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Early adolescents' perspectives on factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development with peers at the time of school transition

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ABSTRACT

Supportive peer relationships are fundamental for mental health and well-being. Hence, peers and friends are a valuable resource, especially at the time of transition from primary to secondary school. Yet, current literature lacks both novel approaches to studying friendship development and how to involve early adolescents in research that is being conducted about them. Within the present study we used novel participatory research methods involving early adolescents who were active in the analysis of their own generated data. We aimed to better understand their perspectives on factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development with peers during the time of school transition between primary and secondary schools. A total of 916 pupils ($M_{age} = 10.44$ years, range = 9–16) participated in 54 participatory workshops that were conducted in Austria. We used reflexive thematic analysis to analyze qualitative data from portions of a large series of participatory workshop activities. Moreover, we actively involved participants in the analysis of their own generated data. Themes were structured into personal, interpersonal, and external factors. We found that early adolescents valued kind peers that (a) give them a feeling of safety, (b) show supportive and empathic actions, (c) manage conflicts, (d) avoid negative behavior, (e) spend time with them, and (f) communicate in the offline and online environments. Although shared norms of behavior can support friendship development, friendship jealousy and tolerating bigger friendship groups were identified as important potential barriers. Additionally, external factors (i.e., given circumstances), such as similarities, physical proximity, and duration of acquaintance were included in our data but were perceived as less important by early adolescents. Our results supplement the existing peer relationship literature by showing which factors early adolescents themselves chose as most relevant for friendship development. We conclude with a discussion regarding the implications for school psychology practice and future research.

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1. Introduction

The fundamental motivation for social relationships and belonging is an essential part of healthy human development (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Social relationships are linked to better health, which reduces the risk of heart disease, depression, and mortality (Howick et al., 2019). Social isolation, loneliness, and low social support have correspondingly negative effects that predict increases in severity of symptoms of ill health, development of mental illnesses, and mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018). Thus, understanding factors that facilitate and hinder the development of social relationships is vitally important for promoting health and well-being. This article focuses on individuals who were at the transition from primary to secondary school, hereafter referred to as early adolescents.

1.1. Early adolescence, social isolation, and mental health

During early adolescence, friends and peers are significantly relevant for social, emotional, and cognitive development (Lamblin et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2015). Early adolescents spend a large amount of time with peers at school and outside of school, which increases their separation from parents and boosts their autonomy and identity exploration (Hazen et al., 2008; Larson & Richards, 1991). Yet, the multiple developmental changes in early adolescence (e.g., development of autonomy, perspective taking, physical maturation) are challenging and can increase the risk of social isolation and loneliness (Laursen & Hartl, 2013). Social isolation and loneliness that occur during early adolescence, in turn, are associated with poor mental health outcomes, such as depression and anxiety (Loades et al., 2020). The lifetime prevalence rates for depressive and anxiety disorders during early adolescence is alarmingly high, reaching 21.77% in Austria (Wagner et al., 2017). Two related and important protective factors against the development of poor mental health outcomes during early adolescence include friendships and supportive peer relationships, which have been found to reduce the risk for depression and anxiety disorders (Klineberg et al., 2006; Mitic et al., 2021).

1.2. Friendships and supportive peer relationships

Early adolescents spend a lot of time at school, which makes the educational environment an important social environment for friendship development with peers. In a recent review, Roach (2019) pooled existing literature from different disciplines on adolescents' definitions of friendship, concluding that friendship encompasses attributes of support, intimacy, affection, trust, ability to manage conflict, and time. These attributes of friendship persist in digital interactions as well, making the online environment as relevant as the offline environment (Yau & Reich, 2018). Compared to friends, peers at school might get along well and spend a lot of time and do group activities together, but conversations are primarily school-related and lack attributes of intimacy and support (Roach, 2019). Nonetheless, early adolescents spend most of the time at school among peers, which makes peers, in addition to friends, a valuable resource. Accordingly, friendships and supportive peer relationships predict both mental health and well-being (Heinsch et al., 2020; Lester & Cross, 2015). Thus, this study aimed to better understand factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development.

1.3. School transition from primary to secondary school

Having supportive peers one can turn to in stressful times may help to overcome the difficulties they are experiencing and lead to health benefits (Kendrick et al., 2012; Lyell et al., 2020). During the transition from primary to secondary school, support from friends is a relevant predictor for well-being and school satisfaction across cultures (Oriol et al., 2017). However, school transition often leads to changes in the school environment, including, for example, bigger schools, more subjects and teachers, and new peers (Symonds & Galton, 2014). This period is marked with unstable and fractured peer networks (Ng-Knight et al., 2019). Although some friendships endure because early adolescents transit to the same school, stay connected via digital media channels (e.g., chat services, social network sites, online games), or because pre-existing family connections keep them close, other friendships rupture due to being assigned to different schools or classes (Mittmann et al., 2021; Weller, 2007). After transition, pupils must deal with new class compositions at school, which necessitates the negotiation of group affiliations and friendships with classmates (Rice et al., 2011). Making friends, belonging to a group of peers, and fitting in are some of the primary concerns that early adolescents mention at the time of their school transition (Curson et al., 2019; Pratt & George, 2005; Weller, 2007). Experiencing inclusion in the peer group and school belonging significantly relates to friendship (Mitic et al., 2021). Early adolescents without friends experience their school environment as more threatening and unsafe (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018). In fact, friendlessness, clique isolation, and loneliness during early adolescence have negative long-term consequences, such as internalizing difficulties (i.e., depressive symptoms, social anxiety, and low self-esteem; Lessard & Juvonen, 2018; Loades et al., 2020; Qualter et al., 2013; Witvliet et al., 2010) and deficits in social skills (Schinka et al., 2013). Thus, understanding factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development at the time of school transition from primary to secondary schools is an important aspect within school psychology.

1.4. Digital media

The use of digital media among adolescents significantly increases during the school transition from primary to secondary schools and many early adolescents extensively use their smartphone to communicate and stay connected with their friends and peers (Davis,

2012; Mittmann et al., 2021). Digital gaming, as well as casual and intimate online communication, are new ways to increase belonging and improve offline peer relationships (Davis, 2012; Mittmann et al., 2021). For example, after the school transition when peers need to form new friendships and get to know their classmates, discovering a common identity as digital gamer makes the development of offline peer relationships 1.5 times more likely (Eklund & Roman, 2017). Consequently, digital media has an impact on early adolescents' relationships with peers and friends and might be particularly relevant during the school transition.

1.5. Negative effects of peer victimization and rejection

Although friends and peers can be a supportive resource and can make school and life more fun (Kostenius & Öhring, 2008; Persson et al., 2016; Sotardi, 2017), early adolescents also face challenges with peers in their offline and online social environments. For example, conflicts, bullying, and victimization (Curson et al., 2019; Sotardi, 2017; Sumter et al., 2012) often occur during this time. Across American, European, and Asian countries the prevalence rates of any kind of victimization (traditional and/or cybervictimization) reaches 20%–30% during early adolescence (Chudal et al., 2022; Hasan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2020). At the time of school transition, early adolescents look forward to making new friends, yet they have concerns about victimization and social exclusion (Curson et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2003). Early adolescents who experience bullying in primary school are particularly at risk for facing similar experiences in secondary school (Fujikawa et al., 2021). Several studies with diverse populations across childhood and adolescence have shown that different kinds of victimization (e.g., physical, verbal, cyber bullying) are significantly associated with maladaptive functioning, depression, and loneliness (Baier et al., 2019; Halliday et al., 2021; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Sumter et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2012). Furthermore, peer rejection and (cyber) victimization during childhood and early adolescence can have negative long-term consequences persisting into adolescence and adulthood (e.g., depression, anxiety disorders, criminal justice system involvement; Bettencourt et al., 2023; Copeland et al., 2013; Halliday et al., 2021; Lev-Wiesel et al., 2006; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). Yet, with the transition to secondary school, the prevalence of bullying declines (Fujikawa et al., 2021), which makes school transition a promising time to promote and emphasize supportive peer relationships at school.

1.6. Positive effects of friendships and supportive peer relationships

A recent systematic literature review identified friendships and peer relationships as facilitating factors for successful school transition and concluded that early adolescents should be supported in the development of friendships with peers at school (van Rens et al., 2018a). In qualitative studies, early adolescents have reported on the personal importance of friendships for enhancing self-esteem, confidence, and mental health when facing challenging times and feeling vulnerable (Curson et al., 2019; Pratt & George, 2005; Weller, 2007). In addition, quantitative studies show that supportive peer relationships can explain psychological well-being and reduce vulnerability to depressive symptoms (Buchanan & Bowen, 2008; Burke et al., 2017; Maunder & Monks, 2019). Overall, both feeling accepted by peers and getting along well with peers have protective long-term effects on self-esteem across early adolescence and young adulthood (Birkeland et al., 2014). Thus, friends and peers are a vital resource for personal and health development in early adolescence, particularly in challenging times, such as during the school transition between primary and secondary schools.

Although the relevance of friends and peers is evident during this school transition, early adolescents report receiving limited instruction on *how* to establish friendships with peers (van Rens et al., 2018b). In fact, early adolescents have reported the wish to talk about friendships and the desire to receive health promotion activities that build and strengthen peer relationships (Kostenius & Öhring, 2008; Persson et al., 2016). Hence, understanding factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development with peers during early adolescence and school transition is of particular interest to inform future interventions and school psychology practice.

