

Peer Activities of Preadolescents

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Studies have been made of peer activities and relationships of teenagers, but there is little research on the interpersonal and group patterns of preadolescents (9 to 13 years of age). In this study of Missouri youth, the author investigates the type of peer activities the preadolescent engages in, the relative frequency of his associations on both a group and individual basis, and his attitudes and behavior toward children of the same and opposite sex. The conclusions have many implications for educators, for parents, and for leaders of preadolescent youth programs and organizations.

IN informal educational undertakings, much of the programming for young people depends upon a peer activity (an association between agemates). This is true for the preadolescent as well as the adolescent. We know something about the peer activities of teenagers. But what type of peer activities does the preadolescent child engage in? What is the relative frequency of his associations on a group basis and on an individual basis? What attitudes and behaviors does he express toward children of the same and opposite sex?

From the age of eight or nine, a child becomes increasingly absorbed in peer activities as he continues the process of emancipation from his family. Bowerman and Kinch¹ report that a dramatic shift occurs in orientation from the family to peers between the fourth and tenth grades. However, the meaning, extent, and quality of peer relationships during preadolescence has been a neglected area of investigation. Most previous research sampled high-school youth.²

The major purpose of this paper is to describe some interpersonal and group patterns found in a sample of Missouri youth ranging in age from 9 to 13.

¹C. Bowerman and J. W. Kinch, "Changes in Family and Peer Orientation of Children between the Fourth and Tenth Grades," *Social Forces*, XXXVII (March, 1959), 206-11.

²See A. B. Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1949).

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METHOD

The cross-sectional sample consisted of 410 boys and 409 girls about equally divided among grades four, five, six, and seven in four communities within 75 miles of Kansas City. Subsamples, of about 200 each, included central Kansas City, an established contiguous suburb, a town with a population of 24,000 (75 miles to the east), and a rural county southeast of Kansas City.

Some general characteristics of the sample were that all subjects were white, 93 per cent were Protestant, 94 per cent were from families with more than one child, 85 per cent resided with both parents, 33 per cent of the mothers were employed, and 61 per cent of the families were rated in the lower half in socioeconomic level as measured by a modification of the Short Form of the McGuire-White Index of Social Status.

Answers to eight questions selected from a 71-item schedule were analyzed in relation to respondents' sex, age, and community location. The larger schedule³ was a replication of the earlier Broderick research. Separate schedules were developed for boys and girls, with only the wording changed to fit the gender of the respondent.

Public school teachers administered the schedules to their classes during the winter and spring of 1965. On the test day, the investigator brought to each teacher the correct number of schedules and a sealed ballot box for the completed schedules. Pupils were promised that only the investigator would know how they responded and he would keep the individual results secret. Ballot boxes were picked up immediately after the last schedule was turned in.

The first four questions related to peer groups to which the youth belonged: (1) "How often do you attend Sunday School?" An answer of "almost every Sunday" was interpreted as regular attendance. (2) "Do you have a bunch of girls (boys) that you hang around with or spend a lot of time with?" An affirmative reply was interpreted to mean that the subject belonged to a monosexual clique (a clique composed of the same sex). (3) "What clubs or groups do you belong to at school, church, in your neighborhood or other places?" The listing indicated whether the subject belonged to any youth group. (4) "Do you belong to any athletic or sports team?" A positive reply indicated that the subject was a member of a team.

The last four questions were concerned with different dimensions of interpersonal relationships: (5) "Would you like to get married

³ George P. Rowe, "Patterns of Interpersonal Relationships among Youth Nine to Thirteen Years of Age" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, 1966).

someday?" (6) "Do you have a boyfriend (girlfriend) now?" (Boys and girlfriends will be referred to in this study as "sweethearts.") (7) "Name your best friend and list four others you like almost as well." (8) "Have you ever had a date?" Since names were recorded on the schedules, it was possible to achieve sociometric measurement, and some patterns of social reciprocation were determined.

MAJOR RESULTS

Findings are presented as percentage of positive replies to the eight questions according to sex, age, and location.

Sex Differences

The findings enumerated in Table 1 show that girls are much more regular in Sunday School attendance and more involved in cliques and organized groups than are boys. On the other hand, preadolescent boys are much more active on teams than are preadolescent girls.

Table 1. Percentage of positive responses to eight items by sex for Missouri youth 9-13 years of age.

Item	Boys (N=410)	Girls (N=409)	Total (N=819)	Level of significant difference between sexes
Attend Sunday School regularly	63	74	69	.01
Belong to one or more youth groups	52	60	56	.05
Belong to clique	53	61	56	.05
Belong to team	54	20	37	.001*
Want to marry someday	61	83	72	.001
Have boyfriend or girlfriend	56	70	63	.001
Have cross-sex friend(s)	34	44	39	.01
Have dated	19	11	15	.01*

* Boys were significantly more positive in only these two cases, while girls were significantly more positive on the other six items.

