

Lavallee, K. L., Bierman, K. L., Nix, R. L., & the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group. (2005). The impact of first-grade “friendship group” experiences on child social outcomes in the Fast Track program. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 33(3), 307-324.

Gifford-Smith, M., Dodge, K. A., Dishion, T. J., & McCord, J. (2005). Peer influence in children and adolescents: Crossing the bridge from developmental to intervention science. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 33(3), 255-265.

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Empirical research indicates that when grouped together, children with behavioral problems tend to exacerbate the behavioral problems of their peers, and deviant peer attention seems to encourage delinquency problems among children with behavioral problems. However it is not known whether children and adolescents learn aggressive behaviors from their peers or whether peers are drawn to other children with behavioral problems because they have a predisposition to deviant behavior. Lavallee, Bierman and Nix address behavioral problems among first graders, and Gifford-Smith, Dodge, Dishion and McCord review a range of studies about child and adolescent delinquency and peer effects. Findings from both studies suggest that the behavioral composition of groups of children should be considered when designing interventions for behavioral problems and outcome studies.

The Fast Track program teaches social skills to first graders with behavioral problems by offering positive peer experiences and parent training, home visits, classroom programming and academic tutoring (first year outcomes of the program are summarized in *Data Trends* #23). For the current study, intervention children ($N = 266$) were assigned to Fast Track “friendship groups” of 5-6 children each, for 22 sessions. Groups lasted one hour, and utilized stories, films, roleplaying and discussions. Results suggest that children with behavioral problems tend to exacerbate any behavioral problems that the group might display as a whole. Conversely, groups having children with high levels of pro-social behaviors had less behavioral problems overall. Further, deviant peer attention seemed to encourage behavioral problems in children, while positive peer attention seemed to reduce these problems. Interestingly, the most significant predictor of fewer behavioral problems was the presence of girls in the friendship groups. “Being in a group that included more girls predicted more positive changes in teacher-rated prosocial behavior and [child’s] peer nominations” (p. 316). These findings suggest that group behavior reflects more than the individual behavior of each child.

In the second article, Gifford-Smith and colleagues discuss a range of studies of peer effects on juvenile delinquency among children and adolescents who are involved with the special education, mental health, juvenile justice sectors and with community-based recreational programs. They caution against aggregating youth with delinquency problems so they will not be exposed to a large number of peers with similar problems, noting “the evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that deviant peers play a crucial role in both the initiation and exacerbation of delinquent behavior” (p. 263). In general, a variety of factors seem to be related to a youth’s susceptibility to deviant behavior, such as age, gender, and prior levels of delinquency. However, length of time spent with peers and the degree to which a youth might be attached to another youth with delinquency problems seems to be relatively unrelated to the development of deviant behavior.

Results of the Fast Track study suggest that children with pro-social behaviors might positively influence children with behavior problems when they are put together in groups, and this is especially the case for girls’ positive influence on groups. The second study suggests that deviant behavior may be associated with the development of deviant behavior in other youths; however the length of time spent with a peer having delinquency problems may not need to be very long in order to influence similar behaviors in other youth. In conclusion, both articles express similar research and policy implications for studies of behavioral problems; that is, more attention needs to be paid to the effect of deviant peer group pressure on the composition of groups in interventions, outcome studies, and in natural settings.