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# Q&A with Xingna Qin and Ping Ren, authors of “Does Having Vulnerable Friends Help Vulnerable Youth? The Co-Evolution of Friendships, Victimization, and Depressive Symptoms in Chinese Adolescents’ Social Networks” Child Development

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Does having vulnerable friends help vulnerable youth? The co-evolution of friendships, victimization, and depressive symptoms in Chinese adolescents' social networks

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Contact:
Jessica Efstathiou, Public Relations Consultant

E-MAIL

Peer victimization and depressive symptoms, reflecting social and emotional vulnerabilities, tend to peak in early to middle adolescence. Friends play an important role in protecting adolescents from victimization and depressive symptoms. However, it is unclear whether having friends is always beneficial, particularly when these friends experience vulnerabilities too.

A new study released in *Child Development* analyzed whether having vulnerable friends helps or hurts victimized and depressed (i.e., vulnerable) adolescents and whether this depends on classroom supportive norms. The study was conducted by researchers at the University of Groningen in The Netherlands, the University of Turku in Finland, Linköping University in Sweden, and Beijing Normal University in China.

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) had the opportunity to chat with authors Xingna Qin (Beijing Normal University and University of Groningen) and Ping Ren (Beijing Normal University) about this important research.

**SRCD:** What contributed to your interest in pursuing this particular research?

**Xingna Qin and Ping Ren:** When we read the studies about the role of friends on adolescents' development, we were initially a bit confused. Most previous studies found that friends are beneficial for adolescents (e.g., Schacter & Juvonen, 2018; Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020), but some studies found that victimized friends

would increase victimization (e.g., Schacter et al., 2015; Yeung Thompson & Leadbeater, 2013) or depressed friends would increase their own depressive symptoms (e.g., van Zalk et al., 2010). We found other evidence, for example, victimized adolescents had lower depressive symptoms when they had victimized friends (e.g., Schacter & Juvonen, 2019), but had higher depressive symptoms when they had no victimized friends (Brendgen et al., 2013). These inconclusive studies made us curious about the role of vulnerable friends on adolescents' vulnerabilities.

**SRCD:** Describe your hypotheses.

**Xingna Qin and Ping Ren:** We made two opposing hypotheses about the role of vulnerable friends on adolescents' vulnerability: the vulnerability-enhancing hypothesis vs. the shared-plight hypothesis. The vulnerability-enhancing hypothesis states that having vulnerable friends may exacerbate adolescents' vulnerability development over time: if victimized adolescents befriend victimized peers, they may increase in victimization and depressive symptoms over time, and if depressive adolescents befriend depressed peers, they may increase in victimization and depressive symptoms over time. On the contrary, the shared-plight hypothesis states that befriending vulnerable peers may benefit vulnerable adolescents by diminishing victimization and depressive symptoms over time. We also made two opposing hypotheses about the role of classroom norms. On the one hand, we hypothesized that classroom supportive norms would provide a buffer against the proliferation of depressive symptoms and victimization or strengthen vulnerable friends' beneficial role and on the other hand, we hypothesized that classroom supportive norms would exaggerate the proliferation of depressive symptoms and victimization or reduce the beneficial role of vulnerable friends.

**SRCD:** How do you define the term "vulnerable?" in your research?

**Xingna Qin and Ping Ren:** When speaking about 'vulnerable' adolescents and friends in general in this study, we refer to processes that may occur for both depressed and victimized adolescents and their friends.

**SRCD:** In your opinion, why was previous research inconclusive on whether having vulnerable friends help or hurts vulnerable (i.e., depressed or victimized) youth and why was the role of the broader classroom context ignored?

**Xingna Qin and Ping Ren:** First, the research question whether having vulnerable friends help or hurts vulnerable (i.e., depressed or victimized) youth is quite complicated, which can be divided into four specific conditions, as we have discussed in the hypotheses. Second, there may also be a methodological reason for this. For example, prior research on this topic used traditional regression techniques, which fail to account for interdependencies of social relationships and to control for general network tendencies (e.g., Schacter & Juvonen, 2017). We used a multiplex social network analysis to incorporate the depressive feelings and victimization of oneself and one's friends simultaneously. We increased the complexity further by examining the role of classroom norms as well. Our research was inspired by research on the role of classroom norms on adolescents' relationships and emotions, in particular by research on the "healthy context paradox" (Huitsing et al., 2019).

**SRCD:** Your work showed that depressed adolescents with depressed friends increased in victimization over time, whereas victimized adolescents with victimized friends also increased in victimization but decreased depressive symptoms. Can you explain these results? Xingna Qin and Ping Ren: This result can also be understood as that vulnerable friends may hurt vulnerable adolescents' social position (i.e., increase the risk for victimization), yet at the same time may help vulnerable adolescents' emotional development (i.e., protect against depressive symptoms).

