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Good Friendships among Children: A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation

DAVID WALKER, RANDALL CURREN AND CHANTEL JONES

ABSTRACT

Ethical dimensions of friendship have rarely been explicitly addressed as aspects of friendship quality in studies of children's peer relationships. This study identifies aspects of moral virtue significant for friendship, as a basis for empirically investigating the role of ethical qualities in children's friendship assessments and aspirations. We introduce a eudaimonic conception of friendship quality, identify aspects of moral virtue foundational to such quality, review and contest some grounds on which children have been regarded as not mature enough to have friendships that require virtue, and report a qualitative study of the friendship assessments and aspirations of children aged nine and ten (n = 83). In focus group sessions conducted in ten schools across Great Britain, moral qualities figured prominently in children's assessments of friendship quality. The findings provide evidence of children having friendships exhibiting mutual respect, support, and valuing of each other's good character.

Keywords: friendship, children, friendship quality, eudaimonic well-being, SDT, moral development

I. FRIENDSHIP QUALITY

Quality of friendship and the social competence that contributes to friendship quality are widely regarded as important to children's wellbeing and adjustment (see e.g., Adams, Santo and Bukowski, 2011; Berndt, 2002; Eisenberg, Vaughan and Hofer, 2009; Ladd, 2005; Ladd, Kochenderfer and Coleman, 1996). "Quality" is typically characterized in non-moral terms, as pertaining to "level" or "degree" of emotional support, absence of conflict, enjoyment of companionship, and the like. "Social competence" is similarly characterized in non-moral terms, despite a broadening of this term to include not just specific social skills but often "prosocial" and cooperative orientations or temperament (Crick, Murray-Close, Marks and Mohajeri-Nelson, 2009; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Ladd, 1999, 2005, p. 193 & 318). Prosocial orientation and cooperative temperament are constructs that strive for value neutrality, and such neutrality has long been

considered essential to scientific objectivity, but there are grounds for contesting this assumption (see Kristjánsson, 2013) and addressing the ethical dimensions of friendship quality and social competence as objects of investigation. If, for example, fairness is a virtue preferred in friends, it scarcely furthers our understanding of friendship to exclude it from consideration. We introduce a eudaimonic conception of friendship quality as a basis for investigating ethical aspects of children's friendship quality assessments and aspirations.

Children's Friendships

Observational and interview studies have recently suggested that children are concerned with the ethical attributes of peer friends, grasp ethically salient implicit rules of peer relationships (help, share, be honest, etc.), and can begin to display moral sensitivity and responsiveness toward peer friends by ages 4 to 6 years (Bigelow, Tesson and Lewko, 1996; Dunn, 2006). Peer friendship is also by many accounts *foundational* to moral development, as an arena of voluntary association with social equals beyond the family (Akerman, Kenrick and Schaller, 2007; Bell & Coleman, 1999; Bukowski, Motzoi and Meyer, 2009; Bukowski & Sippola, 1996, 2005; Dunn, 2006; Keller, 1984; Piaget, 1932/1965) and a sphere of trust, disclosure, morally reflective conversation, and mutual formation (Aristotle, 1999; Brewer, 2005; Cocking & Kennett, 1998; Sherman, 1989; Wadell, 1989), suggesting a developmental interdependence of friendship and virtue. These studies go some ways toward overcoming a tradition of thought suggesting that children do not possess or value in their peers the ethical attributes significant for friendship quality (Aristotle, 1999; Kohlberg, 1984; Selman, 1980)[1], but there has been little direct theoretical or empirical investigation of the matter.

The Present Inquiry

This study will contest the more pessimistic views of children's character and friendships, and offer findings from our own qualitative research that reinforce previous studies suggesting that at least some pre-adolescent children value and exhibit virtues of character important to friendship quality. We will introduce a eudaimonic conception of friendship quality and identify aspects of moral virtue foundational to such quality. We will then acknowledge some grounds on which it has been supposed that pre-adolescent children are not capable of kinds of friendship that require the possession of virtue, and suggest a variety of grounds for hypothesizing that at least some

children are capable of having such friendships with their peers. These preliminaries will provide the theoretical basis for the study of pre-adolescent children we will then report and discuss.

We interpret the data we will present in Section 4 as evidence that by age ten some children will have: (1) learned – perhaps largely through their experience of friendship – that a variety of moral virtues are desirable in friends, and (2) adopted aspirations to exhibit those virtues of friendship themselves. The limitations of this study do not enable us to estimate the extent to which these aspirations are reflected in the *acquisition* and consistent *expression* of those virtues, but we interpret the data as indicating the possession of moral motivation focused on the well-being of others, as well as motivation to engage in activities of friendship that would be consistent with and develop the relevant virtues.

II. THE NATURE, EUDAIMONIC QUALITY, AND VIRTUES OF FRIENDSHIP

The Nature of Friendship

Friendship has been defined by philosophers as a form of relationship that is: based in the mutual positive regard two people have for one another, exhibits mutual concern and willingness to act for the good of the other for the other's sake, and involves time spent together in shared activities (Helm, 2013). As implied by the Greek word for friendship, *philia* (a form of love), the mutual positive regard involved in friendship is often characterized as affectionate or imbued with friendly feeling, and it is assumed or expressly affirmed that the pleasure or enjoyment of shared activities is in some measure an enjoyment of the friend herself or her perceived qualities. It is also often noted explicitly that the positive regard and goodwill essential to friendship are not just mutual, but mutually recognized and acknowledged. To say that friendship is a form of relationship *based in* mutual positive regard is to imply that *liking* each other or *appreciating* each other's perceived qualities is an essential aspect of friendship. This philosophical definition seems well aligned with common intuitions about who is, and is not, a friend.

