

All Students

Best things about friends

Throughout the study, when asked ‘What are the best things about your friendships?’ students most often responded that they valued their friends because they were:

- fun;
- someone to talk to,
- someone you could trust and who would support you;
- someone who understood you; and
- someone to do things with.

Some responses further indicated that students felt close to friends with whom they could identify, and/or with whom they shared common values, and, at times, particular interests.

As well, responses from other students revealed that they felt they could be relaxed, not shy, with friends they knew well, and that sometimes the ‘best thing’ about friends was about admiring particular qualities in others, and/or having someone show they valued certain qualities in you.

Some examples of frequently made comments over the course of the study on the ‘best things about friends’ follow.

- *“Having heaps of fun. Just keeping up with the latest gossip. I can have a laugh with them.”*
- *“They’re really cool. We have things in common, we like the same things. You can play with them, talk to them and play sports (rugby, basketball) and go for walks. One friend — a boy, goes to another school — we talk about everything in our lives.”*
- *“We, like, understand each other. They’re funny. We’re just all alike, we all like the same things. Everyone helps each other.”*
- *“They understand you, they’re not like your parents.”*
- *“They look out for me, kind and good to me. They care about me. They’re good to talk to.”*
- *“Have the same standards — [ie], wear appropriate clothing, no smoking, no drinking.”*
- *“They all like reading; we like studying together too.”*
- *“That we’re all the same nationality (Tongan).”*
- *“Getting to know each other better and better. We like doing the same things. They are fun to be around.”*
- *“We try to do something new or make stuff together.”*
- *“Comfort.”*
- *“If I’m stuck in the middle of something (problems and social stuff) they would help me. They care for me and stuff. Friendship problems or problems at home they would sort out for me.”*
- *“They’re all hard case. They do crazy stuff, for example, like my friend will do something that nobody will think he’ll do, then all of a sudden in class he’ll be really smart (intelligent) — that’s good.”*
- *“It’s better doing things as a group than on your own.”*
- *“Probably [the best thing about them is] having a lot of fun while working. It’s a friendly place/ atmosphere: that helps you with doing the work.”*

continued...

All Students

Best things about friends – continued

- “We’re in the ATC [Air Training Corps together] and it’s good to get to have a time to talk about things, for example, about a new air rifle and other things in the Gun Digest, and we talk about sports.”
- “Chatting — talking about nothing in particular. Currently we’re talking about evolution. We talk about silly/random things.”
- “You can tell them stuff, secrets, and know they won’t say anything. I like talking: talk, talk, talk. It’s real fun to exchange gossip.”
- “Can talk to them and don’t have to be shy around them.”
- “They listen to my problems; they’re loyal — don’t backstab, don’t lie to you They stick up for me.”
- “[The best thing is] just that I’ve got friends.”
- “They understand me, they know what I’m going through — bad things.”
- “They listen, they’re fun and they’re just cool to hang out with — the way they act, the things they talk about. They’re not like other people.”

Not So Good Things about Friends

Phase 1

Emily’s comment in Year 8 on any ‘not so good things’ about her friendships was:

“Some of them can’t keep a secret and it gets around. Sometimes you argue with them. Some can’t handle being rejected, they blame everyone but themselves.”

She added that another not so good thing was that “some of them live far away”, making it difficult to see them very often.

Phase 3

At the end of Year 9, Emily’s view of ‘not so good things about friends’ reflected the changing nature of teenage relationships, especially when boy–girl relationships begin to be part of the mix:

“When one of my friends gets a boyfriend and they treat their [other] friends differently. When you tell people things and it gets out and they tell everyone else — and all of a sudden it’s chaos.”

Phase 4

Emily’s comments in Year 10 seem to illustrate the tension young people may feel when trying to balance their own needs as an individual with the needs or desires of the group(s) they are part of:

*“When we want to go different ways: like when half the group will want to go **here** and half the group will want to go **there**. Or, say, one person wants to stay there and then the rest of the group want to go, it’s just, oh! Like if they want to go to the canteen and the rest of us don’t want to, then they get left out, that’s the only problem. [So it’s hard to please everyone?] Yeah. That’s the only problems though.”*

A ‘not so good thing’ about friends in Year 8 was when they couldn’t keep a secret.

Emily observed in Year 9 that girl–boy relationships led to tensions among friends.

A challenge in Year 10 was balancing personal choice and group decisions.

