



# Encyclopedia of Human Development

## Social Development

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Social development is the change over time in an individual's understanding of, attitudes concerning, and behavior toward others; for example, a developmental change in how people behave with members of the other gender or their understanding of what friendship entails. These changes are perceived to occur due to socialization processes as well as physical and cognitive maturation. Socialization, however, is not a unidirectional influence, where society simply affects the individual. Instead, relationships are perceived as bidirectional. That is, the parent affects the child's development, as well as the child impacting the parent's. Initial relationships may be the most important as they serve as models of what infants and children should expect in their future relationships. Over the course of the life span, relationships with parents, siblings, peers, and romantic partners play integral roles for social development.

Because these relationships do not exist in a vacuum, they are affected by the social and cultural contexts in which they exist. Cultural, ethnic, and religious differences affect the manner in which people interact with each other and subsequently children's development within those contexts. Individuals' gender and social economic standing (SES) also affect how they think, feel about, and behave toward others, as well as how other people respond to them.

### **Initial Relationships**

John Bowlby, a prominent ethologist, proposed that infants develop attachments to their primary caregivers. He argued that attachments are reciprocal relationships; the infants become attached to their caregivers and the caregivers become attached to the infants. Attachments are theorized to serve an evolutionary purpose because they increase the likelihood that the caregivers will protect and care for the infant. Attachments between infants and caregivers develop gradually over time as the infants and caregivers improve their ability to read and respond to each other's signals. Typically, infants form clear-cut attachments to familiar caregivers by 7 months of age.

Attachments provide children with emotional support. The child is able to use the familiar caregiver as a secure base from which to explore his or her surroundings. Because infants look to their familiar caregivers for support, they are more willing to explore their environment when their caregivers are present than when they are absent. Caregivers also serve as sources of comfort when the infants become distressed.

Bowlby proposed that infants grow to understand what their caregivers are like and how they typically respond when the infants are stressed. These initial working models, or expectations concerning social relationships, are theorized to guide their expectations about future relationships during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. If infants had warm relationships with their caregivers and their needs were met, they may expect positive relations with others. However, if these relationships were negative, they may expect to be hurt by others and become more defensive in future relationships.

Mary Ainsworth, a contemporary of Bowlby's, developed the "strange situation" to examine the quality of children's attachments to their caregivers. In this test, 1-year-old infants encounter a number of stressful situations, from interacting with strangers to having their caregivers leave. The children are classified into different attachment styles based on how they cope with these situations.

Children with secure attachments are distressed at separation, but are easily comforted when their caregiver returns, and are more willing to explore when the caregiver is present. Three categories of insecure attachments have been observed. Children with an avoidant attachment style tend to be unresponsive to their caregivers when they are present and display little distress at separation. These children are slow to respond or avoid the caregivers when they return. Children who display resistant attachment styles seek closeness to their caregivers and often fail to explore their environment. They are very distressed at separation and frequently display angry, resistant behavior at reunion. Finally, abused infants usually display a disorganized/disoriented attachment style. These infants often are afraid of their caregivers and display a combination of avoidant and resistant behaviors.

An important determinant of attachment style is the quality of care the infants receive. Mothers of securely attached children tend to be warm, sensitive to their children's signals, and encourage their children to explore the world. Mothers of insecurely attached children provide less sensitive parenting. Mothers of resistant children often provide inconsistent feedback; sometimes they are enthusiastic and other times they ignore the children. These babies become anxious and resentful as they realize they cannot count on their mothers for support and comfort. Two patterns of parenting styles are related with avoidant babies. Mothers of avoidant infants often overstimulate their children or are unresponsive to the babies' signals and express negative attitudes toward them. In both cases, infants learn that they can reduce negative stimulation by avoiding the parent. Whereas infant characteristics, such as being premature or having a difficult temperament, may make an insecure attachment more likely, caregiver qualities seem to be more important for attachment than the infant's qualities.

Because of cross-cultural differences in child rearing, the percentage of children who fall into the secure and insecure attachment styles varies across cultures. For example, German culture promotes independence in their children and discourages clingy behavior. Not surprisingly, German infants tend to display more avoidant attachment than do babies raised in the United States. In Japanese culture, parents rarely leave their infants in the care of strangers. Therefore, Japanese children tend to display greater separation anxiety and more resistant attachment than do children raised in the United States.