A commonly used psychological definition of friendship identifies it as a form of "voluntary interdependence between two persons over time, that is intended to facilitate social-emotional goals of the participants, and may involve varying types and degrees of companionship, intimacy, affection, and mutual assistance" (Asher & McDonald, 2010; cf. Berndt & McCandless, 2009; Hays, 1988). This definition does not expressly identify mutual positive regard and goodwill as *necessary* conditions for friendship, and it seems to depart very significantly from the philosophical

definition in these respects. Yet, the overview of psychological research on which the definition is based identifies mutual liking (positive regard) as an "essential condition for friendship formation" (Hays, 1988, p. 397) and it identifies positive affect (enjoyment associated with positive regard) as "necessary to hold a friendship together" (p. 394). Enjoyment of each other's company and "mutual aid" are also mentioned as key properties or expectations of friendship (pp. 393 & 395). The mutual aid that is characteristic of friendship and valued by friends is presumably rooted in liking and caring about each other, rather than extrinsic motivations (known in some contexts as "ulterior motives"). Returning to the philosophical definition, it seems to capture by implication most or all of the inherent benefits or "provisions" of friendship noted in the psychological definition: the validation of one's worth entailed by a friend's positive regard for oneself as a person, the security of mattering to someone who is concerned for one's well-being, the companionship implied by time spent together in shared activities, and the intimacy made possible by time spent together and by the trust and mutual liking implied by mutual validation and concern.

The differences between these definitions may, in short, be largely reconciled by consulting the wider body of psychological research on which the psychological definition is said to be based. Although other attempts to define friendship might be considered, the reconciliation of these philosophical and psychological definitions justifies the conclusion that *mutual positive regard* and *mutual concern and willingness to act for the good of the other for the other's sake* are essential features of friendship.

A Eudaimonic Conception of Wellbeing and Friendship Quality

These defining features of friendship imply that friends must possess certain attributes. They must be capable of feeling and exhibiting positive regard for other persons based on appreciation of perceived qualities. And they must be capable of concern for another's wellbeing and be willing to act for the good of the other. These are broadly moral attributes and would qualify as moral virtues if they are informed by an *accurate* perception and understanding of the other person's qualities and wellbeing, and are reliably exhibited in conduct. The question we will address is whether virtues of character are important to friendship *quality.* The remainder of this section and the next will consider this question from a theoretical standpoint, laying groundwork for the empirical investigation reported and discussed in sections four and five. We will suggest a *eudaimonistic* framework grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which has demonstrable

explanatory value with respect to adult friendship (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner and Ryan, 2006; Demir & Davidson, 2012; Demir & Özdemir, 2010; La Guardia & Patrick, 2008), and well-established applicability across the life span (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

The term, "*eudaimonia,*" signifies "living well" or "living a good life," and friendship is by all accounts essential to living a good life (see, e.g., Argyle, 2001; Aristotle, 1999, pp. 119-120; Demir, Orthel and Andelin, 2013; Demir & Özdemir, 2010; Helm, 2013; Holder & Coleman, 2009; Pahl, 2000). One well-established reason for regarding friendship as essential to a good life is that it is important to subjective well-being. Subjectively, it provides the most complete satisfaction of the psychological need for *relatedness* (experiencing mutual acceptance and affirmation), and contributes to the satisfaction of needs for *competence* and *autonomy* (Demir & Davidson, 2012; Demir & Özdemir, 2010; La Guardia & Patrick, 2008), the satisfaction of all three of these needs being theorized and empirically confirmed to be essential to happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Affirming the value of others enhances one's own well-being even when it is not reciprocated (Deci et al., 2006), and being a non-reciprocating recipient of such affirmation typically yields related benefits; friendship involves reciprocal affirmation of worth, combining the benefits of both giving and receiving affirmation. The eudaimonistic perspective holds that friendship through which human social potential is fulfilled *well* or *virtuously* also contributes to a life being lived admirably. The eudaimonistic framework we adopt posits that when people aspire to live well or live good lives, they have in mind lives that involve admirable and satisfying fulfilments of human potential (Aristotle, 1999; Curren, 2013; Ryan, Curren, and Deci, 2013). Human social potential is fulfilled admirably in affirmations of the value of others and promotion of their good or flourishing.

Eudaimonic friendship, or friendship that is high in eudaimonic quality, would accurately perceive and appreciate a friend's qualities, and, in acting for the friend's good for her own sake, would understand her good in eudaimonic terms. Friendships high in eudaimonic quality would be rich in intrinsically rewarding activities and exhibit mutual support of self-determination, personal growth, wider relational fulfillment, and success in worthy endeavors. Such friendships contribute to the satisfaction of the friends' basic psychological needs, and could not do so without the friends exhibiting forms of basic moral respect entailed by respecting each other as self-determining rational beings. Eudaimonism posits that eudaimonistic friendship is good for people, and we hypothesize that it aligns with and explains judgments about who is and is not a "good" friend.

Virtues of Eudaimonic Friendship

The forms or aspects of moral virtue required for eudaimonic friendship can be specified as follows:

(1) Eudaimonic friendship requires basic moral respect for others as self-determining persons, so a disposition to show such respect towards other persons is required. Basic moral respect of this kind is inherent in the idea of moral virtue, and understood to entail norms of non-coercion, honesty, fairness, and avoidance of emotional manipulation that undermines rational judgment. It is a foundational form of respect for what is good because it is good, the good in question being the *potential* for rational self-determination that is more or less fulfilled in all human beings. Eudaimonic friends don't coerce, deceive, cheat, manipulate, seduce, or try to corrupt each other.

(2) Eudaimonic friendship involves appreciative regard for a friend because he or she is *actually* good, and such regard is only possible for someone who is able to discern *who* is good in specific ways and *who* is not. Discernment of this kind is an aspect of being virtuous, and it is dependent to some extent on the possession of virtuous desires, emotions, aspirations, and understanding. Eudaimonic friends see what is good in us and appreciate us for who we are.

