



**HOW PEERS CAN PUSH
EACH OTHER TO KEEP
GETTING BETTER**

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Many educators worry about student motivation, which typically declines as students grow up through middle school and high school. At the same time, they see the growing importance of friends and peer groups during these same years. A common conclusion is that negative peer influence is undermining student motivation and engagement.

Yet research on peers, teachers and student motivation paints a different, more complex picture. Some major conclusions from research include the following:

1. Motivation does tend to decline as students move through middle school and high school.
2. Peers do influence motivation and engagement, but that influence is most likely to be positive, not negative. This influence does not overwhelm other influences, such as teachers and parents.
3. Peers are much more likely to learn from each other when they are intentionally taught skills and practices for helping each other and solving problems together.
4. Teachers—who continue to have much greater influence on academic engagement than peers—play major roles in shaping peer relationships in ways that challenge students to learn and grow, rather than undermining learning.

Students develop relationships in schools with both adults (teachers, staff, administrators) and peers or friends. These friendships can be a positive resource for growth and learning that teachers can encourage. [Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework](#) provides a tool for exploring positive friendships and how they help students grow. This month's content focuses on how teachers can make it more likely that students will push each other to keep getting better, rather than holding back.

This month, we focus on the positive influence of friends and peers in challenging students to learn and grow. Just as important, we highlight the role of teachers in creating learning environments and experiences that accentuate positive peer influence for academic motivation and learning.

SOURCES:

Derry, S. J. (1999). A fish called peer learning: Searching for common themes. In A. M. O'Donnell & A. King (Eds.), *Cognitive perspectives in peer learning* (pp. 197-211). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hamm, J. V., Hoffman, A., & Farmer, T. W. (2012). Peer cultures of academic effort and achievement in adolescence. In A. W. Ryan & G. W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships and adjustment at school*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Hardré, P. L., & Sullivan, D. W. (2008). Student differences and environment perceptions: How they contribute to student motivation in rural high schools. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 18(4), 471–485.

Otis, N., Grouzet, F. M. E., & Pelletier, L. G. (2005). Latent motivational change in an academic setting: A 3-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 97(2), 170–183.

The students in schools and classrooms may be an untapped resource to motivate and challenge each other to learn and grow. It's easier to tap this resource when it is recognized as a resource, not a deficit, and when educators understand the multiple layers of peer relationships and influence. The good news is that teachers can play an important—if often hidden—role in encouraging positive peer support and challenge to be engaged in learning.

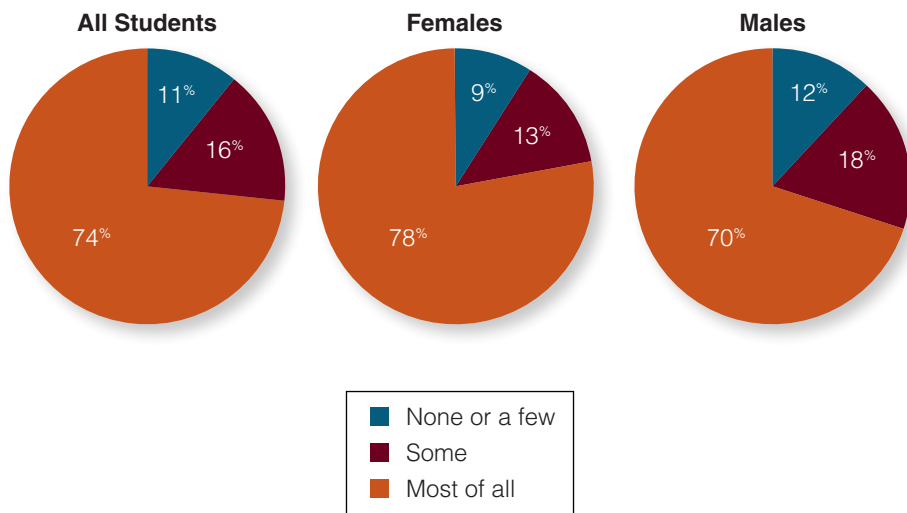
Five Key Findings on Peer Influence

Many people worry about the negative influence of peers on student motivation. However, research suggests that these fears may be misplaced or overstated, with negative attitudes being more often triggered by other individual, classroom and educational factors. Some key themes in the research include the following:

- 1. Peers have a modest, but meaningful influence on academic motivation and achievement.** Most research finds relatively small, though meaningful, effects of peers on each others' academic motivation and learning—with teachers playing a much more significant role than peers—even throughout high school.
- 2. Most often, peers are a positive academic influence.** When peers do have an effect, it is most common that friends and classmates challenge each other to put in academic effort and to learn, rather than undermine learning. This finding is consistent across different racial-ethnic groups of students.
- 3. Peer influence varies for different students.** Peer influence is different for different students, depending on their individual personalities and strengths as well as their academic abilities. For example, students who struggle in school benefit the most from having relationships with students who excel in school. However, if high-achieving students have too many low-achieving friends, it can undermine their motivation.
- 4. Students are more influential when they learn skills** to help each other with learning, such as communication skills, effective group work, helping behaviors and how to explain problem solving (rather than just giving answers).
- 5. Teachers and schools play a significant role in shaping peer influence.** How classrooms are managed so that students feel safe and engaged and how schools create a safe climate and group students all influence how peers either support or undermine academic motivation and learning. For example, when teacher-student relationships are better, peer relationships tend to have more of a positive effect on learning.