There is significant evidence to support Bowlby's claim that early attachments influence subsequent social relationships. During the preschool years, children who were classified as securely attached tend to be more sociable with their peers and have more friends and more positive interactions with peers than do insecurely attached children. In middle childhood, children who had secure attachments have better relationships with peers and closer friendships than insecurely attached children. Furthermore, there are intergenerational effects of attachment. Adults' attachments to their parents are correlated with how their children are attached to them. This likely occurs because the parents' attachment style affects how they behave with their children. Typically the best outcomes occur when the children are securely attached to both parents and the worst outcomes are when both attachments are insecure. For the quality of the attachment to be maintained, it is necessary that sensitive caregiving continue throughout childhood.

## Parenting Styles

In addition to warm, responsive parenting, Erik Erikson and others have claimed that a second dimension of parenting, the amount of demands and controls the parents place on their children, also plays an integral role in children's and adolescents' social development. Parents can be categorized as being either high or low on each of these dimensions (Table 1).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Diana Baumrind conducted extensive research on how parents interact with their children. She observed three patterns of parenting styles. Authoritative parents display high levels of warmth and affection and place demands on their children. These parents tend to be responsive to their children's thoughts and feelings, and encourage ageappropriate independence while placing controls on their actions. Whereas authoritarian parents also place high levels of control on their children, they display low levels of warmth. These parents tend to impose many rules and expect compliance from their children. They often rely on punitive or coercive measures to obtain obedience. Permissive parents place few demands on their children but are warm and caring toward their children. Parents often take this approach if they lack the confidence to control their children or feel it is best if the children make their own decisions. Developmental psychologists Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin added the fourth category, uninvolved parenting. These parents display little warmth and place few demands or expectations on their children.

**Table 1 Classifications of Parenting Styles**

	Responsive	Unresponsive
Demanding	Authoritative	Authoritarian
Undemanding	Permissive	Uninvolved

Children raised by authoritative parents have the best social and academic outcomes. They have high self-esteem, are successful in school, and are well liked by their peers. Children raised in authoritarian households tend to have average social and cognitive competencies and during adolescence tend to be more conforming to their peers. Children raised by permissive parents tend to have low cognitive and social competencies. They often are immature and lack self-control and are more likely to get involved with delinquent behavior than children whose parents set controls for them. The worst outcomes are associated with uninvolved parenting. These children tend to perform poorly in school, display aggressive behavior during childhood, and are at risk for delinquent behavior as adolescents.

Because these findings are correlational, the outcomes are not necessarily due to the parenting style. It is possible that easy-going, intelligent children elicit more authoritative parenting than do difficult children. As stated earlier, whereas parents influence their children, the children also impact the parents.

Working-class parents are more likely to take an authoritarian approach to parenting, and tend to display less warmth than do middle-class parents. In addition, they are less likely to reason with, negotiate with, or foster curiosity and independence in their children. These differences can be explained by the power differences in blue and white-collar occupations. Working-class parents tend to have little power in the outside world and have to defer to their bosses. This leads to a perception of the world as hierarchical. These parents therefore stress obedience to their children, because it is a skill that will help them survive in a blue-collar world. Middle and upper-class parents also attempt to teach their children skills that will help them negotiate their futures. These parents focus on instilling initiative, curiosity, and creativity because these skills are relevant in a white-collar environment.

## **Siblings**

The longest-lasting relationships most people have are with their siblings. Older siblings typically assume dominant roles, such as determining which activities to engage in, or how they should be played. They tend to initiate both more prosocial and combative behavior than younger siblings. Younger siblings are more likely to imitate their older brothers and sisters. As siblings age, the importance of birth order lessens and the relationship becomes more egalitarian by early adolescence.

A number of factors affect sibling relationships, including the genders of the siblings, the age gap between them, and their relationship with their parents. Although same-sex siblings tend to be closer than brother and sister pairs, the most conflict is seen in brother-brother relationships. By middle childhood, girls tend to report more warmth and intimacy in their sibling relationships than do boys. This trend continues into adulthood, where sister relationships tend to be the strongest and most intimate. Siblings whose ages are close together tend to display more warmth and closeness but also more conflict during childhood. This occurs because there are more direct comparisons and more frequent conflict over resources or perceived unequal treatment when the age gap is small.