(3) The third aspect of virtue required for eudaimonic friendship is willingness to act for the good of another for the other's sake. Such willingness goes beyond what is required by basic moral respect, and is in that sense morally "supererogatory" or a reflection of a special form of commitment or devotion that is part of friendship. What the qualification, "for the other's sake," signifies is that the acts exhibiting devotion to a friend spring from a desire to promote the other's well-being. Examples would be actions intended to help a friend through difficulty, satisfy a need, or enable the friend to grow, learn something new, or achieve an end that is important to her and not unworthy of her. Terms that would come to mind in describing the qualities exhibited in such examples are "caring," "generous," and "supportive."

III. CAN CHILDREN HAVE EUDAIMONIC FRIENDSHIPS?

Grounds for Pessimism

Pessimism about the quality of children's friendships goes back at least to Aristotle, who developed a typology of kinds of friendship that remains a frequent point of reference for

philosophers (Aristotle, 1999). He argues that the best and most complete form of friendship is based on friends' mutual appreciation of each other's good *character*, and that the friendships of young people appear to be based on *pleasure*, since their actions are dictated by what presents itself as most pleasant at any given time.[2] His view is essentially that children are not yet morally responsible agents, in whom settled states of character and deliberative reasoning yield choices, and that becoming such agents occurs primarily through a lengthy process of guided practice or "habituation" (Aristotle, 1999, pp. 18-36; Burnyeat, 1980; Curren, 2000, pp. 162-164; Curzer, 2002; Sherman, 1989). This view of children has persisted, and it derives some credence from the prominent role that Aristotelian ideas have played in the ongoing renaissance of virtue and happiness studies (Annas, 2011; Curren, 2015a; Kristjánsson, 2007). It is a view that is in some respects testable, however, and it is safe to assume that some of the testable hypotheses in Aristotle's ethical system will be refuted by the evidence, just as others may be well supported (Ryan et al., 2013).

Another basis for doubting that children are capable of eudaimonic friendship is the dated body of theories of the stages through which childhood friendships develop, the best known of which are those of H. S. Sullivan, Brian Bigelow, William Damon, and R. L. Selman (Bigelow, 1977; Damon, 1977; Damon, 1983; Selman, 1980; Sullivan, 1953). To the extent that these theories focus on cognition and are modelled on cognitive stage theories, it would be reasonable to expect a pessimistic estimation of children's prospects for high quality peer friendships. As we noted in passing above, the Kohlbergian model would imply that in the sphere of moral development pre-adolescent children are, at best, committed to upholding conventions. This would predict, as Selman's model does, that displays of reciprocity in children's peer friendships would be inflexible and motivationally unrelated to the friend's well-being (Selman, 1980). Among these and other researchers, there is also general agreement that adolescence is a time of growth in the ability to grasp another person's perspective, and thus a time when friendships become more intimate and characterized by mutual understanding (Dunn, 2006; Selman, 1980; Youniss, 1980). The role of perspective taking is undoubtedly an important aspect of moral development (Batson et al., 2003), sensitivity to other's interests, and the intimacy of friendships, and it is sometimes inferred from this that friendships dependent on virtues would not typically appear until late adolescence (Healy, 2011, p. 447). By this logic, even Damon's work on childhood friendship may be perceived as unfavourable to preadolescent children having eudaimonic friendships. Our own assessment is that limitations of perspective-taking ability, intimacy, and degree of understanding of the other's perspective would not obviously disqualify a relationship from being a eudaimonic friendship,

their significance for friendship notwithstanding. To the extent that these developmental models were cognitive and based on interview data, their identification of adolescence as the period in which true friendship emerges may also reflect a mistaken assumption that social competence cannot precede the capacity to verbalize friendship preferences and aspirations.[3]

Grounds for Optimism

Neither the Aristotelian considerations nor the stage theories of friendship speak with one voice or convincingly against the possibility of children having eudaimonic friendships.

The aspects of Aristotle's thought that remain viable starting points for contemporary investigations do not rule out the possibility of children having eudaimonic friendships. First, he notes that there are natural differences of virtue, some children being substantially more cooperative and reasonable than others (Aristotle, 1999), and that the young are generally more prone to trust and seeing the best in people (Aristotle, 1984, p. 2213). If children can indeed possess such *natural virtue*, then some pre-adolescents might be virtuous enough to have eudaimonic peer-friendships, without much moral habituation. Second, there is an implicit distinction in Aristotle's ethics between passive habituation (by immersion in a socially healthy world) and active habituation (through guided practice) (Curren, 2015a), and the fact that the former could begin earlier than the latter suggests there might be time to acquire the virtues required for friendship during childhood. Third, there are grounds for optimistic readings of the nature and timing of active habituation (Annas, 2011; Curren, 2014; cf. Curzer, 2002; Sherman, 1989). Specifically, if the most plausible understanding of what habituation could be is that it is infused with *reason-giving* from the beginning, and encourages an *appreciation* of what is good and an *aspiration* to be good, then we are not forced to envision an *appreciative responsiveness to the goodness of people* as a distant trailing effect of moral development. Responsiveness of this kind would entail all of the aspects of virtue we have identified as essential to eudaimonic friendship.

Fourth, and most intriguing, is the possibility that children's autonomous engagement in the activities of friendship might constitute a form of habituation along the lines just noted. Most children have friends from a very early age, and the centrality of friendship in their lives would normally ensure steady and extensive "practice" in the activities of friendship, unless their lives are systematically controlled by adults. Habituation of this kind would have three distinctive features: (1) a child learning to be a good friend would be *coached* by peer-friends, who admonish

and advise on the basis of their own developing understanding of how friends should treat each other; (2) the importance of the friends and friendships to the child may be an unusually direct source of *aspiration* to self-improvement (Dunn, 2006, pp. 5-7, 38-40, 42-44); (3) the forms of goodness or virtue required of friends seem to have a natural basis that makes them identifiable (if not necessarily nameable) to children in the course of their experience with friendship.[4] In favourable circumstances, pre-adolescent children's developing attempts at friendship might be productively shaped by an ability to compare their own experiences of what is good and bad in friends with the expectations of peer-associates who offer criticism and encouragement.[5] Evidence that children's selection of friends is sensitive to virtues of character would support this supposition that peer coached practice in the activities of friendship might be an efficient mode of character development, since children drawn to others on this basis would be reasonably well placed to receive helpful moral coaching.

