Green State University**

### **Abstract**

Mental health issues are a very large problem in the United States today. For a long time, mental health issues were ignored and not even seen as something worth looking into or studying, let alone being a real medical condition. When they finally started to come to light, they were only associated with adults. In the United States, children’s mental health issues were largely ignored. It has only been recently that mental health in adolescents is being addressed, and psychologists and scientists are finding important information about how friendships can impact the way these at-risk adolescents deal with mental health issues. According to the CDC, one in five children will end up developing a mental health disorder, whether it be anxiety, depression, or anger issues. This trend may continue to increase unless something is done about it. I believe that increasing awareness and educating people on adolescent mental health will impact the number of mental health problems youth are facing in today’s world. Childhood depression and mental health issues need to be addressed early on by parents and schools across the United States by screening for mental health issues, showing the importance of friendship and comradery, and encouraging parents to enroll their children in counseling services. Additionally, parents need to be educated on mental health issue signs to address them early on. Studies have shown the importance of addressing childhood mental health problems by stating that if they are left untreated then those problems may develop into worse problems and hamper that child’s ability to handle situations and social interactions as an adult.

Friendship in adolescents can have a large impact on mental health and how they will mentally and emotionally develop. This topic has long been ignored as mental health itself has just recently begun to be brought to light instead of hid and dismissed. Childhood depression and mental health issues need to be addressed early on by parents and schools across the United States by screening for mental health issues, showing the importance of friendship and comradery, and encouraging kids to use counseling. If schools and parents start to practice these ideas and, more importantly, teach their kids about mental health at an earlier age, then it is possible that mental health issues in adolescents could decrease across the United States.

When I was in elementary school, the closest thing I ever heard of mental health was that we shouldn't bully other students. Mental health was never something we learned about or that was ever really mentioned by the school, nor my parents. According to the CDC, about 6% of children 3-17 are diagnosed with depression, and over 10% of children 3-17 are diagnosed with anxiety with 73.8% of these children having both anxiety and depression. This information shows that adolescents can develop serious mental health problems that would only worsen as they get older because these children are not receiving the help they need. Research has shown that parental involvement can have a large impact on child mental health by giving them the support they need. By picking up the slack on mental health that was left loose for too long, parents and schools can decrease the percentage of children with mental health issues by increasing screening, showing the importance of friendship, and showing the adolescents that seeking help is the right thing to do.

### **The Importance of Friendship**

A friendship is one thing that almost everyone will develop within their lives, whether it be in adolescence or adulthood. One thing that people don't realize though is that these friendships being formed while in adolescence can have large impacts throughout the rest of the child's life. A study conducted by Sakyi, Surkan, Fombonne, Chollet, and Melchior showed that "individuals with no friends were approximately twice more likely to experience internalizing symptoms compared to those who had at least one childhood friend" (2014, P. 820). These internalizing symptoms are described as anxiety and depression. This information shows that early childhood friendships do indeed play a massive role in how a child internalizes their emotions and how they deal with their mental health. Without making friends with peers and people within the same age range as the child, mental health issues can start to develop and stay with that adolescent for the rest of their life. Sakyi, Surkan, Fombonne, Chollet, and Melchior also found that along with internalizing symptoms increasing, so do external symptoms (2014, P. 821). These external symptoms include over-aggression and trouble with handling feelings of anger. With adolescents not receiving help or being taught how important friendship can

be, they fall into these categories and it can take up until they are adults to get through these feelings or realize they need help. This is why peer friendship is so important.

Along with adolescents having friendships outside of school, most peer interactions happen in school; this where they could make friends. Some friendships don't last very long, for example, they could end over summer break or during the transition from elementary school to middle school or junior high. Knight, Shelton, Riglin, Frederickson, McManus, and Rice's research on this topic showed that having a best friend during the transition from school to school gives mental health benefits to the students and that transitioning is an important period of time. Stress can build up in this period of time and having a best friend to help the students move through this period will benefit their mental health as they get older (2019, P. 595). This also shows that building friendships and maintain them can help grow healthy mindsets and improve mental health. Improving mental health in one person can improve mental health in others too. It can turn into a domino effect with friends helping each other and then doing the same for other students. Along with these friendships helping to keep a healthy mental space, Knight, Shelton, Riglin, Frederickson, McManus, and Rice also mention that having a best friend can help improve academic understanding.

Along with improved academic understanding, peer relationships help the adolescent find ways to overcome issues they are facing. Waldrip, Malcolm, and Jensen-Campbell found that friendships did play a positive role in the children's ability to socially adjust but only if the friend was supportive. Even if the student had fewer friends and was bullied by peers, having one quality and supportive friendship still showed signs of combating maladjustment. Peer acceptance is a very important part of a child's adolescence because what happens in this time can have positive or negative effects on their mental health that will last into adulthood and possibly beyond (2008, P. 840). Even if someone only has one friend, they can still receive the needed attention and affection to get through emotional and mental issues.