1.7. Participatory research approach

From an ecological perspective, as postulated in Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the school environment is an essential context when aiming to understand early adolescents' peer relationships. Friendships typically exist between one's own classmates (George & Hartmann, 1996), which makes classrooms an important social environment for studying the development of supportive peer relationships. This is especially true for Austria because pupils at the same grade levels are usually split into classes, where they stay together for several years.

Although most studies employ quantitative methods (e.g., questionnaires, social network analysis, peer nominations) to study peer relationships and friendships (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003), research in educational settings that involves younger populations needs to adapt traditional methods to enhance involvement and scientific output (Lundqvist, 2014). Innovative data collection methods, such as visualizations (e.g., drawings) and informal discussions (e.g., workshops), are essential for gaining insights from early adolescents' lives (Lundqvist, 2014). These innovative approaches can not only benefit research, but also promote new social experiences and open interactions among participants themselves (Halliday et al., 2019; Lundqvist, 2014). We think that early adolescents are experts by experience and can best describe their perspectives and needs when involved adequately in participatory, as opposed to traditional, data collection methods. Thus, we wanted to give early adolescents a voice and make their needs visible to respect the fundamental rights of children and adolescents (United Nations, 1989). Yet, only a few studies have considered students' voices in their research (e.g., de Leeuw et al., 2018; Halliday et al., 2019). The present study aimed to close this gap by employing innovative data collection methods (i.e., participatory workshop activities) to understand factors that facilitate and hinder early adolescents' friendship development.

Although early adolescents have been involved in different research processes addressing health-related topics, such as substance

abuse, social skills, physical activity, or nutrition (Larsson et al., 2018; Rouncefield-Swales et al., 2021), to our knowledge, this is the first study on friendship development that actively engaged participants in a decision-making process around data they have generated themselves over the course of data collection. We acknowledge early adolescents as active participants in research about them with a right to be heard and taken seriously (Lansdown et al., 2014; United Nations, 1989). Our participatory data collection methods increased the likelihood that early adolescents were able to share their feels and thereby inform researchers and school psychology practitioners about their perspectives on factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development. Overall, our integrative approach can serve as a baseline for early adolescents-informed intervention development on how to make friends.

The research aim of the present study was to understand factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development during the transition between primary and secondary school levels. Specifically, we attempted to identify those factors that early adolescents self-selected as most relevant by involving them in a decision-making process around data that they generated. Given that digital media use significantly increases during this school transition, we also aimed to understand its possible role in friendship development.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

We conducted a qualitative study that employed a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The aim of this approach was to achieve a rich description of narrative comments from 916 students and from observations of 54 participatory workshops that were conducted to understand factors that facilitated and hindered friendship development among participants in our sample. Qualitative data were collected as part of participatory workshops with the aim of understanding friendship development, the experience of school transition, the role that social media plays during school transition, and peer relationships. Overall, the participatory workshops were designed to understand early adolescents' needs to facilitate and develop meaningful interventions within this area.

This study also employed a participatory research approach, inspired by the participatory design approach (Hagen et al., 2012) that provides a framework for the involvement of young people at various stages of intervention development. In particular, the first two steps (i.e., identifying and defining the problem), from the perspectives of early adolescents, were included in the participatory workshop activities. We examined guidelines for public and patient involvement, engagement, and youth involvement to identify an appropriate level of involvement for early adolescents (e.g., Kaisler & Missbach, 2019; Kirby, 2004). The level of engagement that we utilized was selected to allow for the involvement of a large number of adolescents so that broadly held perspectives potentially important in universal intervention development could be identified.

2.2. Participatory workshop design

The participatory workshop (90 min) was conceived by a European interdisciplinary research team (D.O.T. Research Group; <https://dot.lbg.ac.at/>). The workshop's structured content included seven different participatory workshop activities focusing on three main topics, including (a) peer relations, (b) school transition, and (c) digital media. Participatory workshop methods were based on participatory and arts-based methods literature (e.g., Colucci, 2007; Foster et al., 2018; Lundqvist, 2014) and practical experience from multiple disciplines (e.g., psychology, psychiatry and therapy, child theatre arts). The participatory workshop manual is available in a data repository (see osf.io/2u7r4) to increase clarity, transparency, and reproducibility of our participatory workshop methods.

The participatory workshops were designed to provide information that could be used in intervention development. The main purpose of these workshops was to involve early adolescents in research by giving them a voice to express different views regarding the school transition as a way to better understand what content they deemed as essential for future interventions focused on peer relations, school transition, and digital media. The aim was to better understand (a) how early adolescents develop friendships with peers, (b) how they expected to or actually experienced their school transition, and (c) what role social media played during their school transition and with their peer relationships. The methods of delivery allowed pupils to voice their opinion in different ways, thereby creating a safe space for expressing and listening to each others' views. Although the participatory workshops were not an intervention in itself, they were designed to heighten participants' awareness of their peer relationships during the primary to secondary school transition and the corresponding role of digital media during this time.

Feasibility and acceptability of the workshop activities were tested in two pilot participatory workshops conducted in September 2018. After these pilot workshops, the participatory workshops were adapted and optimized. For example, based on the pilot workshops, a story task was modified into a focus group discussion because the activity as originally designed resulted in participants telling fantastical stories that were unsuitable to inform intervention development. Following optimization, all participatory workshops included in this study were conducted between October and December 2018. The participatory workshops were led by two main workshop leaders (including at least one member of the D.O.T. Research Group) and supported by 1–4 workshop assistants depending on the overall group size. Workshop leaders and assistants participated in a full-day training that included discussions of theoretical and practical components that was led by two members of the D.O.T. Research Group (first and third author). Participatory workshop manuals were distributed, followed by a discussion regarding the theoretical background and aims of the workshop activities. Workshop leaders and assistants role-played each activity themselves and offered time to reflect and provide feedback where appropriate. Workshop leaders and assistants were undergraduate students in the fields of psychology, movement pedagogy, and music therapy, and all were experienced in working with children. Workshop leaders and assistants received continuous supervision throughout the duration of the participatory workshops. To maximize fidelity, participatory workshops were conducted according to a

detailed written manual defining mandatory workshop components, as well as flexible activities (e.g., movement games, body percussion) that could be used to respond to specific group needs, such as restlessness (see osf.io/2u7r4 for materials available in the data repository). The present study only analyzed data from two (i.e., Peer Support and Establish a Friendship) of the seven total participatory workshop activities.

2.2.1. Description of the Peer Support Participatory Workshop Activity

In the Peer Support activity (5–10 min), the workshop leaders created a big poster with the entire class (containing 6–25 pupils) all sitting in a circle around it. The workshop leaders led the discussion by asking how the pupils could support classmates or other children of the same age, for example, when feeling sad, alone, or uncomfortable, and what kind of support they would wish to receive from their peers when feeling this way themselves. Students' ideas were collected on post-it notes (written by the workshop leaders) in the group setting and then were attached to the poster. This procedure was repeated several times. Following this, all students received their own post-it note and were encouraged to write down any additional ideas that they could think of that were not already mentioned or that they did not want to say aloud in the group setting. The workshop assistants observed this activity and used their structured observation sheet to record verbatim quotes of mentioned ideas and further relevant information on, for example, dialogues occurring between participants that referred to an idea to record on the post-it notes. In two participatory workshops the Peer Support activity was not conducted because of insufficient time, resulting in 52 workshops being included for the final analysis.

2.2.2. Description of the Establish a Friendship Participatory Workshop Activity

The Establish a Friendship activity (10–15 min) was conducted in smaller groups that consisted of 3–6 students led by one workshop leader or assistant. To maximize willingness to engage and disclose information, the formation of the small groups was part of a dynamic group game that occurred earlier in the participatory workshop and resulted in self-chosen working groups. The aim of the activity was to write down as many ideas as possible relating to the following questions: “Why are you (best) friends with someone and what helps to make friends?” (written on green post-it notes), “What stops a friendship?” (written on red post-it notes), and “Why are you not (best) friends with someone?” (written on red post-it notes). Students were also encouraged to share other personal experiences of friendship.

Students then engaged in a decision-making process about their own generated data (Task 2). Students were asked to review their self-generated ideas that were already written on post-it notes and decide on the most important facilitating (written on green post-it notes) and hindering (written red post-it notes) aspects in a friendship. The self-selected most important facilitating and hindering ideas were collected on a poster and photographed so that researchers could identify this subset of ideas for a later analysis. All pupils participated in the Establish a Friendship activity.

2.3. Participant recruitment

The Lower Austrian Department of Education supported recruitment and provided a list of schools potentially interested in participating. In addition, we recruited schools via flyer distribution, postings in social media networks, and networking with teachers. After initial school contact via electronic mail, we established direct contact with principals and teachers via phone calls or in-person meetings. Schools interested in participating needed to be located across Lower Austria. Eligibility criteria for student participation included being (a) enrolled in the last year of primary school, (b) enrolled in the first year of secondary school, or (c) a pupil who recently experienced the transition from primary to secondary levels (e.g., students with special needs). Although schools participated on a voluntary basis, they were purposefully chosen to represent a wide range of (a) school types (i.e., primary schools, secondary schools, and special needs schools; distribution of schools presented below in “Participating Sample”) and (b) school sites to reach schools of different sizes and pupils with urban or rural backgrounds (see below in description of “Participating Sample”). No personal relationships existed between principals or pupils of eligible schools and researchers and thus could not impact on the results.