Returning to the stage theories of friendship, there are significant differences between them regarding the apparent bases of children's friendships, their expectations of friends, and their responsiveness to friends' well-being. Bigelow's and Damon's models both suggest that appreciation of a friend's moral qualities is a significant aspect of pre-adolescent peer friendships, with Damon identifying trust, reliability, and personal qualities as all significant by ages 8 to 10 (Bigelow, 1977; Damon, 1977). Sullivan's model holds that children aged 8 to 11 years old are already learning how to help each other grow as persons in their peer friendships, suggesting an orientation to affirming each other's value and promoting each other's good for unselfish reasons (Sullivan, 1953). The contrast between these developmental theories of children's friendships and Selman's model, noted above, is in any case oblique, given the differences between their various conceptualizations of the nature of the stages involved. All told, these theories are far from decisive regarding the possibility of children having eudaimonic friendships with peers, suggesting that further research is needed.

IV. THE STUDY

Rationale

Although the research on friendship relations between children is vast, varied and promising, there is much that can still be learned from investigations of children's experiences of friendships. In particular, the ethical dimensions of preadolescent children's friendships and their

understanding of virtues of character in the context of these relationships are underexplored. Having specified the virtues foundational to eudaimonic friendship (in section 2) and found the existing research literature inconclusive regarding the capacity of pre-adolescent children to form such friendships (in section 3), the present study focuses on children's awareness and possession of attributes of virtue as aspects of friendship quality.

Methods

As part of a broader investigation of character and character education in schools across the United Kingdom, 14 focus-group interviews with children aged nine and ten (n = 83) in 10 schools were conducted. These schools were selected to include different types and cover different regions of the UK (Table 1). Focus groups were carried out between March and October 2013.[6] The initial purpose of the focus groups was to investigate children's use of moral language, "friends" being one of the categories used to prompt discussion of the qualities they admired or expected in people (other categories included "teachers", "famous people", and "family members"). Six children were recruited for each focus group session, on the basis of parental consent and through requests that teachers provide samples of students representative of their schools with regard to ability, behaviour, attainment, gender, and race.

At the start of focus group sessions the participants were told that there were no right or wrong answers, that they were not being tested, and that the researchers present were interested to know their views in order to learn how schools might help children be good people as well as good students. In each group children were asked to write down the word "friend" and then what they thought made a good friend. Once completed, researchers facilitated the pupils' discussion of their ideas, before covering the other themes, with sessions lasting between 40 and 60 minutes.

Table 1 – List of participating schools and pupil codes

Focus Group Code	School code	Information about school	% of pupils eligible for Free School Meals in school	Total pupils KeyStage1/ KeyStage2	Members (and pupil codes)						Unidentifiable
FG1	**P5**	Academy Non-faith Birmingham	51	820	G1 FG1	G2 FG1	G3 FG1	B1 FG1	B2 FG1	B3 FG1	G FG1/B FG1
FG2					G1 FG2	G2 FG2	G3 FG2	B1 FG2	B2 FG2		G FG2/B FG2
FG5	**P8**	Local authority maintained Non-faith Hereford	17.6	547	G1 FG5 "Lizzy"	G2 FG5	G3 FG5	G4 FG5 "Alison"	B1 FG5 "Tom"	B2 FG5 "Gavin"	G FG5/B FG5
FG7	**P10**	Community school Non-faith Cornwall	10	80	G1	G2	G3	B1	B2	B3	G FG7/B FG7 "Jack"
FG8					G1 FG8 "Tilda"	G2 FG8	G3 FG8	B1 FG8	B2 FG8 "Toby"		G FG8/B FG8
FG9	**P11**	Voluntary aided Roman Catholic Stockport	45.6	128	G1 FG9	G2 FG9	B1 FG9	B2 FG9	B3 FG9	B4 FG9	G FG9/B FG9 "Dan" "Jessica"
FG10	**P11**				G1 FG10	G2 FG10	B1 FG10	B2 FG10 "Ben"	B3 FG10 "Mike"	B4 FG10	G FG10/B FG10
FG11	**P13**	Independent Non-faith Suffolk	-	196	G1 FG11	G2 FG11	G3 FG11	B1 FG11	B2 FG11	B3 FG11	G FG11/B FG11
FG12	**P2**	Independent Catholic London	-	124	G1 FG12	G2 FG12	G3 FG12	G4 FG12	B1 FG12	B2 GF12	G FG12/B FG12
FG13	**P14**	Community Non-faith Cumbria	44	205	G1 FG13	G2 FG13	B1 FG13 "Tod"	B2 FG13 "Ian"	B3 FG13	B4 FG13	G FG13/B FG13
FG14	**P15**	Community Non-faith Staffordshire	46.7	229	G1 FG14 "May"	G2 FG14	G3 FG14	B1 FG14	B2 FG14	B3 FG14	G FG14/B FG14
FG15					G1 FG15	G2 FG15	G3 FG15	B1 FG15	B2 FG15	B3 FG15	G FG15/B FG15
FG16	**P12**	Community Non-faith Birmingham	22.9	362	G1 FG16 "Sonam"	G2 FG16	G3 FG16	G4 FG16	B1 FG16 "Sanjay"	B2 FG16	G FG16/B FG16
FG17	**P16**	Community Non-faith Gloucester	20.5	297	G1 FG17	G2 FG17 "Kate"	G3 FG17 "Sarah"	B1 FG17 "Kevin"	B2 FG17	B3 FG17 "Matt"	G FG17/B FG17

