

Do Friends Help Adolescents in Military Families Adjust After a Residential Move?

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine whether students evidence better adjustment after a residential move if they have a high-quality friendship. In the fall and spring of a school year, students in the third ($n = 331$), sixth ($n = 286$), eighth ($n = 256$), eleventh ($n = 172$), and twelfth ($n = 92$) grades answered questions about the length of time they had been in their school district, the features of their best friendship, and their feelings of scholastic competence and social acceptance. Teachers and peers also provided information on students' adjustment. Students who in the fall of the school year had been in their school district for less than four months showed less positive academic and social adjustment than students who had been there longer. The adjustment of students who had been in their school district for more than four months did not vary according to how long they had been in their current school. Also, for students who had been in their school district for two or more years, having a friendship that was high in positive features in the fall contributed to increases in report-card grades and in teacher-reported social skills, and decreases in peer-reported problem behaviors, over the school year. The reverse was true for students who had been in their school district for less than four months in the fall. Finally, students whose best friendships were high in negative features in the fall were rated by their teachers as decreasing in their academic competence and social skills over the course of the school year.

Introduction

According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2004), 14% of Americans between the ages of 15 and 19 relocated in 2003. While moving may be fairly common during adolescence, it may also contribute to adjustment problems. Theories of stress and coping (e.g., Garmezy & Rutter, 1983)

suggest the hypothesis that relocation is an inherently stressful experience because daily routines are disrupted, daily hassles increase, social relationships end, and access to familiar resources is reduced.

Although a residential move is a stressful event, some adolescents may adjust more successfully to a new situation than other adolescents do. In particular, the quality of adolescents' friendships may affect their adjustment. In an earlier study of seventh graders, having friendships higher in positive features contributed to improvement during the year in positive involvement in school (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). Having friendships higher in negative features contributed to increases during the year in disruptive behavior at school.

The purpose of this study was to examine a possible connection between friendships and adjustment after a family move. The first hypothesis was that adolescents who have moved recently will show poorer adjustment than those who have lived in the current location for some time. We also wanted to explore whether the effect of relocation on adjustment differed for children and for adolescents. The second hypothesis was that students who have a high-quality friendship in the fall of the school year will improve in their adjustment during the year.

Method

Participants were 1137 students with a parent in the Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines who completed surveys in the fall and spring of a school year. The students were in the third ($n = 331$) sixth ($n = 286$), eighth ($n = 256$), eleventh ($n = 172$), or twelfth ($n = 92$) grade. Most students (56%) were female and were European American (52%) but many were African American (14%), Hispanic (17%), or Asian American (5%).

To determine whether students had moved recently, they were asked how long they had been in their current school district. Ten percent of the students were new to their school district

(i.e., had spent less than four months in the current school district); 53% had been in their school district for less than 2 years.

Students answered questions about the positive features and negative features of their best friendship using questions adapted from Berndt and Perry (1986). The internal consistency of the measures of positive features and negative features was high (fall α s = .91 and .74, respectively; spring α s = .92 and .84, respectively). The negative correlations between the measures of positive and negative features were low but significant (fall $r = -.10$, $p < .001$; spring $r = -.12$, $p < .001$).

To measure academic adjustment students completed the scholastic competence subscale of Harter's (1986) Self Perception Profile for Children (SPPC; e.g., "Some kids feel that they are very good at their school work but other kids worry about whether they can do the school work assigned to them;" fall $\alpha = .78$, spring $\alpha = .82$). Also, teachers completed the academic competence subscale of the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990; e.g., "Compared with the other children in my classroom, the overall academic performance of this child is;" fall $\alpha = .96$; spring $\alpha = .95$). Students' report-card grades in the fall and spring served as a final measure of academic adjustment.