2.4. Participating sample

A total of 916 pupils (a) from the last year of primary, (b) from the first year of secondary schools, or (c) who otherwise recently experienced a transition from primary to secondary levels participated in the study. Before participation, parents of participants provided written informed consent and participants received verbal information regarding the project that included an emphasis on voluntary participation; participants then provided verbal assent if they wished to continue with the project. The study received ethical approval by the ethics committee of the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna (EK-Nr. 10/2018) and all data were de-identified for analysis.

Participants' mean age was 10.44 years (range = 9–16; $SD = 0.912$; 52% male, 44.5% female; 3.5% missing data). Of note, the mean age and standard deviation of ages reflects our focus on recruiting participants from the years immediately before and immediately following the school transition in Austria. However, because we deliberately did not exclude special need schools so as to represent the broad range of pupils who experience transitions between primary and secondary levels, the oldest participants were 16 years old ($n = 17$ students were 13 years; $n = 8$ students between ages 14–16 years). Age was gathered in a questionnaire that was distributed at the end of the participatory workshop. In Austria, pupils typically experience the primary to secondary school transition up to age 12 years. Key teachers selected these older participants as being eligible because they recently experienced a school transition or repeated a school year and were therefore in the eligible school year. In sum, 54 participatory workshops were conducted that included 29 different schools (26 public, 3 private schools; 45% rural, 55% urban area) across Lower Austria.

In Austria, children complete 4 years of primary school and then move to secondary schools. Two distinct school types for secondary education exist, including (a) new secondary schools (in Austria called *Neue Mittelschule* [NMS]) and (b) academic secondary schools (in Austria called *Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule* [AHS]). NMS are attended by 10–14-year-olds, whereas AHS can be attended by 10–18-year-olds; upon completion of the AHS, a certificate that allows admission to a university is awarded. Additionally, special needs schools exist; these schools cover 9 years of compulsory education for children with diverse cognitive and physical disabilities, learning difficulties, and behavioral difficulties (Bundesministerium für Bildung, 2022). In the present study, the distribution of school types was 22% primary schools, 71% secondary schools (56% NMS, 15% AHS), and 7% special needs schools.

Table 1

Excerpt of themes and subthemes with example codes and examples of interpersonal factors that facilitate friendship development.

| Theme | Subtheme | Example codes | Examples |
|---|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Interpersonal factors | | | |
| Feeling of safety | Truthfulness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say truth • Be truthful | “say the truth” [WS 21], “keep secrets” [WS 5] |
| | Continuity & protection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide continuous support | “be there for her, if she is not doing well - go through thick and thin with her” [WS 39], “one can always rely on friends” [WS 49] |
| | Disclosure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal secrets • Keep secrets | “discuss secrets that you cannot discuss with others, e.g., be in love with sb” [WS 19], “being able to tell secrets and to keep them” [WS 31] |
| | Reciprocity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work as team • Mutuality | “teamwork” [WS 6], “listen to one another” [WS 54], |
| | Common ground | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be on good terms | “get along well with each other” [14 mentions, e.g. WS 17], “if you like someone” [WS 29] |
| Supportive & empathic actions | General support strategies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help • Console | “help” [49 mentions], “console” [46 mentions] |
| | Empathic actions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model function • Perspective taking | “play with children who get excluded and show the others that you can play with them as well” [WS 22], “try to put yourself in the position of others” [WS 45] |
| | Practical assistance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help out • Practical support | “when I broke my clavicle, friends carried my backpack for me” [WS 33], or “when I forget my pens at home, someone in my class lend me one” [WS 51] |
| | Make presents | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make presents | “make somebody a present” [WS 7], “bring a birthday cake, when it’s someone’s birthday” [WS 9] |
| | Help with schoolwork | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help with homework • Help at school | “help with homework, if he doesn’t know what to do” [WS 2], “if someone is new in school, show him everything” [WS 25] |
| | Encouraging words | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivate • Encourage | “tell things that someone has done well in life” [WS 37], “everything will be alright” [WS 33] |
| | Caring hug | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical closeness | “hug best friend” [WS 53], “cuddle” [WS 26] |
| | Emergency help | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help when hurt | “if someone falls, you get help” [WS 23], “I once fell off a tree and my friend got help immediately” [WS 52] |
| Conflict management | Help to find friends | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help to find friends | “help someone to find a friend” [WS 14], “another child or adult can help, if you don’t have friends” [WS 41] |
| | Avoiding negative behavior | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not annoy • Not insult | “not annoy someone” [WS 27], “don’t insult” [10 mentions, e.g., WS 8] |
| | Acceptance & tolerance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept more friends | “do not exclude someone if he has other friends as well” [WS 51], “if you look for new friends, do not abandon old friends” [WS 54] |
| | Overcoming conflicts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologize • Accept apologies | “If something happens by accident, you still always have to apologize” [WS 31], “accept an apology or apologize, if you argue” [WS 52] |
| | Knowing & accepting boundaries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept small badinages • Be yourself | “sometimes we annoy each other” [WS 26], “not have everything in common, because you don’t need to have the same things to be friends” [WS 48] |
| Establish contact & spend time with peers | Defense | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defend | “if people bully you, that others don’t join in, but are on my side” [WS 40], “if people get excluded that you help” [WS 22] |
| | Common activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play together • Spend time together | “play together” [45 mentions, e.g., WS 2], “spend time together, e.g., play, swim, go to a spa, play football” [WS 21] |
| | Communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk | “when people say ‘let’s be friends’” [WS 10], “ask if he had a nice weekend” [WS 28] |
| | Shared positive emotions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have fun • Share positive emotions | “have fun together” [35 mentions, e.g., WS 5], “tell jokes to each other to become happier” [WS 24] |
| | Invitations & visits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite • Visit | “invite to birthday party” [WS 10], “invite people home” [WS 32] |
| | Frequency | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular meetings | “when people do everything together” [WS 20], “keep in touch, even if you don’t see each other, use your phone” [WS 51] |

2.5. Data sources

Data were generated as part of the participatory workshop activities and collected on post-it notes and/or structured observation sheets. While workshop leaders gathered data on post-it notes and summarized ideas and responses, workshop assistants took notes on structured observation sheets and wrote down pupils' responses verbatim. Thus, structured observation sheets functioned as transcripts of pupils' responses; behavioral indicators were not of interest. Members of the D.O.T. Research Group (first and third author) regularly monitored the data quality and provided individual and/or group feedback to workshop leaders and assistants. The present study analyzed data from two (i.e., Peer Support and Establishing a Friendship) out of the seven total participatory workshop activities.

2.6. Data analysis

2.6.1. Overall analytic approach

A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was conducted with a realist approach designed to describe and therefore understand meanings and the reality of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given that the views of participants were not known, we aimed to produce a rich description of the narrative comments from 916 students and observations of 54 participatory workshops (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Utilizing this approach, we analyzed the dataset for patterns of shared meaning which allowed us to generate themes. Themes are interpretive stories about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019), and as such, our analytic narrative goes beyond description and we fully acknowledge our active role in theme generation. Additionally, this analytic approach allowed us to analyze the prevalence of themes across the data of 54 participatory workshops (Braun & Clarke, 2006), providing an indication of the extent to which they represent the perspectives of our whole sample of participants. Note that the reflexive thematic analysis was conducted by researchers only without involving early adolescents in the theme development. Instead, early adolescents were involved in data analysis during the workshops through the decision-making process by examining what they deemed as the most important facilitating or hindering aspects for friendship development. This subset of important data, self-selected by early adolescents, informed the scope of an additional analysis of prevalence to make those factors visible that early adolescents chose as most relevant for themselves.

2.6.2. Data preparation and initial analysis

Structured observation sheets were digitalized and post-it notes were transferred into Microsoft Word documents; electronic documents were imported and analyzed in the QSR International's NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. Data were coded on a semantic level to summarize surface meaning of the data. The process of coding was data-driven; therefore, themes were identified following an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Only the first author coded and structured data in the NVivo qualitative data analysis software. However, several authors (including the second, fourth, and sixth authors) were involved in discussions as part of the analytic process, that is, discussing the coherence of themes in collaboration to develop well differentiated reading of the data. This collaborative approach is a standard procedure when conducting reflexive thematic analysis in teams (Braun & Clarke, 2019). First, the first author familiarized herself with the data. Then, in an iterative process, the first author generated codes, identified themes, and reviewed the coherence of themes with her team (including the first, second, fourth, and sixth authors). This analytic process ended when data were organized into coherent, consistent, and distinct themes that resulted in clear definitions and names for each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Table 1 illustrates themes, subthemes, example codes, and examples of the qualitative data to illustrate the analytic process. The initial coding structure was based on data from structured observation sheets (i.e., notes taken during the activity Peer Support) because written verbatim notes on structured observation sheets yielded richer insights into conversations and dialogues between workshop leaders and participants. After structured observation sheets from 32 participatory workshops were coded, no new codes were identified. As coding was considered as repetitive, the decision was made that code saturation was achieved (Hennink et al., 2017). This coding structure served as a basis for coding themes from the obtained post-it notes. Given that the themes from post-it notes corresponded to those obtained in the structured observation sheets, data from structured observation sheets were not included in any further analysis.