The treatment children receive from their parents also influences their relationship. When parents favor one child, not only does sibling antagonism increase, but the least-favored child is also at risk for adjustment difficulties. The greatest problems occur when the children believe their parents care more about one child than another.

Sibling rivalry begins with the arrival of the new baby. This typically leads to a decline in positive interactions between mothers and the older children, such as joint play, cuddling, and talking. However, negative interactions, such as restrictive and punitive behavior, increase in frequency. This can lead to jealousy if the older children associate these changes with the baby.

Sibling rivalry tends to increase when the younger child reaches 1½ to 2 years of age. The younger siblings can now try to hold their own by hitting back or getting the parents' attention. Sibling rivalry continues increasing into middle childhood and is usually more intense when the children are the same gender or are close in age. Sibling rivalry declines during adolescence as the siblings develop their own social worlds and

the frequency of their interactions with each other decreases.

There are a number of positive aspects to sibling relationships. First, they can provide social support. Older children can provide emotional support when their younger siblings are dealing with uncertain situations. Sisters play an important social support role, because relationships with sisters are more intimate. Second, older children can serve as models or tutors to their siblings. They can help their younger siblings master cognitive, physical, or social tasks through direct instruction or modeling behavior. Both older and younger siblings benefit from the tutoring. Children who tutor their siblings tend to do better on academic aptitude tests than same-age children who do not have these experiences. Third, interactions with older siblings aid in younger children's social cognitive development. This helps younger children develop social skills and enhance their emotional understanding and perspective-taking abilities.

### **Peer Relationships**

Parents both directly and indirectly influence their children's peer relationships. Parents choose which neighborhoods they live in, which schools and religious services they attend, and whether or not they participate in after-school programs. These decisions affect who their children's potential peers are. Furthermore, they act as gatekeepers or booking agents in scheduling play dates for young children. Parents also serve as positive or negative role models of how to act toward others, and they can actively coach how to deal with peers. Finally, the parenting style they employ is related to peer sociability. Children raised by authoritative parents tend to have better social skills than those raised by authoritarian or uninvolved parents.

This is important because children's social skills strongly affect their popularity. Popular children tend to be calm, outgoing, and friendly. They act prosocially and are rarely disruptive or aggressive. In addition, they tend to have better perspective-taking skills than their peers. Two patterns of social interaction styles have negative consequences for popularity. Hostile, impulsive children tend to be poor perspective takers and often interpret other children as having a hostile intent. Because of this perspective, they are more likely than others to respond to other children's behavior with aggression. Children with this interaction style are at risk for becoming delinquent adolescents.

A subset of withdrawn children are passive and socially awkward. These children are aware that others dislike them and expect their peers to treat them poorly. They are very sensitive to negative feedback because this information supports their belief that they are disliked. Because of this, they tend to have a submissive interaction style and withdraw from social interactions. Subsequently, they often feel lonely and are at risk for depression and low self-esteem. However, not all children who have low rates of interactions with others are socially inept. Some of these children are socially well adjusted but just have a preference for interacting with only a few friends.

Physical appearance also impacts popularity, because attractive children tend to be more popular than their unattractive peers. The timing of the onset of puberty is influential as well. Boys who mature early tend to be more popular than later maturing boys. As early maturers are bigger and stronger than their peers, they excel in sports, which boosts their social status. In contrast, early maturing girls tend to be slightly less popular than later developing girls. Because these girls are the first in their cohort to reach puberty, they are likely to be teased, especially by the boys.

Gender differences in peer relationships begin much earlier than the onset of puberty. During early childhood, children begin to show preferences for playing with their own gender. Girls prefer to play with other girls by age 2, and boys start to prefer playing with other boys the following year. Young children not only prefer same-sex playmates, they also actively avoid the other gender. Because children segregate along gender lines, boys and girls live in different social worlds. Among other distinctions, boys and girls differ in their style of play, toy choices, what they do with their friends, and how they deal with conflict.

Boys are more active and aggressive, and are more likely to engage in rough-and-tumble play than girls. Furthermore, boys tend to play in larger groups and play more competitive games than do girls. Boys'

groups tend to develop dominance hierarchies with power plays to determine where each child stands in the group. Because boys are concerned with their status within the group, their communication often focuses on dominance. When conflict arises, such as a fight over toys, they are likely to use verbal or physical aggression to resolve it.

