

6. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF CLASS AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

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Recent longitudinal research indicates that most children with disabilities have active lives outside the classroom.¹ Most of them interact with friends and take part in organized extracurricular activities of various kinds, and more than half work. Analyses also suggest that active individual friendships and participation in organized activities outside of school, including employment, are related. Activities of both kinds can vary for youth who differ in their primary disabilities, age, gender, household income, and race/ethnicity.

What other characteristics distinguish youth who are active outside the classroom? In particular, do active youth demonstrate greater social skills? It is reasonable to expect a connection between participation in social interactions or organized activities and social competence, but the direction of that relationship is not at all clear. Youth who engage in positive exchanges with others individually or in groups may reap benefits from the experience in terms of their social adjustment. However, it is equally reasonable to assume that youth with greater social competence choose active lives outside the classroom to have an arena in which to exercise that competence. Regardless of whether socially competent youth choose active lives or whether interpersonal interactions improve their social skills or both, understanding the relationship between nonacademic activities and social adjustment can help illuminate both concepts.

To help explore these concepts, parents of NLTS2 students were asked to rate their adolescent children on a variety of items related to their social competence. Parents responded to 11 questions² representing three areas of social ability:

- **Assertion**—youth's ability and willingness to become involved in social activities (e.g., joins groups without being told).
- **Self-control**—youth's ability to cope with frustration and to deal with conflict (e.g., ends disagreements calmly).
- **Cooperation**—youth's ability to cooperate and stay on task (e.g., cooperates with family members without being asked to do so).

Responses were used to create scales of each kind of social skill. In addition, general scale of social ability was created by summing parents' ratings on the 11 items. Ratings are categorized as high (greater than one standard deviation above the mean), medium (within one standard deviation of the mean), and low (more than one standard deviation below the mean).

¹ Analyses similar to those reported in this chapter were conducted for elementary and middle school students with disabilities as part of the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) and are reported in Cadwallader and Wagner (2002b).

² Students' social skills were assessed by using questions taken from the Social Skills Rating System, Parent Form (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). See Cameto, Cadwallader, and Wagner (2003) for a more detailed discussion of these social skills.

In addition to these social skills scales, two other factors that may reflect the ability of youth to abide by norms that are important in school and in their communities are considered: parents' reports of whether youth ever had been suspended or expelled from school and whether they ever had been arrested. Scale scores and incidences of suspension/expulsion and arrest are analyzed in relation to the measures of individual friendship interactions presented in Chapter 3, to the forms of extracurricular participation presented in Chapter 4, and to youth's employment, discussed in Chapter 5.

Interactions with Friends and Social Skills

There is a consistent, robust, and positive relationship between ratings of the overall social skills of youth and their frequency of interaction with friends (Exhibit 6-1). For example, youth who visit with friends frequently are significantly more likely to be rated by parents as high in their overall social skills (27%) than are youth who never see friends outside of class (11%, $p < .001$). The inverse also is true—frequent visitors with friends are much less likely to be rated as having low social skills (13%) than youth who never see friends (40%, $p < .001$). A very similar relationship is apparent between social skills and both the frequency of receiving phone calls from friends and being invited by other youth to social activities—those who are more

Exhibit 6-1
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FRIENDSHIP INTERACTIONS AND SOCIAL SKILLS

	Visit with Friends		Receive Phone Calls from Friends		Are Invited to Social Activities		Use E-mail or Chat Room		Do Any of These	
	Never	Frequently	Rarely	Frequently	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Percentage with:										
Social skills rated:										
High	10.7 (3.0)	27.1 (2.7)	12.8 (2.0)	26.6 (1.7)	9.1 (2.2)	25.5 (1.5)	23.2 (4.9)	24.6 (1.7)	2.2 (1.9)	23.7 (1.4)
Low	39.6 (4.8)	12.7 (2.0)	31.2 (2.7)	13.4 (1.3)	36.1 (3.7)	14.7 (1.2)	17.5 (4.4)	16.5 (1.7)	52.7 (6.6)	16.9 (1.2)
Assertion skills rated:										
High	7.4 (2.5)	42.8 (3.0)	10.9 (1.8)	34.6 (1.8)	8.7 (2.1)	32.3 (1.6)	21.6 (4.7)	31.5 (1.8)	1.3 (1.4)	29.6 (1.5)
Low	62.2 (4.7)	8.2 (1.7)	42.7 (2.9)	12.8 (1.3)	48.3 (3.7)	15.1 (1.3)	22.1 (4.8)	17.0 (1.5)	85.8 (4.4)	18.2 (1.3)
Self-control skills rated:										
High	16.5 (3.6)	13.7 (2.1)	16.6 (2.2)	16.2 (1.4)	10.6 (2.3)	16.9 (1.3)	12.6 (3.8)	16.7 (1.5)	17.4 (5.0)	15.9 (1.2)
Low	25.8 (4.2)	22.9 (2.6)	22.2 (2.4)	21.9 (1.6)	28.1 (3.4)	20.9 (1.4)	22.4 (4.8)	21.7 (1.6)	27.4 (5.9)	22.0 (1.3)
Cooperation skills rated:										
High	31.7 (4.5)	30.5 (2.8)	35.1 (2.8)	35.8 (1.8)	33.1 (3.5)	36.2 (1.7)	33.5 (5.4)	34.9 (1.9)	32.6 (6.0)	35.8 (1.6)
Low	44.9 (4.8)	43.6 (3.0)	42.3 (2.9)	40.2 (1.9)	45.9 (3.7)	39.8 (1.7)	48.1 (5.7)	39.7 (1.9)	48.6 (6.4)	40.4 (1.6)
Previous suspension or expulsion from school	27.3 (4.3)	40.0 (3.0)	26.3 (2.6)	34.3 (1.8)	33.4 (3.6)	32.1 (1.7)	42.6 (5.7)	31.6 (1.8)	20.1 (5.1)	32.9 (1.5)
Previous arrest	10.7 (3.0)	20.4 (2.5)	9.2 (1.7)	13.6 (1.3)	13.6 (2.6)	12.3 (1.2)	14.7 (4.1)	12.6 (1.3)	4.2 (2.5)	13.0 (1.1)

Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.

Standard errors are in parentheses.

socially active in these ways also are more likely to have high overall social skills. However, the relationship is not as apparent among youth who have computers and use them for communication. Perhaps the “virtual” nature of these electronic relationships makes engaging in them less subject to variation in social skills, or, conversely, participation in them contributes less to developing such skills among participating youth.

Despite these generally strong relationships, it is important to note that some youth with at least some friendship interactions are rated by parents as having low social skills (17%). Thus, low skills do not prevent all youth with disabilities from interacting with peers outside of class, although the quality of their interactions is unknown.

When the individual dimensions of social skills are considered, it is apparent that the relationship between friendship interactions and social skills results entirely from the strong association between assertion skills and friendship interactions. There are no significant differences in ratings of self-control or cooperation skills for youth who differ in any of the forms of friendship interaction. In contrast, 43% of those who see friends frequently have high assertion skills, compared with 7% of those who never see friends outside of class ($p < .001$). Significant differences in assertion skill ratings are noted for each kind of friendship interaction, including use of computers for communication (32% of users have high assertion skills vs. 22% of nonusers, $p < .05$). This pattern suggests that assertion skills may well be a key component of the willingness and ability of youth to initiate friendship interactions. It also is possible that by engaging in those interactions, youth learn assertion skills, although in the absence of direct instruction in such skills, this seems to be a less plausible explanation for the relationship between friendship interactions and assertion.

Although youth who are involved actively with friends in some ways have higher skills of some kinds, apparently not all friends are “good” friends. Being suspended or expelled from school or arrested is positively related to some forms of more active involvement with friends. For example, youth who frequently visit with friends or who frequently receive phone calls from friends are significantly more likely to have been suspended or expelled or arrested, according to parents ($p < .05$ for all comparisons), than youth who are less involved with friends in these ways. Two exceptions to this general pattern relate to receiving invitations to others’ social activities and participating in e-mail or chat room conversations—youth who are active in these ways are no more or less likely to have been suspended or expelled from school or arrested than youth who are not.

These findings are in line with research that suggests that aggressive peers tend to cluster together and that antisocial behavior may be a basis for peer affiliations (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariépy, 1988; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Pugh, 1986). In fact, extensive research demonstrates that misbehaving and aggressive youth have the same kinds of social attachments as their more prosocial peers (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Farmer, Stuart, Lorch, & Fields, 1993; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). However, the literature on friendship tends to emphasize the importance of having friends and to ignore important questions of friendship quality. Some friends distract from academic activities, challenge authority, and encourage bad conduct. Street gangs represent the extreme on this dimension (Cadwallader, 2000/2001).

Organized Activities outside of Class and Social Skills

Because earlier analyses revealed a positive correlation between the frequency of friendship interactions and participation in extracurricular activities, one would expect the pattern of relationships between extracurricular activities and social skills to mirror those between friendship interactions and social skills—generally higher social skills reported for youth who participate in work and extracurricular activities. This pattern is confirmed (Exhibit 6-2). Youth who work or participate in extracurricular activities are rated by their parents as having better overall social skills than those who do not participate, regardless of the type of activity. Parents rate between 25% and 29% of youth who participate in the various extracurricular activities as high on the overall measure of social ability, compared with 12% to 21% of nonparticipants ($p < .05$ to $.001$). Similar differences are found between participants and nonparticipants regarding assertion skills.