2.6.3. Analysis of prevalence

The final set of themes were analyzed for prevalence, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), to facilitate reporting and interpretation of the entire dataset. Prevalence was counted at the participatory workshop level (i.e., Did a theme appear anywhere in each participatory workshop?) and expressed as a percentage. Prevalence was not counted at the participant level (i.e., how many participants mentioned a theme) because participants could be primed or influenced by previous remarks due to the specific approach of inquiry of this study (i.e., group discussions instead of one-on-one interviews).

First, the entire dataset was analyzed for prevalence to assess the relevance of factors reported to facilitate and hinder friendship development. We termed this the *overall prevalence analysis*. Second, we conducted another prevalence analysis on the final set of themes (as developed by the researchers); however, this time the most important facilitating and hindering factors self-selected by early adolescents (as explained in the participatory workshop activity Establish a Friendship [Task 2]) informed the scope of the prevalence analysis. Given that early adolescents' decision-making processes were the participatory component in Task 2, we termed this *participatory prevalence analysis*.

Third, to determine the relevance of digital media as a facilitating or hindering factor for the development of supportive peer relationships, content that explicitly referred to digital media received an additional code termed "digital media". Hence, an analysis of prevalence was conducted to identify themes that included digital media content.

2.6.4. *Researcher positionality statement*

Several white middle-class researchers (early career and senior) and graduate students contributed to this project. All early career researchers (including the first, third, and fourth authors) received graduate level education covering qualitative research methods and a 2-day NVivo training. These early career researchers were doctoral students in the D.O.T. Research Group and held a master’s degree in psychology. All senior researchers (including the second, fifth, and sixth authors) had experience in qualitative and quantitative research, the development and evaluation of interventions, and were in some form involved in the doctoral supervision of the first author. The second author was a consultant psychiatrist and trained psychotherapist. Her research has focused on the interface between psychology and (social) psychiatry. The fifth and sixth authors were research psychologists. The fifth author has focused on stress research, whereas the sixth author has focused on young people who are in need. The first author’s close linkage between participatory workshop delivery and data analysis required high self-reflective skills and structured working, which could be achieved via a manualized workshop, supervision from senior researchers, and reflective group discussions. However, given the nature of the data (verbatim quotes of students consisting of single words and short phrases), the first author was able to use the experiences gained and direct contact with early adolescents in classrooms to enrich the understanding of the collected data.

2.6.5. *Trustworthiness*

We followed recommendations for conducting rigorous thematic analysis by [Nowell et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Smith and McGannon \(2018\)](#) to increase trustworthiness of our qualitative research. We engaged in peer debriefing, researcher triangulation, and regular team meetings to reach consensus on themes. Reflexive thematic analysis is an approach that values researcher subjectivity as a resource and argues against testing inter-rater reliability ([Braun & Clarke, 2019](#)). Instead, we established “critical friends”, who vetted the clarity of themes, and offered critical feedback on theme development as suggested by [Smith and McGannon \(2018\)](#). Our critical friends were external (fifth author) and internal researchers (second, fourth, and sixth authors) who challenged the first author’s analytical process and theme development in regular meetings, resulting in intensive discussions.

To further increase trustworthiness and transparency of our data, transcripts of post-it notes and structured observation sheets are available in an open data repository (see osf.io/avtw2). In the Results section we link qualitative data to the original data source to increase transparency. For example, “You must help your friends all the time” (WS 31) indicates that this data originated from Participatory Workshop 31.

2.6.6. *General Coding Structure*

To facilitate reporting and interpretation of results, we structured the data into two strands based on an overview of initial generated codes. Strand A describes factors that were reported to facilitate friendship development, which includes data from the Peer Support activity and the Establishing a Friendship activity (green post-it notes). Strand B describes factors reported to hinder friendship development, which includes data from the activity Establish a Friendship (red post-it notes). Strand A and B were further organized into three main clusters, including (a) personal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) external factors. Personal factors included descriptions of personal and emotional characteristics. Interpersonal factors comprised different behavioral aspects or strategies, which involved or required the participation of at least two people. External factors encompassed specific circumstances or aspects that could not be influenced or readily changed by early adolescents themselves. [Table 1](#) provides examples of codes generated within this structure.

3. Results

[Table 2](#) summarizes the general coding structure and presents the main themes. Overall, factors that facilitated friendship

Table 2
Coding structure – corresponding themes on opposite sites.

| Strand A - Factors That Facilitate Friendship Development | | | Strand B - Factors That Hinder Friendship Development | |
|---|--|---|--|---|
| Personal Factors | | | | |
| + | Attractive personal characteristics Attractive emotional patterns | ↔ | Unattractive personal characteristics Unattractive emotional patterns | - |
| Interpersonal Factors | | | | |
| + | Feeling of safety Supportive and empathic actions Conflict management Establishing contact & spending time with peers | ↔ | Absence of safety Malicious and deceitful actions Bad conflict management Lack of shared time & communication | - |
| External Factors | | | | |
| + | Given supportive circumstances | ↔ | Given hindering circumstances | - |

development often corresponded to the opposite factors that hindered friendship development (see Table 2). For example, the theme “supportive and empathic actions” encompassed a variety of positive actions for friendship development, whereas the theme “malicious and deceitful actions” encompassed a variety of hindering actions for friendship development.

3.1. Strand A: Factors that facilitate friendship development

Fig. 1 depicts factors that participants reported as being facilitative for friendship development, ordered by prevalence according to the overall prevalence analysis. Fig. 1 also illustrates the participatory component of the data analysis, emphasizing subthemes that became most relevant according to the participatory prevalence analysis.

In general, the relevance of subthemes in the participatory prevalence analysis corresponded well to that of the overall prevalence analysis. However, minor discrepancies arose in the theme “feeling of safety”. Although “truthfulness” was still given the highest priority, “reciprocity”, “disclosure”, and “continuity and protection” changed in the order of relevance. In the overall prevalence analysis, these three subthemes appeared equally important (they share an almost identical percentage), whereas the participatory prevalence analysis suggested a clearer order with “reciprocity” appearing before “disclosure” and with “disclosure” coming before “continuity and protection”. Furthermore, within the external factors cluster, “local proximity” was second in the overall prevalence analysis, with the participatory prevalence analysis indicating that “duration of acquaintance” was the second most important external factor. Overall, the participatory prevalence analysis indicated that “kindness” was self-selected by early adolescents as the most important factor for friendship development, followed by “truthfulness”, “common activities”, and “general support strategies” (see Fig. 1).

3.1.1. Personal factors

Attractive personal characteristics. Friendship development was facilitated by having an attractive personality. Such a personality comprises a subjective sense of treating each other well alongside specific features – which may vary across individuals – that engender dependability and respect. In over 90% of participatory workshops (see Fig. 1), early adolescents described supportive peers using words that conveyed a subjective impression of a person who treats others well. We termed this “kindness” as early adolescents described supportive peers as “nice”, “kind”, “friendly”, and “helpful” persons. The personal characteristic “kindness” was linked with supportive interpersonal behavior that facilitated friendship development. For example, kind peers “console others” (WS 5), “lend things or make presents” (WS 27; subtheme “supportive and empathic actions”), “don’t rant, don’t hit” (WS 42; subtheme “avoiding negative behavior”), do “not touch my books” (WS 32; subtheme “knowing and accepting boundaries”), and “ask if you are alright