To assess social adjustment, students answered questions from the social acceptance subscale of Harter's SPPC (e.g., "Some kids are popular with others their own age at school but other kids are not very popular at school;" fall $\alpha = .73$, spring $\alpha = .77$). Peer reports of students' social adjustment were obtained using the sociability-leadership subscale and a subscale for problem behaviors (aggressive, disruptive, sensitive, and isolated) from the Revised Class Play (Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985; α s = .60 or higher). Teachers reported on students' social

adjustment using the social skills and problem behaviors subscales of the SSRS (Gresham & Elliott, 1990; α s ranged from .87 to .95).

Results

Recency of Moves and Academic Adjustment

Students who were new to their school in the fall (i.e., had spent less than four months in the current school district) felt less positively about their scholastic competence than other students did. Table 1 shows the mean scores for the fall and the spring assessments, because the differences did not change significantly over time. Table 1 also shows that teachers rated the academic competence of new students less positively than that of other students. Again, these differences held in the fall and spring. School records indicated that sixth graders who were new to their school had significantly lower GPAs than their classmates, but the comparable effects for the other grades were not significant (see Table 2).

Recency of Moves and Social Adjustment

In the fall and the spring, students who were new to their school in the fall rated their acceptance by classmates less positively ($M = 2.78$) than other students did (4-12 months $M = 2.89$; 1-2 years $M = 2.92$; 2 or more years $M = 2.98$). In addition, classmates judged new students' sociability and leadership less positively than they judged that of other students, but this difference was smaller in the spring (see Table 3).

Does Friendship Quality Moderate the Relationship between Recency of Move and Adjustment?

Regression analyses were conducted to examine whether students who had a high-quality friendship in the fall of the school year improved in their adjustment during the year. These analyses also allowed for the examination of whether the quality of students' best friendships moderated the relationship between how recently students moved and improvements in

adjustment over the school year. Each measure of students' adjustment in the spring was used as the criterion in separate regression analyses. The corresponding measure of students' adjustment in the fall and a measure of friendship quality (positive or negative) were entered on the first step. The length of time students had been in their current school district and the interaction of friendship quality and length of time in the school district were entered second.

Students who had been in their school for two or more years showed greater improvement in their report-card grades over the course of the school year when they reported that their best friendships in the fall were higher in positive features ($\beta = .06, p < .03$). Conversely, students who were new to their school and reported more positive features in their best friendship in the fall showed a decrease in their report-card grades from the fall to the spring of the school year ($\beta = -.15, p < .05$).

Teachers judged students who had been in the district for two or more years as showing greater improvement in their social skills over the course of the school year when those students had a best friendship that was higher in positive features in the fall ($\beta = .06, p < .05$). However, students who had been in their school for less than four months in the fall were rated by teachers as decreasing in their social skills when they reported a best friendship characterized by more positive features in the fall ($\beta = -.17, p < .02$).

Students who had been in their school district for two or more years decreased in peer-reported problem behaviors from the fall to the spring when they reported a best friendship that was higher in positive features in the fall ($\beta = -.13, p < .01$). The reverse was true for students who had been in their school district for less than four months in the fall ($\beta = .24, p < .02$). For these students having a best friendship characterized by more positive features in the fall

contributed to increases in peer-reported aggressive, disruptive, sensitive, and isolated behaviors over the course of the school year.

Students who reported friendships higher in negative features in the fall decreased during the year in their academic competence ($\beta = -.04, p < .03$) and social skills ($\beta = -.05, p < .03$) as judged by their teachers, regardless of how long they had been in their current school.

Discussion

The pattern of adjustment for students who were new to their school in the fall was significantly different from that of students who had been at their current school for a longer period of time. In both the fall and the spring of the school year, students new to their school district perceived themselves to be less scholastically competent and were rated by their teachers as being less academically competent than other students. In addition, students in the sixth grade who were new to a school had lower report-card grades than did sixth graders who were not new to their school. It may be that the stress of moving to a new school makes transitioning from the grading system and standards of an elementary school to a middle school especially difficult. Consistent with theories of stress and coping, the stress involved in moving to a new place does take a toll on several aspects of students' school adjustment. However, students who had been in their current school for more than four months, but less than one year, did not differ in their academic adjustment from students who had been in their school district longer. And the negative impact of relocation on adjustment did not vary with age. This suggests that the immediate negative effects of moving on students' school adjustment are similar at all ages but that students are able to adapt to their new surroundings within a year.