However, the caveat mentioned above applies here, as well; these relationships do not confirm the direction of influence. Extracurricular involvement may result in improved social skills, improved social skills may lead to greater extracurricular involvement, there may be a

Exhibit 6-2
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVITIES OUTSIDE OF CLASS AND SOCIAL SKILLS

	Lessons or Classes		School-Sponsored Group		Community-Sponsored Group		Volunteer Activity		Paid Work		Any of These	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Percentage with:												
Overall social skills rated:												
High	21.1 (1.5)	29.0 (2.9)	18.8 (1.7)	28.0 (2.2)	17.5 (1.7)	28.6 (2.1)	18.3 (1.6)	29.9 (2.3)	19.0 (1.8)	26.6 (2.0)	12.0 (2.7)	24.7 (1.5)
Low	18.9 (1.4)	14.6 (2.3)	22.9 (1.8)	11.7 (1.6)	21.7 (1.8)	13.9 (1.6)	20.5 (1.6)	14.5 (1.8)	21.3 (1.8)	14.9 (1.6)	31.0 (3.8)	15.8 (1.3)
Assertion skills rated:												
High	27.0 (1.6)	34.8 (3.1)	22.0 (1.8)	36.5 (2.3)	21.1 (1.8)	36.8 (2.2)	24.2 (1.7)	35.3 (2.4)	20.6 (1.8)	35.8 (2.2)	12.2 (2.7)	31.4 (1.6)
Low	21.3 (1.5)	15.7 (2.3)	26.1 (1.9)	12.8 (1.6)	25.3 (1.9)	14.2 (1.6)	22.9 (1.7)	15.7 (1.8)	27.5 (2.0)	13.8 (1.6)	39.2 (4.0)	16.9 (1.3)
Self-control skills rated:												
High	14.4 (1.3)	21.3 (2.6)	14.8 (1.5)	17.9 (1.9)	14.6 (1.5)	17.4 (1.7)	13.7 (1.4)	19.4 (2.0)	14.8 (1.6)	17.6 (1.8)	13.2 (2.8)	16.5 (1.3)
Low	23.1 (1.5)	19.6 (2.6)	26.0 (1.9)	17.6 (1.9)	26.0 (1.9)	18.6 (1.8)	23.7 (1.7)	20.7 (2.1)	23.6 (1.9)	21.3 (1.9)	27.5 (3.6)	21.5 (1.4)
Cooperation skills rated:												
High	34.6 (1.7)	38.0 (3.1)	32.0 (2.0)	39.4 (2.4)	34.9 (2.1)	36.0 (2.2)	33.4 (1.9)	37.5 (2.5)	35.8 (2.1)	34.6 (2.2)	29.4 (3.7)	36.4 (1.7)
Low	41.9 (1.8)	37.8 (3.1)	43.9 (2.1)	37.2 (2.4)	41.7 (2.1)	40.0 (2.3)	43.2 (2.0)	37.5 (2.5)	40.8 (2.2)	41.1 (2.3)	45.2 (4.0)	40.3 (1.7)
Previous suspension/expulsion from school	34.3 (1.7)	27.2 (2.9)	36.3 (2.1)	27.8 (2.2)	36.5 (2.1)	28.8 (2.1)	33.5 (1.9)	31.7 (2.4)	29.7 (2.0)	35.4 (2.2)	27.3 (3.6)	33.5 (1.6)
Previous arrest	13.0 (1.2)	12.5 (2.2)	14.3 (1.5)	11.0 (1.5)	14.2 (1.5)	11.7 (1.5)	12.5 (1.4)	13.8 (1.8)	10.9 (1.4)	14.6 (1.6)	11.5 (2.6)	13.2 (1.2)

Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.
Standard errors are in parentheses.

bidirectional effect, or there may be some other explanation for the relationships. For example, the positive connection between extracurricular involvement and social skills may reflect differences in primary disability classification between participants and nonparticipants. Youth with severe emotional disorders, mental retardation, or autism, for example, receive lower ratings from their parents for overall social skills and congregate on the low side of the self-control and cooperation scales (Cameto, Cadwallader, & Wagner, 2003). These same youth are least likely to be involved in extracurricular activities.

There is a consistent relationship between having been suspended or expelled from school and participation in lessons or classes or in school- or community-sponsored group activities, with participants being significantly less likely than nonparticipants to have been suspended or expelled ($p < .05$ and $p < .01$). This is in contrast to the relationship between suspensions/expulsions and friendship interactions reported above, which depicts those who are actively involved with friends as more likely to have these negative outcomes. There is no significant relationship between suspension/expulsions or arrests and volunteer activities, working, or participating in any of these extracurricular pursuits.

Summary

There is a strong positive relationship between parents' ratings of their adolescent children's social skills and both their friendship interactions and participation in extracurricular activities, including jobs. More active youth generally are reported to be more socially skilled.

Assertion skills are most strongly linked to friendship interactions; individual friendships seem less contingent on having good self-control or cooperation skills. However, participation in extracurricular activities in some forms, which involve interactions with groups of youth or other adults, relates to all three kinds of social skill, affirming the greater complexity of interaction of groups relative to individual friendship relationships. In addition, youth who participate in group activities are less likely to have been suspended, expelled, or arrested than nonparticipants. However, the opposite relationship occurs regarding interactions with individual friends, suggesting that individuals in a relationship may tolerate or even encourage the kinds of behavior that result in suspensions, expulsions, and arrests more than peer groups that are organized around prosocial kinds of activities.