With respect to interpersonal behavior, girls are the most committed to a future marriage, and they most often named a sweetheart and a cross-sex friend among their five best friends. The fact that 19 per cent of the boys have dated, compared with only 11 per cent of

the girls, is contrary to previous findings which indicated that boys and girls began dating at about the same age.⁴

The best friend named by 94 per cent of the boys and 96 per cent of the girls was a person of the same sex, while 66 per cent of the boys and 56 per cent of the girls listed only persons of the same sex among their five closest friends. Since only 20 per cent of these five closest peers were included in the sample, it was not possible to obtain enough mutual responses to chart reciprocal patterns. However, nearly 75 per cent of these "best friends" were part of the sample, so reciprocal choices could be analyzed on that portion. The best friends responded mutually only one-third of the time.

The relationships of sweethearts to each other was even more tenuous. Less than 25 per cent of the sweethearts named actually reciprocated (reciprocal measurement could be obtained on only 60 per cent of the sample with sweethearts). Only 13 per cent of the girls and 22 per cent of the boys reported that they had ever dated their designated sweethearts. Yet nearly two-thirds of those with sweethearts were certain that their sweethearts liked them.

Age Differences

Influence of age on group and interpersonal patterns is illustrated in Table 2. Different patterns are noted for boys than for girls. Regular Sunday School attendance drops for boys at each age between 9 and 13, while girls' attendance does not drop until after 11 years of age. Membership in cliques remains nearly steady for boys, while girls tend to become more involved in cliques as they increase in

Table 2. Percentage of positive responses to eight items by age and sex for Missouri youth 9-13 years of age.

Item	Boys by age					Girls by age				
	9	10	11	12	13	9	10	11	12	13
Attend Sunday School regularly	72	64	62	62	55	75	70	79	76	66
Belong to one or more youth groups	45	43	55	61	59	42	64	60	71	66
Belong to clique	57	55	46	56	51	58	59	61	58	57
Belong to team	61	53	48	53	62	16	17	25	25	37
Want to marry someday	58	61	58	65	61	76	84	89	81	89
Have boyfriend or girlfriend	50	65	53	55	58	63	69	78	70	66
Have cross-sex friend(s)	35	35	25	45	35	50	44	42	40	40
Have dated	7	17	12	26	34	11	7	16	11	9

⁴ See studies by W. J. Cameron and W. F. Kenkel, "High School Dating: A Study of Variation," *Marriage and Family Living*, XXII (February, 1960), 74-76; and G. J. Schnepf, "Survey of Going Steady and Other Dating Practices," *American Catholic Sociological Review*, XXI (Fall, 1960), 238-50.

age. Organized group membership increases for both sexes up to the age of 12 before it declines. Team membership for boys was highest at ages 9 and 13, with the lowest percentage belonging at age 11. Too few girls were on teams to discern any particular age trend.

With respect to interpersonal patterns, the desirability of marriage increases with age for both sexes, except that boys of 13 are less positive than boys who are 12. The highest frequency of sweethearts occurs for boys at 10 and girls at 11 years of age. Girls tend to choose a cross-sex friend among their five best friends less often as they grow older, while there is no apparent age pattern for boys. The percentage of boys who have dated increases from 7 per cent for 9-year-olds to 34 per cent for 13-year-olds. Girls, on the other hand, said they dated more often at 11 than at 13, suggesting that they may have a changed perception of the term "date" as they advance in social maturity.

Community Influence

A family's geographical location apparently affects its patterns of social participation (Table 3). There are few differences among the four communities in relation to Sunday School attendance. In clique activities, girls vary little by location; however, urban boys are the most involved and rural boys are the least active. Membership in organized groups is much more the normative pattern for urban youth than for those living in other communities. Rural youth clearly participate least in organized groups. Belonging to an athletic team occurs most frequently in the town subsample.

Table 3. Percentage of positive responses to eight items by sex and location for Missouri youth 9-13 years of age.

Item	Boys				Girls			
	Urban	Town	Sub-urban	Rural	Urban	Town	Sub-urban	Rural
Attend Sunday School regularly	60	64	64	65	74	74	73	76
Belong to one or more youth groups	60	58	49	45	67	63	60	54
Belong to clique	58	56	53	42	61	61	62	58
Belong to team	44	72	51	52	13	47	19	10
Want to marry someday	65	52	54	66	76	82	90	83
Have boyfriend or girlfriend	57	56	53	61	74	73	67	67
Have cross-sex friend(s)	38	35	37	24	57	49	47	31
Have dated	21	28	18	9	16	14	10	6

"Wanting to get married someday" was considered the most desirable by suburban girls. On the contrary, suburban boys (along with town boys) said they least wanted to get married, while urban and rural boys have the strongest positive feelings toward marriage. There is no significant difference between the incidence of naming a sweetheart and the location of the subjects' homes. Urban youth have the highest proportion of cross-sex friends, and rural youth have the least number. Town youth date the most often, while rural boys and girls date least frequently.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

1. Missouri boys and girls 9-13 years of age have peer group patterns quite distinct from each other. Girls were significantly more active than boys in both clique and organized group activities. Boys, on the other hand, participated in team sports almost three times as frequently as girls. In fact, a higher proportion of these boys played on teams than belonged to cliques or clubs.