Table 2. Pupils' indirect and direct reference to virtue

Theme	Explanation of Theme	Virtue	Evidence (1)	Evidence (2)
		Virtue	**Directly**	**Indirectly, selected examples**
1	**Refer to many virtues, directly and indirectly**	Honesty	√	Never hides anything from me; never lie to you
		Sense of humour	√	Funny; jokes a lot; hilarious
		Reliability	√	Do never tell a secret
		Love	√	
		Trustworthiness	√	Don't talk about you behind your back; don't betray you; can tell anything
		Generosity	√	
		Helpfulness	√	Give you advice
		Possession of self-control	√	
		Kindness	√	
		Care	√	Cares about you; look after you; listens to your feelings; comfort you
		Perseverance/determination	√	Kept on going; never give up; always battling to be the best; tenacious
		Humility/modesty	√	Doesn't boast or show off; teachers admit not good at everything
		Thoughtfulness	√	
		Creativity	√	
		Loyalty	√	Always by your side; always there for you; on your side
		Braveness/courage	√	Sticking up for people
		Empathy	√	Understand what you're feeling
		Consideration	√	Thinks of others; understanding of other people, like notice if somebody's upset
				Care about how you're feeling; think about you…not just themselves
		Perspective		See things from other people's point of view
		Share	√	e.g. lunch, bricks
		Respect	√	
		Patience	√	
		Gratitude	√	Say thank you a lot
		Fair	√	Gives everyone a chance to play with her; treat pupils evenly; wouldn't be biased
		Forgiveness	√	
		Teamwork	√	Cooperative
		Commitment	√	Put a lot of effort into things for people; always works hard
		Intelligence	√	Someone who knows stuff; smart; knowledgeable
		Encouragement/support	√	Believe in pupils; supports you in everything you do
		Vitality		They've got a lot of energy
		Politeness	√	

Analysis

Transcripts from the sessions were initially coded for direct and indirect references to virtue (Table 2). This was done using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whereby the third author open-coded (Holton, 2007) the transcriptions line-by-line for references to virtue. This revealed unexpectedly sophisticated descriptions of virtue, especially in the discussions of good friends, and led the researchers to explore the idea of *good* peer friendships between children aged nine and ten. The third author subsequently re-coded the data using the Aristotelian categories of pleasure, utility, and virtue-based friendships. At this stage, further theoretical work was undertaken (by the second author) to clarify the nature, varieties, and character prerequisites of friendship. On the basis of this theoretical work, the data were re-coded again, focussing on the three aspects of moral virtue required for eudaimonic friendship. The final stages of coding were completed in the first instance by the third author and then again by the first author, before the two coders compared, discussed and refined the basis on which coding decisions were made in order to achieve inter-coder reliability. Findings are based on the transcript segments addressing friendship and participants' assessments of their own goodness.

The presentation of these findings will be organized around the research questions: Do pre-adolescent children recognize virtues of character as important to friendship quality? Do they aspire to be friends who possess and exhibit the attributes of virtue essential to eudaimonic friendship or already possess these attributes and have eudaimonic friendships? The presentation of findings bearing on the latter question will match the sequence of attributes identified in section 2.

Do Pre-adolescent Children Recognize Virtues of Character as Important to Friendship Quality?

Direct and indirect references to a wide range of virtues occurred frequently throughout the sessions (Table 2), as well as detailed accounts of childhood situations in which the virtues of friends were objects of concern. We interpreted this as evidence that many of the children recognised a variety of moral virtues as desirable in friends, and (as discussed in the sub-section below) that they also aspired to or exhibited such virtues themselves. A high degree of concern and care for each other was also observed during the actual focus groups. Friendships were mostly discussed in warm and caring ways and often with reference to shared activities that are routine for children of this age, such as completing or handing in homework, performing in and

organising school assemblies, selecting partners in Physical Education lessons, and lunch time games such as football.

In describing qualities of a good friend, the language of virtue seemed to come naturally to many of the children. They said, for example, that a good friend was brave, loyal, helpful, honest, reliable, and so on. Other children who did not refer to virtues by name described good friends in ways that implied virtues. For example, loyalty was referred to indirectly through such phrases as, "always by your side" (B1FG1; FG2), "always there for you" (G3FG5; B1FG13; FG7), and "on your side" (G3FG16). Empathy was implicit in references to a friend understanding what one is feeling. Fairness was indirectly referred to through such phrases as, "gives everyone a chance to play with her"' (BFG9) or "wouldn't be biased" (B3FG1). Trustworthiness was indicated through statements that friends "don't talk about you behind your back" (G1FG1), "don't betray you" (GFG5), or "can tell you anything" (G1FG13). Both direct and indirect references to virtue expressed appreciation of virtuous acts of friendship and appreciation of friends based on their good character.

The children participating in the sessions said a friend is "always fair" if they "include everyone in games" (G3FG15), and a good friend "wouldn't be biased and go on the other person's side [but would] listen to two sides of the story" if there was an argument, because people are "equal" (B3FG1). Fairness was also a trait that the children admired in their own characters, or aspired to: "I always try to be fair… I try to not think about how *I* feel and try and see things from other people's point of view. Like, I'm not the only one that's upset" (G2FG14). One example given for fairness involved a talent show when, "everyone got something to sort out," e.g. the decorations or speaking to teachers about being judges (G2FG16). Being honest and not deceiving or manipulating each other were also identified as aspects of basic moral respect required of friends. Mike[7] said of friends, for example, that "they wouldn't cover up the truth. Say they did something wrong, [they] wouldn't blame it on you, [they'd] be honest and say 'yeah it was my fault', and say sorry." Sanjay also explained that if "one of your friends accidentally steals something that's yours [they would] tell [you], instead of [you] being upset." Despite worries that "you might lose them as a friend" (because of taking the object in the first place), a good friend would recognise that the best solution is to be honest and admit the mistake ("if you do tell them they'll just be happy").

Something children said they expect of friends is that they would not cheat: "if someone cheated for their house[8] to win you wouldn't be good friends, even if he cheated for his house to win the results" (B3FG17). In addition to perceiving cheating as less than admirable, they expressed the view that a friend would not lead them to act in ways which get them in trouble.