All Students

The not so good things about friends

Responding to a question about any 'not so good things about your friendships', it is of note that 38 percent of students in Phase 1, 54 percent in Phase 3, and 57 percent in Phase 4 considered that there was "Nothing" that was not so good:

- "Nothing really — maybe just that I miss them sometimes when I'm not with them."
- "Cool mates."
- "I don't reckon there's anything that's bad."
- "I'm happy with friends."

In addition, a small number of students stated that the only not so good thing about friends was that they 'live too far away to be able to see them very often' or that they had moved away entirely:

- "Losing them is hard — when they move away."

However, students who sometimes were not happy with their friends, generally simply mentioned disliking it when there were arguments, disagreements and/or instances of cattiness, gossip-mongering, or competitiveness:

- "Sometimes we disagree about things (eg, what we're going to do) and get in an argument."
- "Sometimes they get in little catfights, little girlie things. Sometimes you have your disagreements. But nothing too serious."
- "You can disagree if you spend too much time with them. Sometimes you can sort of get sick of one another and take words the wrong way."
- "We hurt each other, we make up. We just split up for a couple of days so we can cool down and then we go back to the friendship."
- "Sometimes some of us get a bit cocky, a bit too competitive, nothing too serious."
- "Probably [it's when] they backstab each other and I have to listen to it, but it's not too bad."

But, as well, other, usually more serious, issues were mentioned.

Most often, these involved: sometimes feeling pressured to do things they didn't want to do; people trying to make them 'take sides'; worrying about things some of their friends were 'getting up to'; sometimes being teased or excluded; having confidences betrayed; jealousies; and complications arising from boy-girl relationships. Some illustrative comments follow.

- "They sometimes tell everyone what you tell them."
- "Sometimes they tease me about being short."
- "Sometimes controlling."
- "Distract me when I'm working."
- "When they force you to do stuff you don't want to, like wag school and smoking — peer pressure to do stuff, but we are learning to say no to each other."
- "The not so close friends do silly things sometimes, things that might get you into trouble."
- "Get stuck in the middle of other's fights: other friends fall out with each other and I get caught in the middle."
- "Some of them are bad, some of them are street kids. They go out late, late, they don't go home. (I don't really go out late.) They get in trouble — I feel bad for them."
- "Sometimes they say things as a joke but I don't find it funny. Sometimes they leave me out of things. They can be a bit mean."

continued...

All Students

The not so good things about friends – continued

- “I’ve got this friend, I don’t feel safe around her, she steals and I’m frightened I might get blamed.”
- “Arguments about guys: if you have a boyfriend they get jealous.”
- “Can be boring with friends when you do nothing.”
- “Some of them smoke and drink and they try to get me to do it, or go to a party.”
- “We get jealous of each other.”
- “Sometimes my other friends, their attitude is not good. They take the wrong choice: when they’re supposed to be at class, they wag (go to the toilets).”
- “When you talk to them and they blow smoke on you. They smoke in toilets. They smoke to be cool, they follow what other people do.”
- “Friends who have boyfriends and girlfriends who they split up with: they come crying to me to do something like [give] a punch in the face. I only did that once (smashed his head against the wall).”

How Emily Rated Aspects of her Relationships with Friends

Exhibit B lists particular aspects of friends and friendships that we asked students to provide feedback on over the course of the study. On the whole, Emily’s responses remained consistent from Phase 1 through to Phase 3³³. The main exceptions during this period were that as time went on she was less likely to say that her friends all went to her school, less likely to say her friends at secondary school got into trouble at school, and slightly more likely to say that she and her friends did homework together³⁴.

In Phase 4, it was evident that some of Emily’s friends were different in character from those she

had previously mixed with, in terms of engagement in learning, for example. That is, in Year 10, Emily was less inclined to rate her friends overall as enjoying learning new things or wanting to do well at school, and considerably more likely to rate them as wagging, or as getting into trouble at school. This finding seems to correspond with the desire Emily expressed earlier to meet new people and mix with as diverse a range of students as she could. But, in Emily’s case, spending time with friends who were less motivated about schoolwork did not impact negatively on her own behaviours and attitudes to study and learning.

By Phase 4 there was greater diversity among Emily’s friends.

Some friends were not well engaged by school but this did not seem to impact negatively on Emily.