Friends See Friends Doing Well in School

One indicator of positive peer influence in student motivation is whether students believe their friends do well in school. Recent Search Institute surveys of more than 120,000 students in grades 6 to 12 found that students believe most or all of their closest friends do well in school. Females are somewhat more likely than males to believe their closest friends do well in school.



FIVE KEY FINDING SOURCES:

Burke, M. A., & Sass, T. R. (2014). Classroom peer effects and student achievement (Working Paper 08-5). Boston, MA: Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

Collie, R. J., Martin, A. J., Papworth, B., & Ginns, P. (2016). Students' interpersonal relationships, personal best (PB) goals, and academic engagement. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 45, 65–76.

Hamm, J. V., Hoffman, A., & Farmer, T. W. (2012). Peer cultures of academic effort and achievement in adolescence. In A. W. Ryan & G. W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships and adjustment at school*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Webb, N. M., & Farivar, S. (1999). Developing productive group interaction in middle school mathematics. In A. M. O'Donnell & A. King (Eds.), *Cognitive perspectives in peer learning* (pp. 117–149). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Wentzel, K. R., Donlan, A., & Morrison, D. (2012). Peer relationships and social motivational processes. In A. M. Ryan & G. W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships and adjustment at school* (pp. 79–108). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

SOURCE:

Unpublished Search Institute results from surveys between 2012 and 2015 of more than 120,000 middle and high schools across the United States.

Different Peers Influence Motivation in Different Ways

Students obviously have different kinds of relationships with peers. These different types of relationships challenge students to learn and grow in different ways. Here are three types of relationships in order from greatest to least influence on motivation, school engagement and learning:

Two-Way Friendships

Friends who trust and are loyal to each other provide emotional support and encouragement that helps students when they're struggling. Students also push themselves to meet their friends' expectations, and they often develop habits and skills together.

Regular Interactions

Students interact with other students regularly, even if they may not be emotionally close. These relationships sometimes provide information students need to learn as well as influencing their beliefs and behaviors about themselves and about learning.

Shared Group Membership

Groups provide a source of identity, resources and positive feelings of belonging and being liked. These more distant relationships have less impact, though they do influence how students see themselves and their status in the school.

SOURCE:

Molloy, L. E., Gest, S. D., & Rullison, K. L. (2010). Peer influences on academic motivation: Exploring multiple methods of assessing youths' most "influential" peer relationships. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 31(1), 13–40.

Wentzel, K. R., & Wigfield, A. (1998). Academic and social motivational influences on students' academic performance. *Educational Psychology Review*, 10(2), 155–175.

How Peer Relationships Affect Academic Motivation

For many students, peer relationships enhance both the effort they put into education and outcomes they achieve. When students feel supported by their peers, they are more likely to help others or cooperate with classmates. And when students are shown care from peers, they become more motivated to pursue social and academic goals. Students are more likely to develop an intrinsic desire to learn and a mastery orientation to learning when they:

- Believed they were valued and respected by other students;
- Believed their best friends had positive attitudes toward learning; and
- Felt they belonged in the classroom with their peers.

In addition, when peer groups share positive expectations about school achievement, students become more intrinsically motivated, and their interest in and enjoyment of schoolwork increase. In this study of peer relationships in a middle school science class, each level of peer interaction—from positive one-to-one relationships to a broad sense of belonging—contributed independently to students' motivation to learn. If, however, these peer interactions were negative (such as resistance to academic norms), students became less motivated.

SOURCES:

Hamm, J. V., Schmid, L., Farmer, T. W., & Locke, B. (2011). Injunctive and descriptive peer group norms and the academic adjustment of rural early adolescents. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 31(1), 41–73.

Nelson, R. M., & DeBacker, T. K. (2008). Achievement motivation in adolescents: The role of peer climate and best friends. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 76(2), 170–189.

Wentzel, K. R., Baker, S. A., & Russell, S. L. (2012). Young adolescents' perceptions of teachers' and peers' goals as predictors of social and academic goal pursuit. *Applied Psychology*, 61(4), 605–633.