For example, Gavin told us that “sometimes there’s one bad thing about your friend, because friends can land you into trouble if they make the wrong move and be a little bit silly.” Similarly, Sarah felt a good friend was “someone that won’t get you in to trouble,” and a friend was “someone that makes you feel comfortable and safe around them.” Neither would a good friend apply excessive pressure to get his own way: “if [they] didn’t really want to play a game, not like forcing them to play it just ‘cause you want to play it” (Toby).

Keeping secrets and helping each other “pull through” in the face of difficulties stood out as the foci of the children’s more sensitive friendship observations. The disclosure or guarding of sensitive information was often invoked as a marker of the quality of a friendship, especially as a measure of being valued by a friend and in determining trustworthiness or how far the friends could trust each other. It takes time for trust to develop between friends, Jack explained through a story about an ant: “‘I trust you to look after this tiny ant’, and if they can do that then you can move on to the bigger secrets.” One child explained that a secret “would just be between you and your friend” (G3FG1), while another said “you can tell me stuff and I won’t tell anybody else if you don’t ask me to” (BFG13), “because if you told them something that you don’t want anyone else to know and they go blurting it out you get really upset” (FG2).

Supportiveness in helping one “pull through” difficulties was also invoked as a broad marker of the quality of friendships, and would commonly be associated with such attributes as compassion, generosity, and valuing people for themselves. The provision of support between friends was described as entailing practical and emotional help, in such terms as, “‘they’ll help you to cheer up” (G3FG5), “they care about your feelings” (G2FG17), “when times are tough, helps you to pull through” (B2FG10), and [a friend is] “someone to talk to if you’re feeling sad” (B2FG15). Children looked to friends to “…always [be] there for [them] when [they were] upset” (B1FG13), and to be “there when [they] need a support or a shoulder to cry on” (G2FG10). Children said they would help friends in these ways, and expect friends to offer such support, when facing difficult events such as injuring themselves, being in hospital, or experiencing the death of a pet or family member. For example, Ben claimed that if “your grandma is dead or something like that, they’ll help you pull through,” while May explained that “if something bad happened to your family, [a good friend] would come over to you if you are upset and ask you why, and [they] would say ‘I am sorry for that,’ erm, maybe give you a hug, and then talk through it, because it always feels better when you talk to someone about your problems.”

Best or close friends were most likely to help each other pull through since “best friends are the ones that are always there for you” (GFG5) and “if you have a really, really strong

friendship with someone, they're always there if you need them" (G2FG10). Many different kinds of circumstances stimulated the need and expectation for friends to help each other pull through, and this was achieved in multiple ways, such as by cheering each other up, telling jokes, sticking up for each other (e.g. "If somebody bullies you they stick up for you and make things good" (B1FG1), helping each other in arguments, and handing in homework. Lizzy referred to an example from the day before, recounting that "…my friend was sad yesterday because her dog is too weak, and I said 'he'll be alright,' sort of thing like that," while in a different group, Sonam explained that "a few days ago a friend […] was worried about something, so at lunch [they] sat down and chatted and… she feels a bit better now."

There were references to valuing friends for their non-moral qualities and for instrumental reasons, though there were far fewer such references than expected. Some children indicated that they only wanted to be with someone who was fun or funny, not sad, moody or boring. For example, Jessica said that happiness was important: "…so, like, if someone's sad or angry then there's no point being their friend because they … wouldn't show that they liked you if they weren't happy when you were there." Similarly, Dan said that what was needed in a friend was "a sense of humour – so not always like dull and they don't have a laugh or anything." Other examples included children who saw friends as sources of practical assistance at school (e.g., Sanjay: "they help you with your work if you don't have any ideas") or as companions so they wouldn't be alone. Such concern with pleasure and instrumental valuing of friends was evident in some children, but on the whole this was overshadowed by references to virtues of character.

Do Pre-adolescent Children Possess or Aspire to the Virtues Essential to Eudaimonic Friendship?

Basic moral respect for others as self-determining persons.

Basic moral respect was repeatedly exhibited by the children in how they related to each other within the focus groups and in their accounts of friendship. Friends show each other respect by "listen[ing] to each other" (BFG14); they "don't sort of talk when they're talking" (G2FG8). They also understand that "people make mistakes and just get on with them" (B2FG14). Many recognised that friends should consider each other's opinions and respect what others have to say. So, for example, "if you're playing a game and they wanted to change, listen to what they have to say cause it might be a good idea… if you don't want to do that that's fine, but it's good to just listen" (G3FG8). If someone does say something "you don't like, don't go off in a big strop; say

‘I don’t really like that idea, can we do another idea”’ (G2FG8). By providing these examples, the children acknowledged the importance of respecting others’ ideas and preferences, and expressed aspirations to show such respect in practice, however limited their ability to do that in practice might be. The examples above concerning fairness, cheating, and pressuring provide similar evidence of sensitivity to aspects of basic moral respect, and aspiration to be a person who respects others in those ways.

Another indication that children aspire to a form of basic moral respect for each other is that they say friends “take time to learn about [each other’s] personality” (GFG8). They recognised that “different people have different qualities” (G2FG10), and that “everyone’s different in their own way” (G1FG17); whereas “some people might [exhibit] forgiveness, some people might not” (G2FG10). Alison told us that even if “the outside appearance of a person is really dull and boring, [you might] open it up and it’s a really good book.” The expression of friendly curiosity about each other may qualify as an aspect of respect and good will in ongoing social contact. It is in any case a prerequisite for the development of friendships based on valuing a friend for him or herself.

Appreciating a friend’s good qualities.