Students who were new to a school in the fall also differed from other students in their social adjustment. In both the fall and the spring, new students perceived themselves to be less

socially accepted and were viewed less positively by their peers than were other students. These results indicate that at all ages the transition to a new school affects students' interactions with their peers. However, students who are in their second year in a new school are similar in their social adjustment to students who have been in the district for a longer period of time.

The positive and negative features of students' friendships were related to changes in their academic and social adjustment over the school year. The hypothesis that students who had a high-quality friendship in the fall of the school year would improve in their adjustment during the year was partially supported. Students who had been in their school for two or more years and had a best friendship higher in positive features in the fall improved in their report-card grades, were rated by their teachers as becoming more socially skilled, and were viewed more positively by their peers over the school year.

However, having a high-quality friendship in the fall did not result in improved academic adjustment over the course of the school year for new students. In fact, students new to their school district whose best friendship in the fall was characterized by more positive features showed a decrease during the year in report-card grades and teacher-rated social skills, and an increase in peer-nominations for problem behaviors. These unusual results were clarified by examining the correlations between positive friendship features and adjustment for new students whose best friend did or did not live near them. For students who reported that their friend did not live near them, who presumably were maintaining good friendships with peers from their old schools or communities, friendship quality was positively related to teacher-rated social skills in the fall ($r = .44, p < .001$) but not the spring ($r = .09$). Teacher-rated social skills were not correlated with friendship quality for new students whose best friend lived near them in the fall, who presumably had made new friendships quickly. These correlations suggest that maintaining

a high-quality friendship with an old friend was beneficial for new students' social adjustment in the fall, but that these benefits diminished during the school year. The results for report-card grades and peer-nominated problem behaviors may reflect similar processes.

Regardless of how long students had been in their school, students who rated their best friendship as higher in negative features in the fall were judged by their teachers to decrease in their academic competence and social skills from the fall to the spring. This suggests that students can learn negative patterns of social behavior while interacting with friends. When these students are with other classmates and teachers, they show the same negative behavior patterns. Negative reactions from classmates and teachers may then encourage these students to like school less and to disengage from classroom activities. This leads teachers to view these students as less academically competent and less socially skilled than students who are better able to avoid or quickly resolve conflicts with their best friends.

Table 1

Relationship between Time in Current School District and Academic Adjustment

Time in Current School District	Perceived Academic Competence	Teacher-Rated Academic Competence
Less than 4 months	2.78 _a	3.34 _a
4-12 months	2.99 _b	3.77 _b
1-2 years	2.95 _b	3.76 _b
More than 2 years	3.05 _b	3.82 _b

Note. Means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

Table 2

Relationship between Time in Current School District and Report-Card Grades by Grade

Time in Current School District	3 rd Grade	6 th Grade	8 th Grade	11 th /12 th Grade
Less than 4 months	3.23 _a	2.62 _a	2.66 _a	2.59 _a
4-12 months	3.29 _a	2.90 _{ab}	3.12 _a	2.85 _a
1-2 years	3.37 _a	3.16 _b	2.72 _a	2.91 _a
More than 2 years	3.30 _a	3.09 _b	2.93 _a	2.88 _a

Note. Means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

Table 3

Relationship between Time in Current School District and Peer-Rated Sociability/Leadership

Time in Current School District	Peer-Rated Sociability/Leadership	
	Fall	Spring
Less than 4 months	-.31 _a	-.13 _a
4-12 months	-.04 _b	-.01 _b
1-2 years	.04 _b	-.01 _b
More than 2 years	.10 _b	.06 _b

Note. Means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.