Exhibit B: Dimensions on which students provided feedback about friends over the course of the study

a) I have good friends at school	<p><i>The students rated each of the listed dimensions according to the following scale:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Definitely true</i> • <i>Mostly true</i> • <i>Sometimes true, sometimes not true</i> • <i>Mostly not true</i> • <i>Definitely not true</i>
b) My friends all go to this school	
c) Hanging out with my friends is very important to me	
d) I trust my friends	
e) I can talk to my friends if I have a problem	
f) My friends want to do well at school	
g) My friends enjoy learning new things at school	
h) My friends and I do homework together	
i) My friends get into trouble at school	
j) My friends wag school	
k) My friends push me to do stupid things	
l) I wish I had different friends at school	

³³ On dimensions a), c), d), and e) in Exhibit B, for instance, Emily gave a rating of ‘definitely true’ at each phase of the study, and for dimensions k) and l), ratings of ‘definitely not true’ at all four phases.

³⁴ This was perhaps because they felt a greater need to discuss or compare notes about the requirements of homework tasks than they had at primary school.

All Students

Rating aspects of their relationships with friends and certain characteristics of those friends

Students provided additional feedback about their friends by rating each of the statements given in the table opposite.

The data show that students were consistent before and at the three points after their transition to secondary school in saying that they had good friends at school, although they were a little less likely as time went on to say that their friends all attended the same school.

While still at primary or intermediate school, the proportion of students who wished they had different friends at school was slightly higher than it was later on in the study, perhaps supporting other evidence from the study that a number of students had 'outgrown' their present school, and were ready to move on to secondary school with the relatively larger, more diverse pool of potential friends to be found there. In addition, students in Phase 1 were a little more likely than they were at secondary school to say that their friends pushed them to do stupid things.

However, although not shown in the table due to combining the response categories at either end of the rating scale, students were also considerably more likely in Phase 1 to choose the 'definitely true' rather than 'mostly true' response option for statements a, d, e, f, and g than they were in subsequent phases, especially Phase 3. For example, 86 percent answered 'definitely true' in Phase 1 regarding statement 'a' — having good friends at school, compared to 68 percent in Phase 3. Equivalent figures for statement 'd' — trusting friends — were 59 percent and 41 percent.

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All Students								
<i>Rating aspects of their relationships with friends and certain characteristics of those friends – continued</i>								
‘Dimension of friendship’	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3		Phase 4	
	Definitely true/ Mostly true ^a %	Mostly not true/ Definitely not true ^a %	Definitely true/ Mostly true %	Mostly not true/ Definitely not true %	Definitely true/ Mostly true %	Mostly not true/ Definitely not true %	Definitely true/ Mostly true %	Mostly not true/ Definitely not true %
a. I have good friends at school	95	–	84	–	90	1	86	–
b. My friends all go to this school	48	28	52	19	31	30	39	29
c. Hanging out with friends is very important to me	68	11	68	10	60	3	71	4
d. I trust my friends	90	–	86	1	82	–	83	1
e. I can talk to my friends if I have a problem	84	5	73	5	74	6	75	8
f. My friends want to do well at school	83	–	79	3	78	4	79	4
g. My friends enjoy learning new things at school	74	3	69	–	57	6	66	9
h. My friends and I do homework together	31	44	23	52	10	60	17	47
i. My friends get into trouble at school	31	35	16	52	21	44	12	48
j. My friends wag school	3	90	12	77	10	68	7	79
k. My friends push me to do stupid things	8	82	4	87	4	80	–	89
l. I wish I had different friends at school	10	80	4	88	3	85	5	90

^a To simplify presentation of the data, in this table we have combined the two response categories ‘Definitely true’ and ‘Mostly true’. The same applies for the categories ‘Mostly not true’ and ‘Definitely not true’. Although some of the detail is lost by doing this, it still provides a useful idea of overall trends in students’ responses regarding feelings and views about their friends over the course of the study. Note that where there was missing data, this was usually only at the level of one or two percent, with occasionally three or four percent of students not rating a particular statement. Therefore, most of the data not reported in the table related to the remaining response option ‘Sometimes true, sometimes not true’.

Parent Perspective on Emily's Friends

Phase 1

For a 'significant other', adult perspective regarding friends, parents were asked to comment on their Year 8 child's friends. This is what Emily's parents thought were the 'best things' about their daughter's friends at this stage of her life:

"[They are, in the main,] sociable, independent, responsible, trustworthy, mature, confident."

But they also had concerns about some of Emily's friendships, advising that a 'not so good thing' was:

"Older friends trying to influence her to partake in drinking alcohol, smoke drugs, steal."

Emily's parents also indicated that they 'sometimes' had more general concerns or worries about their daughter's friendships. However, given their very positive overall feedback about her, this was probably at a 'being aware in order to prevent potential dangers for Emily' level, rather than that they had actual concerns about what Emily and her friends were doing.