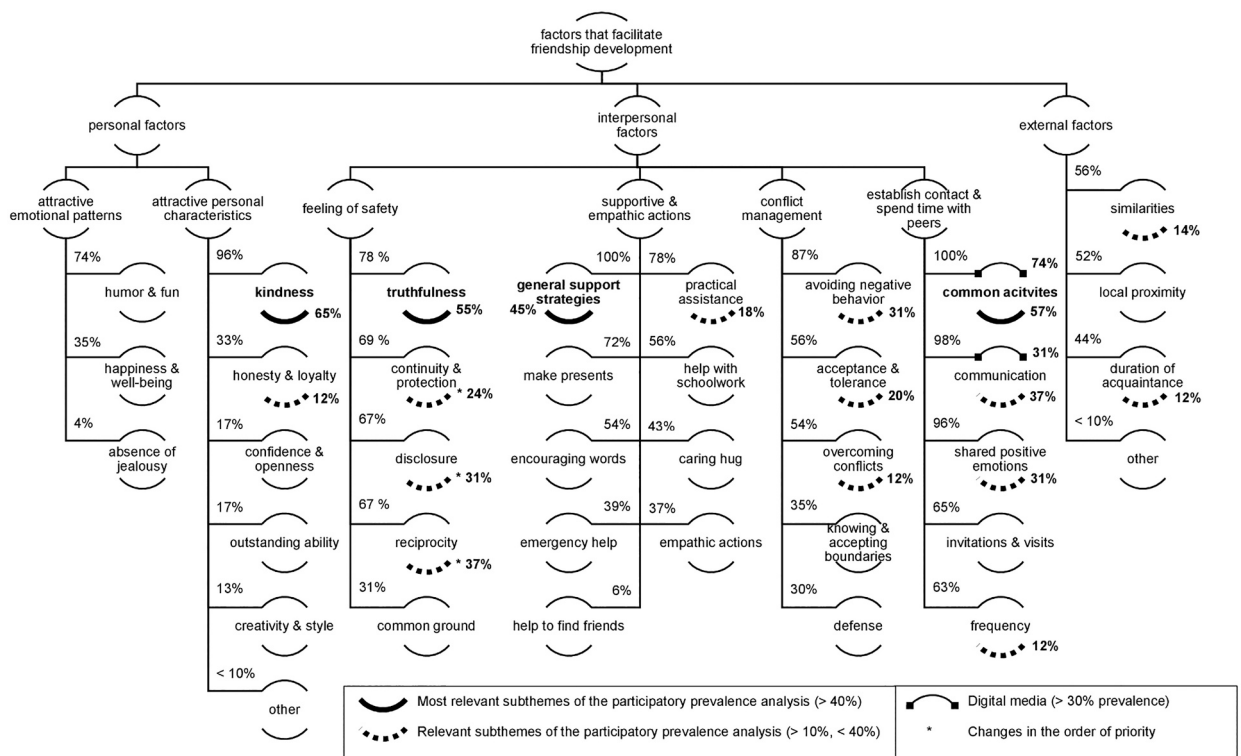


Fig. 1. Factors reported to facilitate friendship development and prevalence of themes expressed as a percentage. Note. Subthemes in bold became most relevant according to the participatory prevalence analysis.

when being ill, [...] do things together” (WS 54; subthemes “communication” and “common activities”). Moreover, being dependable (subtheme “honesty and loyalty”) or having the courage to “be brave, for example, when you want to get to know somebody, you immediately reach out to that person” (WS 34; subtheme “confidence and openness”) can directly support friendship formation alongside engendering respect. Standing out from the crowd because you are perceived as “cool” or “crazy” (subtheme “creativity and style”) was reported to facilitate friendship development, just like being athletic or a nerd or not a nerd (subtheme “outstanding ability”), depending on whether this is admired.

Attractive emotional patterns. An attractive personality further comprises emotionally attractive characteristics, engendering positivity and light-heartedness. Early adolescents described supportive peers as people who created a positive atmosphere by being “funny” or “humorous”, “not serious”, or “not boring” (subtheme “humor and fun”). Furthermore, perceiving a positive mood in peers, such as “joy” or “happiness”, facilitated friendship development (subtheme “happiness and well-being”). The opposite was noted for being unhappy, such as “When someone is unhappy, you’re less likely want to be friends with that person” (WS 24). Also, the “absence of jealousy” was reported as promoting friendship development, which might directly affect the subjective impression of a light-hearted atmosphere.

3.1.2. Interpersonal factors

Feeling of safety. To establish friendships, peers need to feel safe and understood in their peer environment. Aspects of “protection”, “disclosure”, “reciprocity”, and “truthfulness” defined the theme of safety. Early adolescents wished to know that there was someone they could turn to who would “simply be there for him, so that he does not feel alone” (WS 44) and assure continuous support, such as “When your friends always help you!” (WS 10) and “You must help your friends all the time” (WS 31). “Talking about problems together” (WS 28) and “sharing emotions” (WS 48; subtheme “disclosure”) was reported to facilitate cooperation and trust, thereby engendering a feeling of safety.

Supportive and empathic actions. The theme “supportive and empathic actions” summarizes different layers relevant for peer support. Although the subtheme “general support strategies” included broad terms of support, such as “help”, “support”, “console”, “cheer up”, and “distract”, the subtheme “empathic actions” describes skills that relate to the concept of empathy and perspective taking. Accordingly, you should “play with children who get excluded and show the others that you can play with them as well” (WS 22) or “try to put yourself in the position of others” (WS 45). All other subthemes included more specific social acts of peer support that clustered around topics such as “schoolwork”, “practical assistance”, and “emergency help” (example quotations are provided in the Supplementary Materials). Interestingly, supportive actions were not only present in offline interactions, but also in the online environment. For example, “healing together in Fortnite” (WS 24; subtheme “emergency help”) or “giving away skins (outfits for in-game avatars in Fortnite)” (WS 16; subtheme “making presents”) were identified as supportive digital actions. Overall, in the participatory prevalence analysis, “general support strategies” were self-selected by early adolescents as most relevant for friendship development, followed by “practical assistance” (see Fig. 1).

Conflict management. The theme “conflict management” contains strategies, norms, and values that were relevant when dealing with conflict situations among peers. The subtheme “acceptance and tolerance” included concepts of respect, consideration, and fairness, including, for example, “sometimes you should simply leave people alone, if they say so” (WS 28), “accept people as they are” (WS 31), and “let others join in” (WS 18). These concepts were particularly pertinent in the context of bigger or several friendship groups. An example of this included “You can say I am your friend. You should not say I am your better friend. You should treat friends equally.” (WS 17). Supportive peers “avoid negative behavior” because such behavior can lead to conflict. Thus, disputes, exclusions, insults, or attacks were identified as undesirable behaviors for friendship development. Furthermore, “knowing and accepting boundaries” was identified as an important part of conflict management, such as “leaving him alone and don’t repeatedly ask ‘what is it’, if someone does not want to share a secret” (WS 43) or “not do everything your friend says” (WS 7). Appropriate digital media use was found to be acceptable; however, it was recognized that a boundary existed outside which such use would hinder friendship development, such as early adolescents should “not sit in front of the television the whole day but do other things as well” (WS 20). Positive conflict management was reported to require skills relevant for “overcoming conflicts” and ending arguments. These skills included “apologizing” (WS 42), finding a compromise, and “solving the dispute together” (WS 5). Yet, you can also “argue and be friends again” (WS 22) because “disputes are part of every relationship” (WS 20). Furthermore, in certain situations “Some lies are ok. For surprises you need to lie, for example, one should not say that he has a present” (WS 17). Supportive peers defend “when people get bullied, you go there and say that they should stop” (WS 52) or “If two people argue, one should go there and say something” (WS 51; subtheme “defense”). Settling peer conflicts might also involve physical defense, for example, “in bullying situations, interfere and shove as well” (WS 24). For early adolescents, “avoiding negative behavior” was identified as the most important factor for friendship development, coming before “tolerance and acceptance” and “overcoming conflicts” (see Fig. 1).

Establish contact and spend time with peers. The theme “establish contact and spend time with peers” encompassed (a) what early adolescents do when spending time together, (b) how they communicate and arrange meetings, (c) the role of shared positive emotions, and (d) the frequent contact peers long for. The subtheme “common activities” included not only general information on spending time together, but also on specific activities that early adolescents enjoy, such as playing games, going on trips, doing sports together, or eating together. “Common activities” was identified as the most important aspect for friendship development that was self-selected by the participants (see Fig. 1). In over 70% of participatory workshops, “common activities” with peers involved some kind of digital media. A PlayStation, smartphone, or a computer seemed indispensable, and the desire to “play Fortnite” (WS 48) with peers was as relevant as “playing football” (WS 5). Interestingly, fighting each other was identified as a positive shared activity in certain situations because some participants reported that they enjoyed “pushing each other for fun” (WS 37). Others even become friends because of fighting, as “First we hated each other, then we got in a fight, and via beating we became friends” (WS 32). Additionally, it

was reported that fighting on the same side and “insulting others together” (WS 20) were considered facilitating activities for friendship development.

The subtheme “communication” collated general terms, such as “talking”, “listening”, or verbal and text-based communication. More specific strategies were also included, including for example, asking questions (WS 25; “ask if you want to be friends”) or expressing politeness (WS 31; “say please and thank you”). Thus, learning about other people’s preferences (WS 22; “start slowly, talk to each other, you have to understand what the other person likes”) and showing interest (WS 28; “ask if he had a nice weekend”) were identified as starting points for further contact. Interestingly, some early adolescents expected that friendships develop “when people say ‘let’s be friends’” (WS 10). Text messaging, calling peers, or talking online during gameplay again emphasized the importance of digital media for early adolescents. “Communication” was the second most important factor for friendship development according to the participatory prevalence analysis. Connecting with peers also meant experiencing “shared positive emotions”, such as “having fun together” (WS 9), “telling jokes” (WS 2), or “making somebody laugh” (WS 13). The aspect of inviting and visiting peers was identified as essential for friendship development and should occur repeatedly (subtheme “frequency”).