In contrast to boys, girls are more vocal and nurturing. They are more likely to play with only one or two best friends. These friendships tend to be emotionally close and intimate. Typically, girls claim to have closer friendships than boys do from middle childhood on. When conflict does occur, girls are likely to compromise and try to work things out. When girls act aggressively, it is more likely to be an attempt to hurt someone's social relationships than to cause physical harm.

Children base their friendships on shared activities—the people they do things with. By adolescence, friendships become more focused on trust and intimacy, especially for girls. Adolescent girls turn to their friends for emotional support and understanding. Although adolescent boys disclose more to their friends than they did as children, they primarily continue to base their friendships on shared recreational activities.

In addition to the changes in the intimacy of friendships, a number of other changes occur in the transition to adolescence. Both the size of peer groups and their gender makeup change from childhood to adolescence. Cliques, which are small groups of approximately five or six friends who spend most of their time together, develop during preadolescence. Clique members usually are similar in terms of their gender, age, grade, and ethnic background. Larger reputation-based groups, called crowds, emerge in adolescence. Crowds are mixed gender groups that can contain multiple cliques. Crowd members tend to share similar norms, values, and interests. A crowd, such as jocks or brains, not only provides a group identity to adolescents but also a status level within the peer context.

Australian ethnographer Dexter Dunphy proposed a model of how peer group structures change during adolescence. Initially, boys and girls are relatively isolated from each another because they mainly associate with members of their same-sex cliques. In Dunphy's second stage, crowds begin to form as boys' and girls' cliques begin to interact at an intergroup level. Dating ensues between the higher status boys and girls in the third stage. These individuals serve as models for romantic relationships as well as mentors for the other members of their cliques. Crowds become fully developed in the fourth stage, as the youth begin to interact with members of the other sex at an interpersonal level. Finally, in the last stage, crowds begin to disintegrate, leaving loosely associated groups of couples.

There is considerable support to the premise that these changes in peer group structure influence dating and romantic relationships. Youth who had close other-sex friends during early adolescence are more likely to be integrated in mixed-sex social networks in mid-adolescence. This, in turn, is related to an enhanced likelihood of being in a romantic relationship. Furthermore, interactions with other-sex peers are associated with social and romantic competence.

Dates in early adolescence tend to be superficial and often occur in group settings. Whereas early dating relationships provide an opportunity to engage in leisure activities and explore sexual feelings, attachment and caregiving are not central to these relationships. According to B. Bradford Brown, a psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin, youth focus less on the qualities of their romantic relationships and more on characteristics of themselves during this phase of adolescent dating. This initial foray into dating provides adolescents with an opportunity to gain confidence in their ability to relate to the other gender and to view themselves as capable dating partners.

In the next developmental phase, youths focus on how their romantic relationships will be perceived by their peers. For status reasons, simply having a romantic partner may be more important than the relationship itself. Whereas a relationship can enhance an adolescent's status, it is important that the relationship be with the "right" type of partner. Dating the wrong person or performing non-socially accepted dating behaviors could damage a youth's social status.

Youth subsequently orient away from how their relationships are viewed by others toward a focus on the relationship itself. This occurs when they become more confident in their ability to interact in romantic relationships as well as more accepting of their reputation and social status among their peers. At this point, true attachments to romantic partners can be formed. Because these relationships are more emotionally intense and intimate, they tend to be more satisfying than those in the previous phases. In late adolescence or early adulthood, a third shift is proposed toward a focus on whether to form a long-term commitment to the romantic partner.

Adolescents with withdrawn or aggressive interaction styles may face problems developing healthy romantic relationships. Withdrawn adolescents may have difficulty entering into same-sex cliques and subsequently into mixed-sex peer groups. Thus, these youth are likely to lack the learning environment provided by informally dating within the peer group. This becomes problematic when they begin to date because they lack a support network to explore ideas related to romantic relationships and they may have problems developing the right level of intimacy with romantic partners.

Aggressive youth face a different set of problems. Although these teenagers have a peer group, it consists of other delinquent youth. Therefore, their romantic partners often display antisocial behaviors as well. Because these adolescents have developed aggressive interaction styles, their romantic relationships are at risk for psychological and physical aggression. In addition, they tend to engage in earlier sexual activity than their peers.