- First, vulnerable adolescents and their vulnerable friends (depressed adolescents with depressed friends or victimized adolescents with victimized friends) are likely at the periphery of the peer group, which may have negative social consequences: other peers may view them as 'odd,' This makes them easy targets of victimization because it is less risky to victimize someone who is not liked or central in the peer group. Moreover, vulnerable (e.g., depressive, or victimized) friends lack the social skills to tactically intervene in bullying situations, which may provoke even more bullying over time (Shin, 2022).
- Second, victims reap emotional benefits from clustering with other victims, who know better what they are going through than those who have not experienced social mistreatment. Being friends with other victims stimulates adaptive social comparisons ("I am not the only one being victimized"; Taylor et al., 1990), which likely diminishes victims' tendency to blame themselves for victimization and makes them feel better about themselves (Graham & Juvonen, 2002). In contrast, victims with non-victimized friends may start engaging in upward comparison processes (Taylor et al., 1990), which likely elevates emotional distress.

**SRCD:** What are some implications of your research?

**Xingna Qin and Ping Ren:** Our findings are important for social interventions relating to school bullying and depression. First, grouping vulnerable individuals and encouraging them to share their experiences of mistreatment and depressed thoughts may help vulnerable students and their friends to alleviate their distress. But for these vulnerable groups, teachers should be aware and recognize their social position in the classroom (Marucci et al., 2021) and then should be more proactive to protect them from being the target of bullying. Second, for social interventions in Chinese middle schools, both the whole-classroom approach to improving the classroom environment and the targeted approach that focuses on the most vulnerable students may be needed. If interventions succeed in diminishing the depressive symptoms of these adolescents, they may become more open to relating to other classmates and benefit from the supportive environment around them. At the same time, norm-related victimization should be combatted in such classrooms: not every student may be able to conform to highly prosocial norms, and interventions may need to make classmates more tolerant of such students.

**SRCD:** What were the limitations of your research?

**Xingna Qin and Ping Ren:** We have several limitations in this study. First, adolescents' friendship nominations were limited to five friends, which may fail to capture the full range of friendships in the classroom. Second, we focused on the best friendship processes within classrooms, which may not capture complete social networks in adolescence. Third, although social network analysis offers the advantage of disentangling selection and influence effects, it cannot handle continuous variables, and converting continuous variables into categorical variables may lead to a loss of some information. Fourth, classroom supportive norms were based on a continuous measure, and our categorization may have left out important information by grouping them into high, moderate, and low supportive norms. Fifth, we included gender as a control variable but did not examine whether selection and influence processes differed for boys and girls. We also did not examine whether these processes differed for cross-gender and same-gender friendships (see for an exemplary study: Hsiao et al., 2019). In addition, this study only focused on the interactions between adolescents and friends experiencing the same vulnerability. Last, caution is necessary when interpreting the results given the relatively small numbers at the classroom level.

**SRCD:** What are your recommendations for future work in this area?

**Xingna Qin and Ping Ren:** We think an avenue for future research is to examine the impact of friends from various contexts (e.g., friends within the classroom, grade-mates, or out-of-school friends), as well as

potential differences in friendship influence depending on the quality of the friendships. The protective effect of friendship against (victimization-related) depression may depend on friendship quality and friendship stability (Bernasco et al., 2022). Second, another interesting avenue for further research is to examine friendship selection and influence processes among cross-gender and same-gender networks. Last, it is interesting for future research to examine whether students' social position (e.g., perceived popularity) could work as a mechanism by which friends' characteristics (e.g., depression) influence adolescents' victimization.

**SRCD:** If you could offer one quote or takeaway about the research, what might that be?

**Xingna Qin and Ping Ren:** Having vulnerable friends can help and hurt vulnerable adolescents. The findings present an interesting paradox—when victims are friends with other victims, they feel less depressed but are more likely to be the target of continued victimization.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, "Does Having Vulnerable Friends Help Vulnerable Youth? The Co-Evolution of Friendships, Victimization, and Depressive Symptoms in Chinese Adolescents' Social Networks" by Qin, X. (University of Groningen, The Netherlands and Beijing Normal University, China), Laninga-Wijnen, L. (University of Groningen, The Netherlands and University of Turku, Finland), Steglich, C. (University of Groningen, The Netherlands and Linköping University, Sweden) Zhang, Y. (Beijing Normal University, China), Ren, P. (Beijing Normal University, China), and Veenstra, R. (University of Groningen, the Netherlands).
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