

PEERS OR PARENTS? STUDY SHOWS STRONG FRIENDSHIPS SET TEENS UP FOR SUCCESS LATER IN LIFE



Illustration by Ziniu Chen, University Communications

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If parents need any more evidence that being your teen's best friend should not be the goal, we present more research from a distinguished psychologist at the University of Virginia.

Joseph Allen, UVA's Hugh Kelly Professor of Psychology, has turned out yet more groundbreaking research based on a longitudinal study of nearly 200 participants who were just 13 years old when the study began in 1998.

Published this week in the journal *Child Development*, the latest research finds that the quality of teen's relationships with their friends is a better predictor of certain long-term outcomes than their relationships with their parents. This is just the [latest in a long line of findings from Allen's lab.](#)

In the newest survey, Allen's team – which has included more than 100 undergraduate students over the years – asked the study participants a series of questions. Now 27 years

old, the members of the study cohort were asked to rate the quality of their adult social relationships, the quality of their romantic relationships, their depressive symptoms and their work performance.

That data was compared to earlier interviews with the cohort, their parents and teen friends on relationship quality. The results were unambiguous: good teen friendships equal success later in life. “Quality relationships with teens was a far better predictor of all of these outcomes than was the quality of the teens’ relationships with their parents,” Allen said.

So, what about teens who said they did not have good friendships with teens?

“The flip side is just as you’d expect, which is if you did not have good, quality, best-friend relationships as a teenager, in adulthood, by age 25, 26 and 27, you had worse work performance, you had lower-quality relationships with other adults, you had poor-quality romantic relationships and you were more likely to be depressed,” he said.

Allen said that what his team is increasingly coming to realize is that learning to relate to peers in the teen years is a critical life skill.

The other issue, he said, is that some parents tend to think that teens’ intense focus on their relationships is “silly or trivial.”

Nothing, he said, can be further from the truth.

“There’s a reason for that intense focus, which is young people are learning how to manage relationships that are going to ultimately determine how they fare for the rest of their lives, and they sense that in their bones,” Allen said.

And he said this dynamic creates a continuum. “When teens are not being successful and learning to establish those positive relationships, peers are going to be similar to their peers when they’re adults,” he said, meaning that ill-equipped teens will seek out like-minded peers in adulthood.

Allen said it’s important to stress that these findings do not mean that parents are irrelevant during the teen years. It’s just that they may be in for a bumpy ride.

“It’s not that parents don’t matter,” he said. “There’s a lot of evidence that what parents do in terms of how they parent does matter.”