Parental concerns about some of Emily's friendships had lessened by Phase 3.

Emily herself did not directly mention peer pressure to undertake particular activities or behave in certain ways³⁵. However comments she made in the context of other interview questions suggests she was aware of the negative implications of an unwise choice of friends.

Phase 3

At this phase of the study, Emily's parents chose not to provide comment about her friends, either concerns or positive aspects, suggesting that they did not have any particular issues about Emily's friendships at the time.

Teachers considered Emily's friends to be a positive influence.

Some confirmation of this interpretation comes from their response to a later question which asked parents if they currently had any concerns or worries about a number of aspects of their Year 9 child's life. In contrast to the previous year, when they were at times worried about the negative influence of some of Emily's older friends, Emily's parents no longer expressed any concerns about friendships.

Teacher Views of Emily's Friends

As teachers are clearly in a unique position to observe a student's interactions with their peers and others, we wanted to obtain their particular perspective on the students' friends. In Year 8, the teacher considered that Emily's particular group of friends 'usually' had a 'positive attitude towards their schoolwork and engaged well in learning activities'. She also felt that they were 'usually' 'well behaved in class and at school'; and that they 'usually' 'actively participated in and enjoyed out-of-class school activities such as sports, cultural activities, and music groups'.

As well, this teacher saw these friends as having a 'positive impact' on Emily in terms of her learning, her behaviour in class and at school generally, participation in the wider life of the school, and the way in which she interacted with teachers and with 'students outside her own social group'.

Late the following year, Emily's Year 9 form/English teacher was also of the opinion that Emily mostly mixed with friends who were a positive influence and that, on the whole, Emily had very good relationships.

The same teacher provided similar feedback about Emily in Year 10. In addition, apart from a small indication that Emily sometimes hassled ('stirred' or teased) other students a little, it seemed that Emily may have matured in a number of ways since Phase 3 in her interactions with other students. Instead of being described as 'occasionally' likely to be 'influenced by peer pressure to do something out of character', as she had been in Phase 3, her form teacher now rated her as 'never' being influenced in this way. She was also now considered to be 'always' 'good at resolving disputes or keeping things smooth with peers' — as compared to 'sometimes' being good at this in Phase 3.

According to the data in Table 2, all of the teachers who commented mostly felt that Emily's relationships with other students were positive, well-balanced ones.

³⁵ For example, Emily consistently answered 'definitely not true' to the statement 'My friends push me to do stupid things'.

A Brief Overview of Emily's Friendship Networks

On the basis of the data presented in Table 2 and in relation to the dimensions listed in Exhibit B, together with many comments she made in each of her four interviews, it is evident that friends were very important to Emily, both at and beyond school. And, despite certain ups and downs, in common with most young people, Emily's relationships with her friends seemed to be generally very positive.

In terms of school and learning, Emily most often³⁶ seemed to be choosing to mix with other students

who did not get into trouble at school, did not stay away from school without valid reason, liked to learn new things, and considered that it was important to do well at school. And from her perspective, Emily seemed able to make her own decisions rather than be led by others.

The views expressed by Emily's parents and Year 8 teacher support these findings. In the main, information provided by Emily's Years 9 and 10 teachers does as well, despite the indication that there was occasionally a 'mischievous' element to Emily's relationship with some other students.

Emily mostly related very well to other students.

She felt 'strong' enough to resist peer pressure.

Table 2: Teacher perspectives on aspects of Emily's relationship with friends/other students

Aspect of relationship with other students	Rating		
	Phase 1: Year 8 teacher	Phase 3: Year 9 form teacher ^a	Phase 4: Year 10 form teacher ^a
Gets on well with other students	1	2	1
Gets hassled/bullied by other students	5	4	5
Hassles/bullies other students	5	4	4
Isolates herself from other children	5	5	5
Is good at resolving disputes or keeping things smooth with peers	1	3	1
Is influenced by peer pressure to do something out of character	Missing data	4	5
Helps/supports other students in the class	2	2	2
Mixes with students who are anti-social or get into trouble	5	4	5
Sees other students' points of view	1	2	1

Key to rating categories in Table 2:

1 = Always

2 = Often

3 = Sometimes

4 = Occasionally

5 = Never

^a This was the same teacher.

³⁶ However, as discussed earlier in the chapter, Emily appeared to be keen to 'experiment' more in her social interactions in Year 10 and have a more diverse range of friends, including some less keen on school and schoolwork.