3.1.3. External factors

Given supportive circumstances. Early adolescents mentioned at least one external factor as relevant for friendship development in almost 90% of the participatory workshops. Overall, three themes repeatedly were mentioned, including “similarities”, “local proximity”, and “duration of acquaintance”. In contrast, an additional five themes were mentioned in less than 10% of workshops (see Fig. 1). All external factors should be understood as existing on a continuum of changeability, ranging from not changeable to more changeable. The theme “similarities” included shared interests and values that varied on the described continuum. For example, a shared favorite TV series or a keen interest in online games might not be unchangeable, but it can be stable over a certain period. In contrast, cultural similarities (e.g., a shared religion or language) are rather immutable in early adolescence. The theme “local proximity”, which identifies circumstances where people are at the same place during the same time, thereby providing adolescents with time and opportunities for social interactions (e.g., attending the same nursery or school) and increases opportunities for common school trips, group work, or the same routes home. Knowing each other for a long time and thus knowing each other very well marks the theme “duration of acquaintance”. Other rarely mentioned topics refer to personal looks, attractive possessions, or family relationships. Example quotations of all generated themes and subthemes that were reported to facilitate friendship development are provided in the Supplementary Materials.

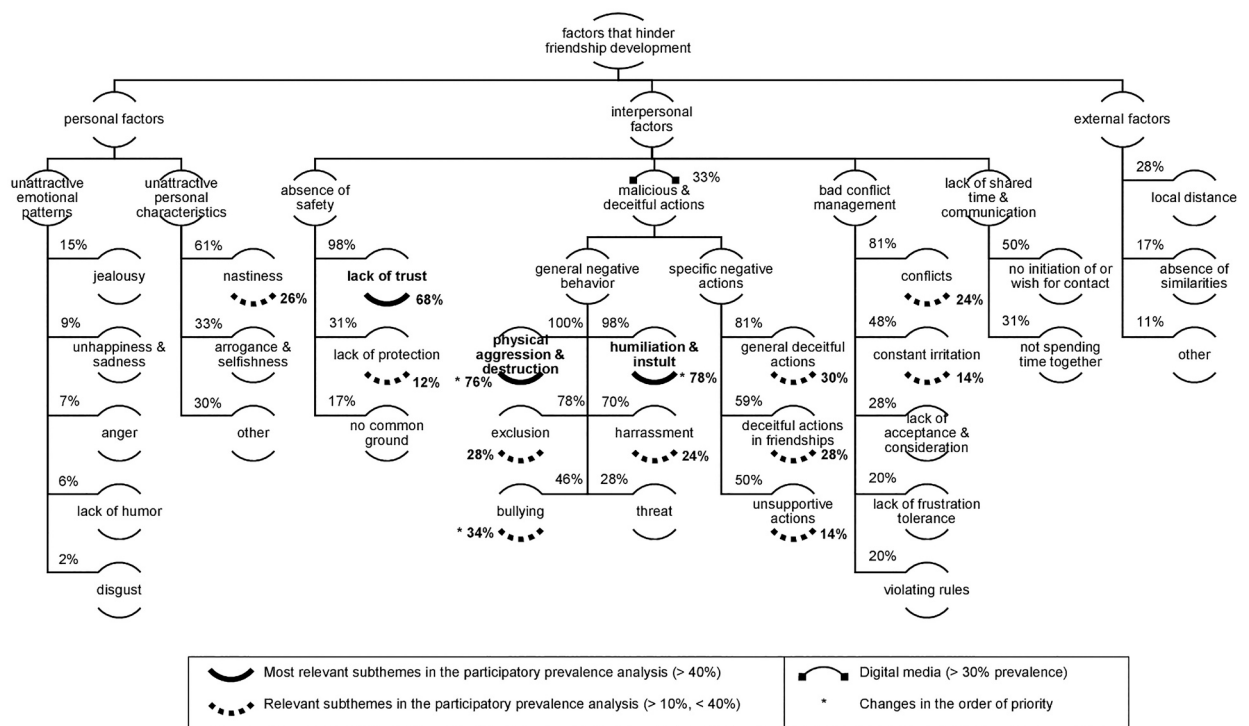


Fig. 2. Factors that were reported to hinder friendship development and prevalence of themes expressed as a percentage. Note. Subthemes in bold became most relevant according to the participatory prevalence analysis.

3.2. Strand B: Factors that hinder friendship development

Fig. 2 depicts factors reported to hinder friendship development, ordered by prevalence. Again, the relevance of the subthemes according to the participatory prevalence analysis corresponded well to that of the overall prevalence analysis. Minor discrepancies arose in the theme “malicious and deceitful actions”. Specifically, “humiliation and insult” changed places with “physical aggression and destruction”. Yet, the two subthemes appeared equally important because they shared an almost identical percentage in both the participatory prevalence analysis and the overall prevalence analysis. Interestingly, in the participatory prevalence analysis, “bullying” was self-selected by participants as the third worst behavior for friendship development, falling above “exclusion” and “harassment”.

3.2.1. Personal factors

Unattractive personal characteristics. Just as an attractive personality can support friendship development, the subjective perception of an unattractive personality can hamper the formation of friendships. In over 70% of participatory workshops, early adolescents were reluctant to consider peers as friends if they experienced them as “nasty”, “mean”, “aggressive”, or “unkind” persons. We termed this “nastiness”, which marks the negative counterpart of the positive subtheme “kindness”. Again, early adolescents described an evil, nasty, and unkind person in terms of interpersonal factor themes, including someone who “pushes, mocks, uses swear words, [or] excludes” (WS 49; theme “malicious and deceitful actions”), “argue(s)” with others (WS 22; theme “bad conflict management”), and is untrustworthy (WS 52; “when people say they give you something, but then they don’t”). Although “kindness” was the most important self-selected aspect for friendship development (see Fig. 1), “nastiness” was a relevant hindering factor, but with much less emphasis (see Fig. 2). Results from Strand A show that exceptional abilities or uniqueness were characteristics that peers respected. However, if these characteristics were conveyed through bragging and selfishness, they were perceived as unattractive. Thus, modesty was identified as an additional supportive personality aspect for friendship development.

Unattractive emotional patterns. Unattractive emotional characteristics matched the descriptions mentioned in the positive theme in reverse; for example, “trust”, “happiness”, and “humor” versus “jealousy”, “sadness”, and “lack of humor”. Additionally, early adolescents appeared to directly link the inability to regulate negative emotions, such as anger and rage, to an unsupportive personality.

3.2.2. Interpersonal factors

Absence of safety. The theme of safety reoccurred in the negative strand and directly linked back to the former identified aspects of “protection”, “disclosure”, “reciprocity”, and “truthfulness” with opposing features. Although early adolescents reported that they share secrets and talk openly with supportive peers, they mistrust peers who tell lies about them, do not keep secrets, or abandon them. Within the participatory prevalence analysis, “lack of trust” was the most relevant hindering aspect for friendship development (see Fig. 2). “Lack of trust” and “lack of protection” were reported as leading to dislike and hatred between peers, engendering “absence of safety”. The reappearance of the topics “trust” and “protection” in Strand B, along with the high prevalence across participatory workshops and the high prevalence in the participatory prevalence analysis in both strands (see Figs. 1 and 2), underpin the feeling of safety as a central basis for friendship development.

Malicious and deceitful actions. Although participating early adolescents described “supportive and empathic actions” as facilitators for friendship development, the theme “malicious and deceitful actions” represented the negative equivalent. Descriptions at two levels were identified, including (a) general negative behavior and (b) more specific negative actions.

In accordance with the subtheme “avoiding negative behavior” from Strand A, early adolescents repeated their description of “general negative behavior” in Strand B, although in an even more precise manner. Overall, peers who “exclude”, “humiliate”, “insult”, or “hit” were not considered supportive behaviors. Although “fighting” was reported to be a supportive common activity that can lead to friendships (as mentioned under Strand A “establish contact and spend time with peers”), “hitting – when it’s really serious” (WS 34), such as “hitting till one bleeds” (WS 18), stops friendship development. Furthermore, peers that “play tricks” (WS 24) on you, “borrow things but not give it back” (WS 43), “pretend to be your friend, but then talk behind your back” (WS 30), or do “not share” (WS 14; subtheme “specific negative actions”) were reported to have difficulties making friends. Just as supportive actions were reported to be present in the offline and online environments, negative behavior was reported to be present in both contexts as well, such as “When someone writes swearwords in WhatsApp” (WS 23) or peers “take a weird picture and post it on the internet” (WS 51); thus, digital experiences appear to affect peer relationships, as do face-to-face actions. Overall, the participatory prevalence analysis indicated that early adolescents considered physically aggressive, humiliating, or insulting behaviors to be the biggest hindrances for friendship development (see Fig. 2). A key component for friendship development is the layer of group dynamics (see also Strand A “acceptance and tolerance”), which again occurred in Strand B. Here, individuals subjectively experienced that peers “steal” or “take away” friends, further emphasizing the difficulties experienced when forming bigger friendship groups.

Bad conflict management. Deceitful and malicious behaviors were reported as leading to conflicts; participating early adolescents considered disputes with peers as highly risky for friendship development (mentioned in over 80% of participatory workshops; see Fig. 2). Supportive peers know when to stop and accept personal boundaries and differences (as mentioned in the positive theme “conflict management”). Conversely, not being able to apologize and not feeling heard or accepted were reported as hindering friendship development. Worse still, being “constantly” criticized or even victimized also were reported to hinder friendship development. Furthermore, conflicts that resulted in blaming others or unleashing anger on peers (subtheme “lack of frustration tolerance”) were considered as unacceptable.

