

Public Abstract

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Title: The Roles Of Parents And Close Friends As Information Sources Regarding Children's And Adolescents' Adjustment

Obtaining information from multiple sources when studying childhood psychopathology addresses many of the problems associated with youth self-report measures (e.g., social desirability biases). Acquiring multiple perspectives also aids understanding how children and adolescents exhibit symptoms differently in diverse settings. Parents are often considered crucial sources of information regarding children's functioning due to their prominent role in their children's lives. However, agreement between parent- and self-reports is typically modest. This is concerning, as information from various informants can result in strikingly different prevalence rates. Also, concerns about youth functioning may depend upon the information source considered and may not generalize across informants.

Surprisingly, researchers and clinicians have largely failed to consider close friends as information sources regarding children and adolescents' adjustment. Recently we found that children and adolescents' close friends also may be knowledgeable of youth psychological adjustment (i.e., depressive symptoms; Swenson & Rose, 2003). Relations were similar in magnitude to those typically found between youth- and parent-reports. The present research extends prior findings on friends' knowledge of youth adjustment by (a) directly comparing self-friend agreement to self-mother agreement, (b) expanding the domains of adjustment considered to include behavioral as well as emotional adjustment, and (c) examining the moderating influences of relationship quality and self-disclosure on self-other agreement.

Participants were drawn from a sample of 610 fifth-, eight-, and eleventh-grade students from four school districts in the Midwest. Agreement between friend- and self-reported externalizing problems (e.g., aggression) was stronger than for internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression). Significant agreement also emerged between mother- and self-reports of both internalizing and externalizing symptoms. When friend- and mother-reports were considered simultaneously, only mother-reports of youth distress were related to youth self-reported internalizing adjustment. For externalizing adjustment, however, both friend- and mother-reported distress were uniquely related to self-reported symptoms. In addition, agreement between youth self-reports and the reports obtained from mothers and from close friends was influenced by relationship qualities and self-disclosure. These findings suggest that friend reports may play a role in research on youth psychopathology and may be able to help identify youth who manifest symptoms in peer contexts (e.g., withdrawal) or who share feelings of distress primarily with close friends, and thus would be missed by relying on adult informants alone.