The children in this study seemed to recognise and appreciate attributes of good character in their friends. They identified admirable character attributes as important and discussed them in ways that demonstrated substantial and nuanced understanding of relevant criteria for judging who does and does not possess them. Many distinguished a good or true friend from a poor or false one and expressed this in relation to virtue, both directly and indirectly (Table 2), saying that a friend who could not be trusted (or relied upon) would not be a “proper friend,” but would be a “fake friend” (G2FG10). Many of the children easily described good qualities that they appreciated in their friends. Among these were qualities such as caring (“about your feelings” (multiple), kindness (“he’s always kind to others and always helps them” [B2FG8]; “make[s] you laugh to make you feel good” [B1FG5]), honesty (“they don’t lie to you and they’re always honest” [B2FG13]), thoughtfulness (e.g. with regards to playtime games friends didn’t enjoy, “they might think about doing something else to make you feel included” [B4FG13]), loyalty (“doesn’t act against you even when everyone else does” [G2FG2]), gratitude (“if you … do something for them, they are grateful” [G1FG14]), sharing (“if you had more bricks, like 14, and they had 10, you can

split the four… so you'll both have 12" [B3FG17]), and empathy ("empathy, put yourself in place of me" [GFG12]).

Trustworthiness was an important good in the character of a friend and was discussed constantly in reference to their own friends: "well I've got friends and they're trustworthy, and I put my trust in them daily" (G3FG14). It was also discussed hypothetically: "you've got to be able to trust them, and they've got to be able to trust you" (G1FG10); "if you ask someone to do something, you trust them to do it, so if they don't do it, you kind of lose trust with them, so you don't trust them anymore" (B1FG17): and "if they told loads of lies then they'd kind of lose their trust with the friend, which isn't a good sign of friendship" (GFG9).

Modesty and humility were admired both hypothetically and as attributes of specific friends: "it's basically when you're modest... So you know what arrogant is? … Modesty is the opposite of that. So that's what humble is" (BFG12). A lack of modesty was criticised by Tod and Ian "because if you always say 'I'm good at this, I'm good at that' or 'I'm better than you at that,' then it's boasting," and so friends would "just give up on you" and "then they're not your friend anymore."

Appreciative regard for friends' good qualities was also accompanied by discussions of the children's own qualities and aspirations to be worthy friends. For example, some pupils said that they needed to "work on [taking] more time to think of others instead of doing things that [they] want to do" (May/G1FG14); that they "should improve on [standing up for friends] a bit" (G1FG12); and that they should involve old friends more ("I need to spend more time with my friend… because I used to play with him all the time, but ever since I've had new friends and moved onto the street I'm leaving him out" [G3FG15]). These examples reflect how children perceive their own characters in the context of their friendships, and demonstrate an understanding of relevant virtues and aspirations to practice and exhibit them. Many of the children expressed a dedication to their friends' happiness and understanding that this required them to monitor or improve their own characters. They thereby expressed an aspiration to possess virtues associated with eudaimonic friendship.

Willingness to act for the good of another for the other's sake.

Being willing to act for the good of another for the other's sake, or expecting this of a friend, was a recurrent theme in the focus group sessions. Sometimes this was understood to require special efforts and attempts to improve oneself as a person. Expressions of concern for friends often

revealed a surprising degree of nuance, sensitivity and tact, involving the protection of each other's feelings and the exercise of good sense. Tilda told us that good friends needed sometimes to be "truthful, but untruthful in a way" and went on to explain that "if they ask you, like, 'Do you like my clothing?', you can't just go, 'No, I hate it,' but should instead say 'Yeah, I think it really suits you but I don't think I would ever wear it.'" Tilda went on to say, "If you, er, invited your friend round to your house and you had like a dog, you'd say, 'Oh do you like my German Shepherd, Sally?' [But if say] in the past they've [the friend] said they've had bad encounters with German Shepherds, instead of saying like, 'No they attack me', [they would] be friendly." Tactfully fielding questions from friends in a "truthful but untruthful" way involved mundane matters such as "ugly" pencil cases and more serious considerations such as friends asking if they're "fat" (BFG12).

These kinds of discussions of balancing compassion and honesty were frequently referred to as important to being a good friend and they provide evidence of concern to act for the other person's sake. The children engaged in these discussions displayed thoughtfulness about how to exhibit different virtues in challenging situations, often recognizing that making an effort on someone else's behalf was part and parcel of friendship. Some children said that they supported each other in assemblies ("I came in even though I was sick; I came for her because I knew I wouldn't let her down" [G4FG12]), that they cared for friends when they were upset and stood up for them ("I stand up for my friends because I don't like when people be mean to [them]" [B2FG12]); that they encouraged each other during their SATs (test taken in year six, when pupils are around the age of ten) (G2FG16), and generally showed that sensitivity to a friend's needs is important: "if you're always thinking about yourself… you wouldn't have a friend if you always did that, like 'me, me, me,'" and nobody "would want a friend that… doesn't think of you and thinks of themselves" (G1FG14).

Supporting a friend could be complicated when opinions differed or situations provoked jealousy or envy, such as when a friend gets a reward the other would like. But, still, a friend should "be happy for you [if] you got an opportunity that they didn't" (G2FG14) and remain loyal, "if you've got something maybe that your friend would want" (G1FG14). "A proper friend would be someone who, say if you liked something different that they didn't particularly like, they don't change their opinion about you… they just stay friends with you, because you're your own person" (G1FG8). How do children apply such insights and know what to say and do? The children in one session explained that "you have to look at their face and work out what they're feeling," or "sometimes it's body language" (GFG5).

Limitations

A limitation of relying on teachers to select students for the study is that researchers could never be sure how truly representative the samples within each school were. The expectation that teachers would choose only six pupils for each session will have made this task difficult for them, but making sessions larger was not feasible. It is possible that a more representative sampling of students would have revealed a lower incidence of concern with moral aspects of friendship quality and evidence of capacity for true friendship.