Lack of shared time and communication. Frequently spending time together was reported as promoting peer relationships (as identified in Strand A); in contrast, “when you don’t do things together anymore” (WS 7) or “when he never has time for me” (WS 54);

subtheme “not spending time together”), friendship development was reported as being more difficult. Although inviting peers, asking questions, and saying hello were reported to be good strategies for initiating contact, opposing behaviors were reported to lead to social isolation (subtheme “no initiation of or wish for contact”). However, spending time together and using digital media were supportive for friendship development (see Strand A), but “meeting in the main menu in Fortnite is not enough” (WS 50). An additional example indicating hampered communication was “when a friend visits you, but then only sits in front of his phone” (WS 49).

3.2.3. External factors

Given hindering circumstances. Hindering external circumstances can be understood as reverse themes compared to those identified in Strand A. Thus, “absence of similarities” and “local distance” between peers were reported to complicate friendship development, just as “similarities” and “local proximity” were reported to support it. School transition and “not knowing anyone yet” (WS 3) in the new school engenders local distance between old friends and a sense of not belonging to a new group, which poses an age specific challenge. Although culture, looks, or family relationships can positively affect friendship development (as mentioned in Strand A), the reverse might be true for others. Example quotations of all generated hindering themes and subthemes are provided in the Supplementary Materials.

4. Discussion

The positive impact of friendships and supportive peer relationships on mental health and well-being is well documented (e.g., Heinsch et al., 2020; Lester & Cross, 2015). Particularly during the school transition between primary and secondary levels, support from friends is a relevant predictor for well-being and school satisfaction across cultures (Oriol et al., 2017). Yet, early adolescents receive limited instruction on *how* to establish friendships with peers (van Rens et al., 2018b). Also, the existing peer relationship literature lacks novel approaches to involve early adolescents in research about them and making their needs visible, thereby inhibiting intervention developers and school psychology practice (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Lansdown et al., 2014). The present study employed participatory workshops to give early adolescents a voice and involve them in the analysis of their own generated data. This novel approach aimed to understand factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development in the eyes of early adolescents. We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis and clustered our results in terms of personal, interpersonal, and external factors, which are conceptually separable but interrelated in the roles they play in friendship development.

Overall, our results emphasize the components of friendship quality that are important to early adolescents, including support, intimacy, affection, trust, ability to manage conflict, and time together as identified in previous literature (Roach, 2019). Furthermore, the results highlight basic requirements for feeling safe and understood in the peer environment, which include truthfulness, reciprocity, disclosure, continuity, and protection. More specifically, we found that early adolescents linked personal characteristics (e.g., kindness, nastiness) and interpersonal behaviors when explaining friendship development. Although early adolescents reported valuing kindness as the most important factor that facilitated friendship development, some individuals indicated that friendliness could incorporate behavior that could be objectively described as antisocial for others. Thus, shared norms of behavior were reported to facilitate friendship development. Supportive and empathic actions appear to be essential interpersonal competencies that facilitate friendship development. Furthermore, spending time together and experiencing supportive communication and fun seems to provide the basis for contact establishment in both the offline and online environments. Conversely, friendship jealousy and the influence of peers in new classrooms were reported to pose additional challenges for friendship development.

4.1. Links between personal characteristics and interpersonal behavior

These results indicated that most early adolescents reported feeling attracted to peers that they considered as kind and humorous. Within the participatory prevalence analysis, early adolescents reported kindness as the most important characteristic for a desirable friend. The opposite was true for undesirable friends who were typically characterized as nasty. Yet, early adolescents offered several descriptions for kind peers on an interpersonal level, encompassing supportive and empathic actions such as “lending things or giving presents”, avoiding negative behavior, knowing and accepting boundaries, and “asking if you are alright when being ill, [...] do things together”. These findings are consistent with the belongingness hypothesis, which emphasizes that conflict and negative affect hampers a sense of belonging in a relationship, whereas a certain stability and continuity in relationships, accompanied by affective concerns about each other, are essential (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Contrary to kind peers, nasty peers showed malicious and deceitful actions because they “hit, mock, [use] swear words, exclude”, “argue” with others, and were untrustworthy.

In parallel with desirable characteristics, early adolescents drew inferences about the undesirable personal characteristic of “nastiness” by describing multiple unsupportive interpersonal interactions that they have observed or experienced. In accordance with the social cognition literature, early adolescents appear to be attributing behavior to personal attributes to make sense of the complex social world (Greifeneder et al., 2017). Yet, inferring from negative social behavior to stable personal characteristics without considering situational factors can manifest in misconceptions, which is a phenomenon termed *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977). For example, an early adolescent who uses swear words or hits others might quickly be perceived as nasty and unwanted as friend. Yet, repeated experiences of peer victimization or unsuccessful attempts to join in a game might result in using maladaptive strategies that induce such behavior. Indeed, peers with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties who get victimized or socially excluded tend to solve social problems through externalizing behaviors or distancing. However, they wished for peers to stand up for them and show more supportive reactions (de Leeuw et al., 2018).

4.2. Shared norms of behavior and similarities can facilitate relationships

Although early adolescents reported valuing kind behavior, their own behavior towards other peers might be antisocial, such as “insulting others together”, but still facilitating for friendships. In general, early adolescents agreed that nasty peers show malicious and deceitful actions, yet pushing and hitting for fun can also be part of a supportive peer relationship. Thus, early adolescents’ perceptions of supportive or unsupportive interpersonal behavior varied between individuals depending on individual levels of acceptability. Indeed, friends tend to be similar in levels of aggression and prosocial behavior (McDonald et al., 2013). Joining a peer group that holds aggressive or prosocial norms even predicts increases in the respective behavior 1 year later (Berger & Rodkin, 2012).

Our findings also show that having something in common (e.g., sharing a hobby) facilitated friendship development. Indeed, shared interests are repeatedly identified as one indicator for the formation of peer relationships (Heinsch et al., 2020; Liberman & Shaw, 2019; Selfhout et al., 2009). The attraction of similarity is a well-documented phenomenon termed *homophily* in relationship research, which emphasizes that people tend to connect with others who are like themselves (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; McPherson et al., 2001).

4.3. The importance of perceived supportive and empathic actions

Participating early adolescents emphasized the importance of perceived supportive and empathic actions for friendship development. In particular, early adolescents reported that peers who provide emotional or practical support are desired as friends. Consistent with our results, previous literature has indicated that socio-emotional competencies are important for friendships and peer relationships. Both a recent meta-analysis (Slaughter et al., 2015) and a systematic review (Derksen et al., 2018) indicated that socio-emotional competencies are linked with peer acceptance. Thus, children with advanced theory of mind understanding are better liked by their peers, receive higher social status, and show increased prosocial behavior (Derksen et al., 2018; Slaughter et al., 2015). Longitudinally, a poor theory of mind understanding has been associated with *friendlessness* over the course of 2 years (Fink et al., 2015). Furthermore, higher perspective taking skills directly link with prosocial behavior, which might lead to increased peer acceptance (Oberle, 2018). Additionally, the negative association between number of friends and loneliness appears to be mediated by social competence (Zhang et al., 2014). Our qualitative data supplement previous literature and provide insights into early adolescents’ concepts of social support and specific strategies that they consider supportive (e.g., ways to practically assist others, making presents, helping with schoolwork).

4.4. The relevance of spending time together, fun, and supportive communication

The participatory prevalence analysis indicated that spending time together was one of the most important factors that facilitated friendship development. Hanging out together or carrying out specific activities, such as playing computer games, doing sports, or going on trips together were reported as popular leisure time activities. Moreover, the emotional component of fun and laughter is highly relevant when spending time with peers. Consistent with this, pleasure and common interests have been reported as key factors in friendships (Heinsch et al., 2020). Moreover, frequent contact helps to develop closeness because “when you like each other, then you spend more time together and you get to know each other better”. Similar results have been reported for adult populations in that increased hours spent together during leisure time (e.g., hanging out, watching TV, gaming together) corresponds with a higher relationship level that develops from a casual acquaintance and leads to a best friend (Hall, 2019). Moreover, in an experimental study, Liberman and Shaw (2019) showed that choosing to spend time together was a more important indicator of friendship than various similarities between individuals (i.e., same gender or same interest). We can draw similar conclusions from our qualitative data. Although early adolescents considered common activities across all participatory workshops as relevant for friendships, similarities were only mentioned in half of the participatory workshops. The participatory prevalence analysis coherently indicated that spending time together was far more relevant than having similarities (see Fig. 1). Communication was another identified factor reported to facilitate friendship development, which included asking questions, showing interest, listening, and being polite. Consistent with this, certain forms of everyday conversations, such as catching up, checking in, or joking around were identified as factors that facilitated friendship development in adult samples (Hall, 2019).

4.5. The online environment facilitates and hinders friendship development

Our data revealed that establishing contact and spending time together can also occur online, for example, by playing computer games or sending text messages (see Fig. 1). Longitudinal and experimental studies have shown that early adolescents who frequently communicate online not only have supportive friendships, but also use it as a means of stress relief (Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013; Lee, 2009). Against the widely held view that digital media use causes mental health problems, a recent review that synthesized data from systematic reviews, meta-analyses, large-scale studies, and longitudinal studies concluded that studies were mainly correlational and produced inconsistent results (i.e., small positive, negative, or null effects; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). A recent Ecological Momentary Assessment study indicated that spending more time together using digital media did not decrease mental well-being; additionally, more daily online communication also resulted in the experience of better feelings (Jensen et al., 2019). The online environment often is used to strengthen offline peer relationships, thereby increasing opportunities to stay connected (Mittmann et al., 2021; Reich et al., 2012).