A study that lasted five months found that supportive family and friends can have a massive impact on the adolescent's mind. Shi, Wang, Xie, and Liu conducted research to find out about "friendship quality and the role it might play in the association of anger coping styles to mental health problems" (2019, P. 3799). They found that the better the friendship, the more positive effect it had on mental health. This makes sense because it is like knowing someone for a year vs just a month; someone who has known you for years knows more about you and how you react to stress and uncomfortable situations. This study also shows that a parental figure could be an important friend because they have known you since birth and have made a meaningful connection with you

throughout your whole life. A high-quality relationship is healthy for both people in the relationship because then both parties know how to help each other in an effective way.

In my experience, I have always had friends to fall back on and help me through tough times. I agree with Knight's study that shows having a friend when passing into the next steps of education and schooling is beneficial to a young person's mental health. For me, having friends and someone to talk to as we transitioned helped me a lot. It made it easier to go from school to school because I knew that I would have a friend and wouldn't be alone in the process that we were going through. This improved my mental health because I was never worried about my issues because I knew I had my friends to help me push through them. I knew people who didn't have people to fall back on and had family issues that fell into depression at a young age.

### **Misinformed**

One main issue is that people don't think that depression and other mental health issues affect kids; mental health issues are made to seem like something only adults face. The truth is, everyone -- no matter what age you are -- can be impacted by these mental health issues and disorders. Mental health issues come from many different traumas and stresses that people face. According to Van Harmelen, Gibson, St Clair, Owens, Brodbeck, Dunn, and Goodyer children who face early life stresses (ELS), such as bullying or not having friends, and have experienced child family adversities (CFA), for example, deaths in the family, are at a much higher risk to develop depressive mental health issues than other children. Van Harmelen and his colleagues conducted a study on 1,238 secondary school students to find out how family and friend relationships impact mental health. They found that having good relationships with family and adolescent friends did have a positive impact on the adolescent's ability to deal and recover from bullying or other toxic actions (2016, P. 1-20). This is important to know because it shows the importance of having family or parental figures take notice of these depressive behaviors and addressing them.

Van Hamelen conducted another study with Kievit, Ioannidis, Neufeld, Jones, Bullmore, and Goodyer on how these friendships improve a person's "resilience". Van Hamelen and his colleagues describe "resilience" as the way individuals show positive adaptation through adversity and trauma, throughout their life. Throughout their study, they found that strong adolescent relationships had the largest positive impact on a person's resilience, and that family relationships were also important but were just slightly less productive than peer relationships are (2017, P. 2318). This study, along with the first study, shows the importance of having peer relationships as well as family relationships. They both show how beneficial the family interaction can be with it helping to boost the resilience of a child and also helping them to better internalize their emotions. These

studies also show how emotionally supportive a peer relationship can be for an adolescent and the benefits that those relationships bring to the table. However, in order to understand and see the issues these children face professional mental help, like a therapist, would still need to screen the adolescent to get a full view of their issues.

Screening children for mental health issues may be a controversial topic. People in favor of mental health screening believe it would overall be beneficial in helping to reduce mental health issues in adolescents. Many of the people against these believe they are invasive and that it may not even be helpful because if the adolescent is scared, they may not want to talk or express their emotions. Kim, a doctor at the University of California, conducted research that shows that many more children face more mental health issues than people really think. Throughout the study, Kim found that 23% of the children faced anxiety and depression at the clinical cut off and 18% experienced clinically significant mental health problems out of the 138 students she interviewed (2015, p. 4). These findings show that there are many more cases of mental health issues in adolescents than people realize. With screening or just overall more education on the topic of children's mental health, these numbers could be decreased, improving the quality of life for adolescents who may fall victim to mental health issues. The CDC says that 1 in 5 children will develop mental health issues within their adolescents. This shows that many children across the US and even the world are facing these mental health issues right now and this will continue.

### **Parental Importance**

Mental health is a topic that I was not really properly informed about until around 6<sup>th</sup> grade. It was talked about as if it wasn't really very important because we should be worrying about "bad touches" instead of mental health issues that I am sure many kids in my grade had already been experiencing from family traumas and friendship issues in elementary school. I'm not saying that talking about sexual predators and informing the students of them is a bad thing or a waste of time, but if we can spend time to discuss that, then why is mental health left out of the conversation? As earlier stated by Kim, many young children end up facing mental health issues, and the fact that they are uninformed and don't really even understand why they feel the way they do is because they are being deprived of education on the topic. Schools and parents should focus more on teaching adolescents about mental health earlier in life to help spread awareness and show the students what they should do when they feel depressed or angry.

One major contributor to childhood mental health issues that schools and parents could help to lessen, is bullying. Many children who experience bullying in their adolescents show lasting effects of it throughout their lives. Bayer, Mundy, Stokes, Hearps, Allen,

and Patton conducted a study with 1,221 students, age 8-9, about experiencing bullying and friendships. The children completed surveys on topics like if they are bullied on a regular basis and how many friends they have. During this study, they found that friendships have an impact on internal problems. Having a best friend was shown as not very beneficial, however, the children who said they have a group of friends show fewer signs of internalizing difficulties. They note that having a group of friends can be more protective than just a best friend. They also say that children who are bullied frequently are less likely to have a friend group and that overall leads to poor mental health (2018, para. 1). This study shows that having friendships is an important factor in how children deal with their mental health. If parents show their own children that having and making friends is an important thing to do, then bullying victims will be less likely to develop mental health issues.