Another limitation of the study is that the researchers' framing of the purpose of the focus groups ("how schools can help children be good people") and dynamics of group process with researchers present may have induced a higher incidence of references to virtues and displays of virtuous aspiration. A study design in which children are prompted to discuss friendship quality without adults present might reveal a lower incidence of concern with moral aspects of friendship or – perhaps just as likely (see Dunn, 2006) – a higher incidence of negative moral assessments of specific peers. Although a skewing of responses toward what subjects perceive as socially desirable could be anticipated, there was no cuing of any of the specific attributes the children identified as desirable in friends and aspired to themselves. That is, the children were cued that "goodness" was of interest to the researchers, but there was no cuing of what would count as good. So while a social desirability bias is likely, the children's focus on specific attributes may nevertheless be a significant reflection of their own experience of peer friendships.

A third limitation of the study's methods is that they may underestimate children's capacity for eudaimonic friendship, if their social competence outstrips their descriptive capacities.[9] Children even younger than the nine- and ten-year-olds in this study may well be capable of friendships high in eudaimonic quality. Because the qualities of their friendships and friendship preferences may be largely inaccessible to interview and focus group methods, future studies should include observational methods where feasible.

Finally, this study offers no insight into the impact of early institutional experiences that bring young children together with more peers than they might otherwise encounter, while also structuring much of the time they spend together.

V. DISCUSSION

Are children capable of true friendship? Do they value and possess the attributes of character essential to friendships high in eudaimonic quality? We have found no basis for the pessimistic view that real friendship does not emerge until adolescence, and we see strong evidence in this study of children valuing and supporting each other in ways characteristic of eudaimonic friendship. We posited that eudaimonistic friendship is good for people, and hypothesized that it would align with and explain judgments about who is and is not a good friend. A peer who shows concern for one's wellbeing and supports the fulfillment of one's potential and associated satisfaction of one's basic psychological needs is much more likely to be identified as a good friend than one who does not. This hypothesis is substantially confirmed by the present study: children value friendships that respect self-determination and support personal growth, success in worthy endeavors, and wider relational fulfillment.

Children in the sessions we conducted discussed examples of real and "fake" friends from their own experience, offering meaningful criteria for the possession of relevant virtues. This suggests that children aged 9 to 10 have enough discernment of who is good in specific ways, and who is not, in order to form eudaimonic friendships. It also suggests variability in how consistently children of this age display basic moral respect for each other, and that some do so with enough regularity to have eudaimonic friendships. We also saw substantial evidence that children of this age attach importance to friends valuing each other for themselves and being willing to act unselfishly for each other's sake. In sum, there is significant evidence that children are capable of and value eudaimonic friendship, much as adults do, even if their respective spheres of shared activity are very different.

As expected, this study did offer insight into children's moral character, and it revealed a command of the language of virtue that was surprising, given recent discussions of the disappearance of such language from public discourse (Kesebir and Kesebir, 2012). In the context of prior research on children's friendships, the session transcripts also indicate a significant and surprisingly sophisticated understanding of interpersonal respect, appreciation of good moral attributes in others, aspiration to become a better person by doing what is characteristic of good friends, and commitment to the good of others for their own sake. Although it is impossible to judge on this basis how consistently this understanding and aspiration is manifested in admirable conduct, the evidence of genuine moral motivation is strong. We interpret the data as indicating the possession of moral motivation focused on the well-being of peer friends, as a virtue-theoretic understanding of moral motivation would require (Curren, 2015b), and motivation to engage in

self-directed activities of friendship that would be consistent with and develop the requisite virtues.

What was less expected initially was the extent to which the study would also reveal evidence that pre-adolescent children care about the ethical qualities of peers as an aspect of friendship quality. This suggests that some children's understanding of *good* friendship coincides substantially with eudaimonic friendship as we have defined it, and that they do have eudaimonic friendships. The evidence that children care about their friends' moral character and experience variability with respect to character within their circle of peers also suggests that, in contexts similar to those sampled in our study, many children will gravitate to others whose own moral attributes and perceptions will provide a context for peer-coaching favourable to becoming a better friend and better person. This should not be surprising. However limited children's ability to conceptualize virtues and qualities of friendship may be, they have needs whose frustration is painful. It is predictable that, given the choice, they would gravitate to peers who are more supportive of their relational, autonomy, and competence needs, and aspire to be worthy of their friendship.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study is the first to investigate the role of ethical qualities in children's friendship assessments and aspirations, and it suggests that at least some children do understand many of the same virtues of friendship adults would identify, value them, aspire to them, and may exhibit them in the context of friendships with peers. We conclude that the ideal of eudaimonic friendship is consistent with children's understanding of good friendship, and that the satisfaction of psychological needs invoked in studies of adult friendship quality may also substantially explain children's judgments of friendship quality. The ethical aspects of friendship quality warrant further investigation.

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[1] Kohlberg was notoriously opposed to conceptualizing moral development in terms of virtue, but his cognitive stage theory of moral development implies that pre-adolescent children are at best committed to upholding social conventions. By contrast, virtue involves responsiveness to the value of things, and friends typically want to be valued for themselves or their inherent qualities.

[2] The only other basis for friendship Aristotle identifies is *utility*, or a person's usefulness in obtaining some desired object or assistance.

[3] We owe this important observation to an anonymous referee.

[4] On the general theme of there being forms of goodness that are natural in the sense of being requirements for human flourishing or attaining satisfying goods, see Foot (2001). On the significance of being *supplied* with a vocabulary of virtue and "the good" more generally, see Annas (2011: 16-25); Arthur (2010: 79-84).

[5] Identifying the conditions in which peer-mediated habituation might efficiently promote moral learning, and not undermine it, is beyond the scope of this inquiry, though it is fair to assume that independent moral socialization and the availability of potential friends who already care about being good are important, and that the accessibility of vocabularies and exemplars of goodness is helpful in enabling children to think through their experiences of friendship productively. Studies of children's peer relationships bear out the fact that their friendships can be both very positive and quite problematic.

[6] All but one of these sessions was conducted by the first author.

[7] Pseudonyms are used throughout. See Table 1.

[8] The term "house" refers to a grouping of children within a school for purposes of registration, competition as "house teams" in sporting events, and the like.

[9] We owe this important observation to an anonymous referee.