Preadolescent youth programs must recognize these sex differences, and coeducational organizations should provide for some separate programs for boys and girls. Since participation in youth organizations reaches its peak when a youth is 12 years of age, special efforts are needed to maintain enrollments after this age. More rigorous membership recruiting is necessary to induce a higher proportion of the boys to join youth groups, particularly in rural areas where only 45 per cent of the boys belonged to any youth organization.

2. A preponderance of cliques and clubs was evident in the urban setting compared with other localities. Town youth engaged most frequently in team sports, while rural youth had the lowest rate of participation in cliques and youth organizations. From a composite point of view, it appears that the frequency of peer group activities would follow this order according to location: urban, town, suburban, and rural. Organizations such as scouting, 4-H, and the churches should place special emphasis on reaching rural youth who, in a sense, are not enjoying the same level of peer group life as are the other youth studied.

3. The interpersonal world of these Missouri preadolescents was largely preoccupied with associations among peers of the same sex. Although 63 per cent of the sample named a boyfriend or girlfriend, these emotional attachments turned out to be largely cover and nonreciprocal. About 95 per cent of the best friends named

were companions of the same sex. Nevertheless, 39 per cent of the sample designated at least one cross-sex companion among their five closest friends. Girls were significantly more positive toward the opposite sex in attitudes toward marriage and emotional attachments (sweethearts), and they expressed less social prejudice toward boys than boys expressed toward girls. Boys, however, said they had dated more often, a measure of overt pair interaction. We could tentatively conclude that boys manifest the most pronounced visible cross-sex couple pattern, while girls possess the most inward positive feelings toward the opposite sex.

These conclusions suggest that, because of their more advanced stage of social development, girls probably need more help than boys do in understanding their own feelings and attitudes toward the opposite sex. Both sexes, however, are seeking guidance into the meaning and function of dating and cross-sex friendships. Preadolescent programs should be developed around such themes as "social behavior," "human relations," and "family relationships" in which there can be free and open discussion. Youth of this age respect adults who answer questions directly and honestly with no attempt to hide the facts. These topics should be handled in sanctioned youth groups; otherwise, youth will be forced to satisfy their curiosity from unauthorized sources.

No longer can we assume that the home will adequately teach children the important concepts of social development. Probably the greatest challenge facing adult educational institutions such as the Cooperative Extension Service is to reach youth indirectly through parent education programs. Many parents are perplexed by this new generation.

4. Data revealed that social heterosexual development follows an orderly pattern of pyramidally related stages which occur in this order: commitment to marriage, naming of a sweetheart, willingness to include cross-sex friends among one's closest companions, and dating. These four steps could be considered as developmental stages in the pursuit of social heterosexual maturation. Commitment to the desirability of marriage is the first step which must be achieved before preadolescents single out some member of the opposite sex as particularly attractive and place him or her in the sweetheart category. Having an emotional attachment with a sweetheart appears to be a prerequisite for learning to appreciate the companionship of cross-sex friends. Finally, the overcoming of social prejudice to cross-sex peers leads to the next big step, actually going out on a date. Through Guttman scale analysis, it was discov-

ered that over 90 per cent of this sample fitted into this general sequence of progression.⁵

Educators, parents, and leaders need to be reassured that precocious heterosexual behavior is not widespread among preadolescents in these Missouri communities. Adults need to understand that even though certain positive feelings exist between the sexes, these relationships are only a part of the normal developmental sequence. By the same token, adults should not prematurely push preadolescents into exclusive pair relationships for which they have not achieved sufficient maturity. Although girls may clamor for precocious couple activities, boys may rebel if they are forced into advanced cross-sex activities before they are ready.

5. Finally, before too much credence is placed on these reported patterns, it should be remembered that no claim has been made that this sample is representative of our nation's youth. Although similar trends were evident in the Pennsylvania communities with which direct comparisons were made,⁶ a much more advanced pattern of social development was reported in the Georgia study.⁷ Further research is necessary to test the universality of these findings. Ideally, fresh situational data should be collected in the community for which a youth program is being developed.

⁵ C. B. Broderick and George P. Rowe, "A Scale of Preadolescent Heterosexual Development," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, XXX (February 1968), 97-101.

⁶ C. B. Broderick, "Socio-sexual Development in a Suburban Community," The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1963 (mimeographed).

⁷ C. B. Broderick and S. E. Fowler, "New Patterns of Relationships between the Sexes among Preadolescents," *Marriage and Family Living*, XXIII (February 1961), 27-30.

WHEN THE YOUNG behave badly it is because society has already behaved worse. We have the teenagers, like the politicians and the wars, that we deserve.

—J. B. PRIESTLEY