Parents need to realize that all kids are susceptible to developing mental health issues, no matter who they are. They also need to understand the signs and be able to accept the fact that their own kid may have problems and if they do, ignoring those problems won't make them go away. Just because your child has mental health issues does not mean that you have failed as a parent, however, a parent ignoring the signs and denying the fact that their child does have issues is the problem.

A teacher I was in contact with who teaches at a local public school in Ohio, expressed the importance of parents acknowledging their child's mental health issues instead of ignoring them and thinking "my child couldn't possibly have any issues". Teachers know some children more than their parents do. The teacher I spoke with explained that a little girl she had taught had definite mental health concerns, however, her parents, who are divorced, ignored and dismissed the problems that their daughter had. The teacher was bewildered that the parent was able to ignore, or did they just not see the clear issues their daughter had. This young girl had trouble associating with other students early in her educational years. Later, by the time the student was a 5<sup>th</sup> grader she had developed anger outbursts at other students for the slightest inconveniences. School counselors are overwhelmed with mental health concerns in schools and are often not able to provide the interventions needed to address issues that are severe. This had painted an even clearer picture to the teachers and staff that this student had a mental health problem that needed to be addressed outside of school.

This student began to talk about how she would harm herself, and even made plans on how she would kill herself or another student. This student was only around ten years old and had shown signs of massive depression and anger issues. She had been bullied before and during this time. Additionally, she had never developed any friendships to help her learn how to associate with the other students, and her mental

health was deteriorating. However, schools can only do so much, and then the rest is on the parents. However, the parents believed there was nothing wrong with their daughter, thus refusing to see the glaring issues the school had pointed out to them. The responsibility to seek treatment for her perceived mental health problem lied with the parents unless Children Protective Services were involved. This is just one case of many that show how parents and students are just not educated about mental health and that it is important to be aware of, understand, and accept the signs that help is needed.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, adolescent mental health is an issue that has been ignored for far too long of a time and changes that are being made need to continue to be improved and become more effective. Parents need to get educated on this topic because they are the first line of defense their children have from developing mental health issues and they won't be able to do anything unless they know how to help. Schools need to emphasize the importance of mental health to their students instead of seeing it as a "touchy subject" reserved only for homelife. If possible, when it is clear to parents or staff at a school, at-risk children should be screened for mental health issues so they can be helped early and live a happy adult life. If changes are not made, then mental health disorders could become more common in the children who will be leading the world of tomorrow and the quality of life for the generations to come will not be what we hoped them to be.

## References

Bayer, J.K., Mundy, L., Stokes, I., Hearps, S., Allen, N. and Patton, G. (2018), Bullying, mental health and friendship in Australian primary school children. *Child Adolescent Ment Health*, 23: 334-340. doi:[10.1111/camh.12261](https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12261)

Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health. (2020, March 30). Retrieved April 16, 2020, from <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>

Kim, M. (2015). *The impact of acculturation, close friendship quality, and personality traits on the mental health problems of korean american adolescents* (Order No. 3712531). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1706912449). Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/docview/1706912449?accountid=26417>

Ng-Knight, T., Shelton, K.H., Riglin, L., Frederickson, N., McManus, I.C. and Rice, F. (2019), 'Best friends forever? Friendship stability across school transition and associations with mental health and educational attainment. *Br J Educ Psychol*, 89: 585-599. doi:[10.1111/bjep.12246](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12246)

Sakyi, K. S., Surkan, P. J., Fombonne, E., Chollet, A., & Melchior, M. (2015). Childhood friendships and psychological difficulties in young adulthood: an 18-year follow-up study. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, 24(7), 815–826. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-014-0626-8>

Shi, R., Wang, K. T., Xie, Z., Zhang, R., & Liu, C. (2019). The mediating role of friendship quality in the relationship between anger coping styles and mental health in Chinese adolescents. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36(11–12), 3796–3813. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407519839146>

Van Harmelen, A., Gibson, J., St Clair, M., Owens, M., Brodbeck, J., Dunn, V., . . . Goodyer, I. (2016). Friendships and family support reduce subsequent depressive symptoms in at-risk adolescents. *Plos One*, 11(5), e0153715. [10.1371/journal.pone.0153715](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0153715)

Van Harmelen, A., Kievit, R., Ioannidis, K., Neufeld, S., Jones, P., Bullmore, E., . . .

Goodyer, I. (2017). Adolescent friendships predict later resilient functioning across psychosocial domains in a healthy community cohort. *Psychological Medicine*, 47(13), 2312-2322. doi:10.1017/S0033291717000836

Waldrip, A. M., Malcolm, K. T., & Jensen-Campbell, L. A. (2008). With a little help from your friends: The importance of High-quality friendships on early adolescent adjustment. *Social Development*, 17(4), 832-852. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.20534>