Yet, our data also suggested that online interactions can sometimes threaten a friendship (e.g., “publishing embarrassing photos”)

and elicit feelings of exclusion by “blocking someone on WhatsApp”. Our data show that malicious and deceitful actions were highly present and hindering for friendship development in offline and online environments. This is not surprising because peer conflicts and victimization are not restricted to the offline environment, as these also occur online (Sumter et al., 2012; Troop-Gordon, 2017; Yau & Reich, 2018). Early adolescents who experience offline victimization are more likely to experience online victimization as well, which affects reductions in life satisfaction and health (Sumter et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2010). Victimization is particularly high during early adolescence; for example, this can be explained due to contextual and social changes, such as the school transition affecting renegotiations of social hierarchies, with aggression being an effective way to establish power and popularity (Troop-Gordon, 2017; Wang et al., 2010).

4.6. Friendship jealousy as potential barrier for friendship development

Finally, our findings suggest that jealousy and challenges in tolerating bigger friendship groups is an important potential barrier to friendship development. Early adolescents reported experiencing peers who “steal” or “take away” friends, engendering a feeling of betrayal. This phenomenon might be particularly present among peers who have a low status of liking and who are trying to maintain the few friends they have (Kraft & Mayeux, 2018). Given that the school transition from primary to secondary levels intensifies the desire to belong to a group (Pratt & George, 2005), observing that some peers have more friends or are part of various cliques might trigger friendship jealousy.

4.7. Practice implications and future directions

Overall, our results provide a solid early adolescents’ informed basis for school psychologists to develop tailored interventions that address factors that facilitate and consider factors that hinder friendship development. Because early adolescents identified kindness as the most important factor that facilitated friendship development, future interventions should discuss how “kind” peers behave and how this desired behavior can be established among peers in a classroom. A basic requirement is also the establishment of a feeling of safety, which could be implemented with an activity that addresses classroom rules. For example, in a successful anti-bullying program that is implemented during the time of school transition, such rules of behavior were created to emphasize supportive peer relationships where everyone feels safe and antisocial behavior is not tolerated (Wójcik & Hełka, 2018). Based on our findings, these rules should demonstrate why it is important to tell the truth and protect each other, and that this agreement should be based on reciprocity. Friendship development interventions should also cover components addressing social skills, conflict management skills, and communication skills. For social skills training, our results indicate that precise supportive and empathic actions that early adolescents deem as relevant for friendship development should be included (e.g., practical assistance, make presents, help with schoolwork; example quotations are provided in the Supplementary Materials). Although our results show that early adolescents think that avoiding negative behavior is crucial for friendship development, their mentioned strategies to overcome conflicts were limited, which can be a specific target for future interventions. Additionally, given that communication takes place in the offline and online environments, future interventions should address both communication channels or might include the use of digital media (i.e., smartphones) in a meaningful way. Moreover, interventions need to provide time for common activities that allow for shared positive emotions. Considering today’s early adolescents’ favorite hobbies, it might not be possible to go out for ice cream or on a hiking trip during an intervention, but these examples can provide suggestions for early adolescents who lack ideas when planning leisure activities with other peers or to provide precise homework as didactic activities.

Our results can also supplement individual counseling for students who struggle making friends. The present study provides a detailed picture of the specific behaviors and strategies that participating early adolescents applied when interacting with peers while aiming to make friends. Although very simple strategies such as saying “let’s be friends” might be a useful security check to clarify whether one should further invest in a potential friendship or not, it might also be an unsuccessful strategy if one lacks other facilitating competencies. Thus, school psychologists could use our results to assess and offer support to individuals who are struggling to make friends; this support would be designed to facilitate behaviors and actions of friendship development, as well as identifying hindering factors to friendship development.

School psychologists can also inform teachers about factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development in the classroom and how teachers can implement friendship development activities at the time of school transition. It is evident that teachers can benefit from implementing friendship development activities at the start of the school year because friendships and supportive peer relationships are related to academic outcomes, academic motivation, classroom engagement, and school belonging (Kiefer et al., 2015; Wentzel et al., 2018). Again, establishing classroom rules and routines that create a feeling of safety and that define kind behavior might be successful ways to facilitate an appropriate atmosphere for friendship development. Also, planning common activities that offer time for peer interactions, such as going on a hiking trip with the whole class, are relevant for facilitating friendship development early in the academic year.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes the importance of friends and peer relationships at school to reduce loneliness, social isolation, and accompanied negative health effects, such as depressive symptoms (Ashworth et al., 2022; Branje & Morris, 2021; Loades et al., 2020). The extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed the need for research like ours described here because knowing how to facilitate and support friendship development at school is more important than ever. Early adolescents have reported that not going to school negatively affected their friendships, which was especially true for pupils who were at the time of the school transition between primary and secondary levels (Lockyer et al., 2022). Consistent with our results, early adolescents longed for face-to-face interactions with their friends, regular contact, and more than just contact via phone, video calling,

social media, or texting (Lockyer et al., 2022). Friendship development interventions, counseling when struggling to make friends, or offering common activities at school are practical actions that school practitioners can offer early adolescents who had limited social interaction opportunities due to COVID-19 pandemic.

4.8. Strengths and limitations

This study aimed to understand factors reported to facilitate and hinder friendship development by using different inquiry methods to gain a holistic picture of early adolescents' perspectives. Employing these distinct inquiry methods allowed early adolescents to contribute in different ways (Lundqvist, 2014). Our participatory workshop activities were conducted primarily with the full class or in small groups, yet, individual post-it note writing also allowed pupils to express their perspectives without being pressured to explain their thoughts in the group (Morgan et al., 2002). Thus, we expect that our data include a variety of different perspectives from early adolescents, which corroborates our holistic approach and aim of the study. Yet, our participatory workshop methods were novel and have only been used in our study. We encourage other researchers to conduct similar participatory workshops in other countries to examine how our present results correspond to the perspectives of early adolescents in other countries. Given that school transitions differ in nature and timing across countries, it is likely that there will be both similarities and differences in the perspectives of early adolescents from different countries, which is essential to consider when designing interventions for international implementation.

Early adolescents were involved in the decision-making process around the data that they generated, thereby presenting novel results regarding participants' perspectives and thus supplementing the existing literature. Although the decision-making process was conducted in small groups vulnerable to group influences (Morgan et al., 2002), we expect that our large sample size minimized potential biases. However, to fully exclude group influences, the decision-making process should be repeated in an individual or anonymous setting.

Following recommendations in literature, and consistent with our aim to conduct child-friendly participatory workshops that created a pleasant atmosphere and increased willingness to participate, we reduced the hierarchical adult-child relationship by (a) using first names only, (b) conducting warm-up activities where facilitators and children participated at the same time, and (c) sitting in a circle on the floor, meeting as equals (Morgan et al., 2002). Collecting data on post-it notes in different settings (i.e., full class, small groups, and individually) was appealing and engaging, but also led to a data set including snippets of conversations, short phrases, or single words. Hence, the nature of the data did not allow for in-depth analysis of individual students' perspectives. Instead, a more holistic understanding of factors that facilitated and hindered friendship development was achieved. However, data collection procedures did not allow for gender specific analyses of early adolescents' responses, although the importance of factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development could differ between girls and boys. For example, girls have scored higher on self-disclosure, empathy, and prosocial behavior than boys (Rose & Rudolph, 2006), which might make these aspects more relevant for girls. Moreover, girls have reported to value the avoidance of negative behavior and keeping secrets as more important than boys, whereas in contrast, boys tend to rate similarities as more important for friendships than girls (Kitts & Leal, 2021). Thus, gender specific factors that facilitate and hinder friendship development need further investigation in future research.

We acknowledge that our large sample size is unusual for qualitative studies. However, this was deemed important due to our participatory methods (e.g., collecting data on post-it notes) that led to unusual qualitative data (i.e., verbatim quotes of students consisting of single words and short phrases), our study aim (i.e., to understand early adolescents' needs in order to develop meaningful universal interventions), and the diversity of the sample (i.e., including a broad range of pupils experiencing school transition from different school types in rural and urban areas; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This study supplements the existing peer relationship literature by using participatory methods to study friendship development and actively involving early adolescents in the analysis of their own generated data. We identified factors that facilitated and hindered friendship development at the time of the school transition between primary and secondary levels and emphasized those factors that early adolescents themselves identified as most relevant. Overall, the participatory prevalence analysis revealed that "kindness" was the most identified important factor for friendship development. In our sample, early adolescents valued kind peers who give them a feeling of safety, showed supportive and empathic actions, managed conflicts, spent time with them, and communicated in the offline and online environments. Yet, early adolescents might only use one strategy and lack other competencies or ideas in how to make friends. In sum, our study can inform school psychology practice and future research regarding how to facilitate friendship development, and thus mental health and well-being at school, by considering early adolescents' perspectives.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary materials

Supplementary materials for this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2023.03.001>.

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