The Nature of Unhealthy Female Friendships and Their Potential Causes

Sydney Mickelsen[1] and Bela Singha[2]
[1]Palo Alto High School and [2]Merck & Co., Inc.

INTRODUCTION

Unrecognized unhealthy friendships create a problem for teenagers who begin to normalize relationships where exclusion and occur. Teenagers who are unable to form good friendships will struggle with **finding an emotional support system as adults.**

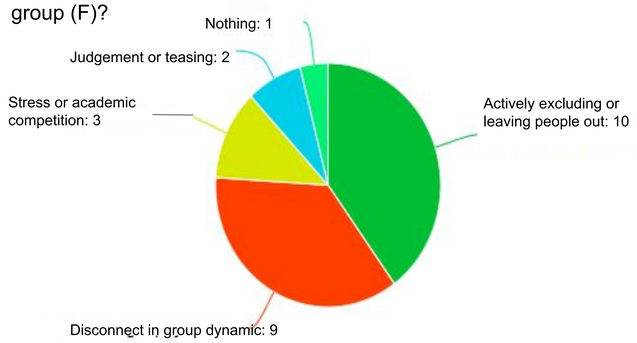
Women have **significantly shorter** friendships than men[3], but women anticipate being more **upset when their current close friendships end** than men do.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

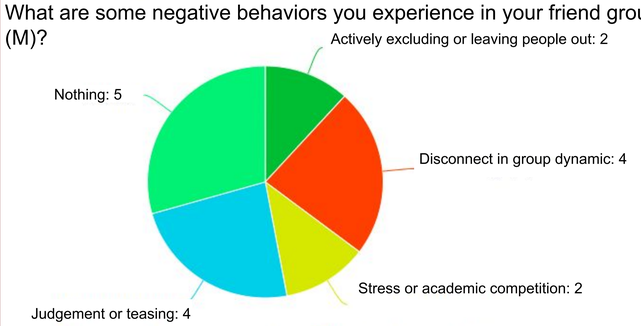
- Despite often displaying outward forms of "bullying" through **physical conflict and insults[6],** men's **advantages in social, economic, and professional situations[4]** allow them to bring more **advice and support[4]** to a friendship, resulting in a **support system that is stronger than those in female friendships.**
- Women usually exhibit **less obvious or aggressive negative behaviors[5]**, often dismissed as a normal part of growing up, but their impact on a woman's social life can be more significant than for males where such behaviors are more of the norm.
  - PAUSD's bullying curriculum is **focused physical/verbal[7]** bullying, making materials more **focused on fixing boys' problems** than addressing the issues of female friend groups.

DATA AND FINDINGS (F) indicates pooled female responses, (M) indicated pooled male responses

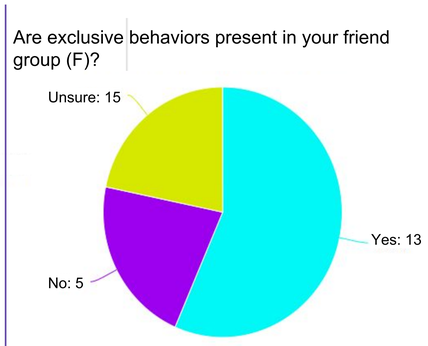
What are some negative behaviors you experience in your friend group (F)?



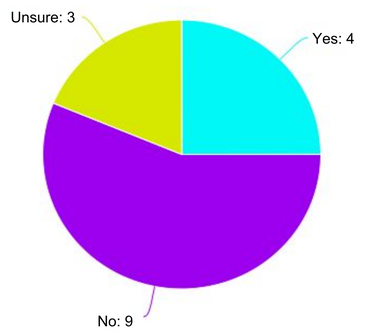
What are some negative behaviors you experience in your friend group (M)?



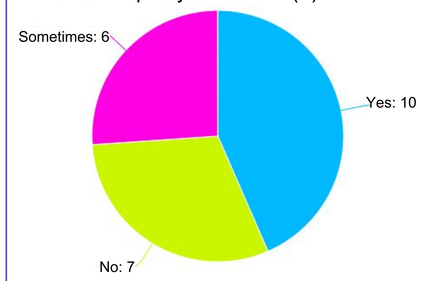
Are exclusive behaviors present in your friend group (F)?



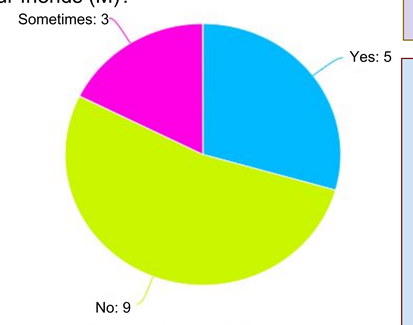
Are exclusive behaviors present in your friend group (M)?



Do you ever feel pressure to measure up to your friends (F)?



Do you ever feel pressure to measure up to your friends (M)?



RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

1 Surveying

- Online survey
- Data from AAR students and the senior class Facebook page

2 Summarizing and Coding

- Summarized data into tables, coded to identify trends and patterns
- Data split by gender, same coding categories used for male and female responses to highlight gender differences
- Calculated percentages for each category of my coding

3 Conclusion

- Commonalities and popular responses used to relate to bigger themes

DISCUSSION, ANALYSIS, AND EVALUATION

Main Themes:

- Teenage boys show more intentional negative behaviors, but teenage girls have more unintentional problems.
- Females place a high value on social status and the condition of their friendships.
- Females were more conscious and aware of exclusivity and negative issues.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND NEXT STEPS

Negative cycle in female friendships:

1. Teen girls are **more invested in being well-liked** among their friends than boys.
2. They are more concerned about and **more sensitive to being excluded.**
3. Less intentional negative behaviors are **more difficult to identify or solve.**
4. **Self blame** for friendship issues with no obvious other reason for problems causes insecurity.
5. Increased anxiety about maintaining current friends, and **cliques may form** in order to create a feeling of control and to prevent further feelings of exclusion.

Future work:

- Why do teenage girls value social status so highly?
- How do pre-existing self-doubt and insecurities play a role in this cycle?
- How can teenage girls feel more supported and secure in their friendships?
- How can teenage girls solve problems that aren't from intentional or obvious behaviors without self-blame?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / REFERENCES

I would like to thank Bela Singha, Erin Angell, Deanna Chute, and my parents for their help and support in the completion of this project.

References

3. Benenson, J., & Christakos, A. (2003). The greater fragility of females' versus males' closest same-sex friendships. *Child Development, 74*(4), 1123-1129.
4. Lipman-Blumen, Jean. (1976). Toward a homosocial theory of sex roles: An explanation of the sex segregation of social institutions. Signs. 15-31. doi:10.1086/493272.
5. Nixon, C. & Baird, M. (2010). It has a name: Relational aggression, high school lesson #3. *The Ophelia Project.*
6. Pascoe, C. J.,. (2013). Notes on a sociology of bullying: Young men's homophobia as gender socialization. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking,* 87-104. doi:10.14321/qed.0087
7. PAUSD Bullying Prevention. (2017, May 01).