Maturing early also places adolescents at risk because they tend to begin romantic relationships earlier than on-time or late-maturing adolescents. Early-maturing girls tend to date older boys who frequently have a delinquent orientation. This places these girls at risk for both deviance and early sexual activity. Unfortunately, not only do early-maturing girls typically engage in sexual activity prior to their peers, but they also are at a higher risk for acquiring sexually transmitted diseases and becoming pregnant.

### **Adult Relationships**

In Brown's fourth phase of romantic relationships, people search for partners to whom they can commit long term. Finding a marriage partner seems to be beneficial, because people who are married tend to be happier, healthier, and wealthier than unmarried people. One explanation for this effect is that people with these qualities are more likely to get married. However, there seem to be actual benefits to marriage because people who have lost their marriage, such as widowed and divorced individuals, tend to do worse than single individuals. This finding implies that the benefits of marriage are not solely due to a self-selection effect.

In terms of emotions and psychological well-being, men seem to benefit from marriage more than women do. More men report being happily married than do women, and being married is related to gains in men's physical and emotional health. For women, relationship quality is more important than just whether or not they are married. Marriage seems to be beneficial for women if the relationship is going well; however, if the relationship is going poorly, women tend to suffer more than do men. One possible reason for this gender difference is that men are more likely than women to only have their spouse as a significant outlet for emotional intimacy and social support.

Gender differences also are observed in other family relationships. Because women seem to be better at kin-keeping skills, such as calling, sending birthday cards, and visiting, family relationships involving women tend to be closer than those involving men. Because they tend to have poorer kin-keeping skills, men are at greater risk for losing intimacy with their children after a divorce. This gender difference also is observed when examining adults' relationships with their parents. Daughters are more likely than sons to provide direct social support and care to elderly parents. When sons are the primary caregivers, they tend to be managers of care rather than direct providers.

People's longest-lasting relationships are with their siblings. Sibling relationships tend to be more important early and late in life. During early and middle adulthood, sibling relationships become more secondary because

adults tend to focus on their families and careers. Siblings become a more important source of support in late adulthood. Strong relationships with sisters during late adulthood seem to be protective against depression, but close relationships with brothers do not. The positive impact of relationships with sisters is probably due to the high levels of intimacy in these relationships.

People's relationships with their peers also change throughout adulthood. The number of friends people have tends to decline after young adulthood as their family and career concerns take precedence. However, the number of close, intimate friendships tends to remain stable throughout adulthood. As in earlier stages of life, women's friendships tend to be more intimate friendships than men's. Whereas women often discuss personal issues with their friends, men are more likely to engage in leisure activities.

### **Community Effects**

About 20% of U.S. infants and children live in families below the poverty threshold. Children and adolescents growing up in poor neighborhoods are more likely to deal with crowded housing, poor-quality schools, inadequate nutrition and health care, and the presence of violence and drugs in their community than those from middle- or upper-class neighborhoods. Thus, it is not surprising that living in a low-SES neighborhood is related to negative outcomes on a wide range of variables. Children in these neighborhoods are at greater risk than those in middle- or high-SES neighborhoods for poor physical health; lower intellectual attainment and poor school performance; social, emotional, and behavioral problems; and engaging in crime, delinquency, and high-risk sexual behavior. Typically, the worst outcomes are for children and adolescents living in extreme or enduring poverty.

Three theories have been proposed to explain the effects of poverty on child and adolescent outcomes. The first model is that the quality, quantity, and diversity of community resources, such as schools, social services, recreational and social programs, and employment, mediate well-being. The second model is that parent attributes and characteristics of the home environment mediate the relationship between the parents' and children's well-being. Because these parents are often under economic hardship and stress, their ability to provide quality parenting to their children is negatively influenced. A number of studies have found that parental stress is related to low warmth and harsh parenting. High parental warmth and monitoring of the children seem to be protective factors against the negative effects of low-SES environments. The third model is that formal and informal community institutions act to monitor the residents' behavior in line with social norms. However, in poor neighborhoods, especially where there are high rates of single parents, there tends to be less social organization and subsequently higher rates of crime and vandalism. This is compounded because when there are low levels of neighborhood monitoring, peer groups tend to have negative effects on adolescent outcomes.

- attachment styles
- siblings
- children
- attachment
- cliques
- infants
- sibling relationships

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See also

- [Antisocial Behavior](#)
- [Prosocial Behavior](#)

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