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Kids Got the Blues? Maybe They Don't Have Enough Friends

Friendless kids can become social outcasts who risk spiraling into depression by adolescence, according to new research from Concordia University, Florida Atlantic University and the University of Vermont. Yet for most shy and withdrawn children, the study reports in the journal *Development and Psychopathology*, friends can be a form of protection against sadness.

"The long-term effects of being a withdrawn child are enduringly negative," says lead author William M. Bukowski, a Psychology Professor and Director of the Concordia Centre for Research in Human Development. "Over time, we found that withdrawn kids showed increasing levels of sadness and higher levels of depressive feelings."

A total of 130 girls and 101 boys in the third through fifth school grades, took part in the three-year study. Participants were asked to rate whether they felt shy or preferred solitude. The research team also found that peers typically excluded children with poor social skills, who were perceived as overly aggressive or immature.

Compared with friendless children, those who had friends were less likely to report depressed feelings. "Friendship disrupts the negative and long-term effects of withdrawal," says Dr. Bukowski, who is also Concordia University Research Chair in Psychology. "Friendship promotes resilience and protects at-risk kids from internalizing problems such as feeling depressed and anxious."

Withdrawal can have consequences that extend beyond the

near term. "In much the same way as a snowball rapidly grows as it rolls down a hill, an adjustment problem is thought to amplify as it worsens," says Dr. Bukowski. "Being isolated and excluded from the peer group can increase levels of depressed feelings in children and those negative feelings can escalate throughout adolescence."

The key to avoid peer rejection is to make at least one friend. "Having one friend can be protective for withdrawn or shy kids," says Dr. Bukowski. "Our study confirms the value of having friends, which are like a shield against negative social experiences."

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William M. Bukowski, Brett Laursen, Betsy Hoza. The snowball effect: Friendship moderates escalations in depressed affect among avoidant and excluded children. *Development and Psychopathology*, 2010; 22 (04): 749 DOI: 10.1017/S095457941000043X