Conditions that Enhance Positive Peer Influence

Students are most likely to be positive influences on each other's academic motivation when the following four conditions are present:

1. Students clearly communicate the shared expectation that they will all work toward and accomplish academic goals.
2. Students provide each other with practical help, such as working together in study groups.
3. Relationships between the peers are safe and mutually responsive.
4. Students provide each other with emotional support.

Although these are all interactions among students, teachers can play important roles in establishing a classroom culture and structure that encourage these conditions.

SOURCE:

Wentzel, K. R. (2005). Peer relationships, motivation, and academic performance at school. In A. J. Elliot & C. S. Dweck (Eds.), *Handbook of Competence and Motivation* (pp. 279–296). New York, NY: Guilford Press

In the End, Teachers Matter More for Academics

Although peers influence students' academic motivation and achievement, research consistently shows that teachers have a much greater effect on academics than peers throughout K–12 education.

For example, a study of 3,200 middle and high school students from the U.S., Canada, and the UK found that students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers, parents and peers were all associated with academic engagement and goal setting.

When compared, perceived relationships with teachers were most strongly associated with academic goal setting and class participation, with peer relationships playing a role as well. Both peer and teacher relationships were associated with whether students enjoyed school. Relationships with parents played less of a role in these academic areas, though they were still significant.

SOURCE:

Collie, R. J., Martin, A. J., Papworth, B., & Ginns, P. (2016). Students' interpersonal relationships, personal best (PB) goals, and academic engagement. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 45, 65–76.

Helping Students Learn to Challenge Each Other Academically

Teachers play important roles in creating classrooms that maximize positive peer influence for learning. Try these strategies to encourage students to push each other to learn and grow.

- 1 Notice students' interactions with each other**, including their social status with peers, how they are being treated and how they interact. These interactions will tell you a lot about how ready they are to work in groups. Use what you see and learn to shape group assignments and class discussions as well as your own relationships with students.
- 2 Set up classrooms to encourage positive peer interactions.** Arranging desks into pods instead of rows, for example, can facilitate discussion and shared problem solving.
- 3 Clearly communicate expectations for social and academic interactions**, including the standard that students encourage and help each other be their best. Set firm limits on inappropriate behavior, providing a clear articulation of the reasons behind these expectations. Set clear norms about supporting all students' learning and growth, treating everyone with respect and kindness, resolving conflicts effectively, and focusing on the class's academic and learning goals.
- 4 Emphasize mastery learning instead of performance-based goals that focus on comparisons among students.** Class ranking and other strategies that pit students against each other may be motivating for some, but they undermine motivation (and relationships) for other students, particularly those who tend not to excel academically.
- 5 Focus the groups on understanding and using the underlying principles and procedures** for solving the assigned problems. Then give plenty of time for them to work together, using those tools to complete the assignment. This approach contrasts with spending a lot of time working as a whole class to come up with correct answers based on the teacher's explanation of the procedure, leaving little time for the groups to work together (which can undermine the group learning process).
- 6 Coach students on how to learn together.** Once students internalize these strategies, they'll use them again on their own. Examples include:
 - Being explicit about steps in group learning processes, such as reading, recalling, listening and interpreting reading materials.
 - Using prompts to guide giving feedback. For example, prompts such as, "Can you explain that?," "Can you clarify what you mean?" or "What do you think about..." give structure to peer discussion and options for openly sharing ideas. Consider giving some examples of prompts on index cards for students to use until they are comfortable providing good feedback.

- Turning questions back to the group (instead of answering individual questions), insisting that students explain problems, not just give the answers, or reinforcing positive group learning behaviors.

7 Give students time to practice group skills before tackling challenging academic problems. It's hard to give explanations to others when you're still trying to understand the content yourself. Once students get comfortable with how to give explanations and help each other with more familiar material, they are prepared to take on harder assignments.

8 Actively monitor group work to hold students accountable to the expectations and group norms (such as the importance of working together and ensuring that everyone contributes), not just the mechanics of the group work (such as signing each other's work at the end of a group assignment). This includes watching carefully to ensure that all group members are involved and contributing.

SOURCES

Hamm, J. V., Schmid, L., Farmer, T. W., & Locke, B. (2011). Injunctive and descriptive peer group norms and the academic adjustment of rural early adolescents. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 31(1), 41–73.

Kindermann, T. A. (2011). Commentary: The invisible hand of the teacher. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 32(5), 304–308.

Webb, N. M., & Farivar, S. (1999). Developing productive group interaction in middle school mathematics. In A. M. O'Donnell & A. King (Eds.), *Cognitive perspectives in peer learning*, (pp. 117–149). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Wentzel, K. R., Baker, S. A., & Russell, S. L. (2012). Young adolescents' perceptions of teachers' and peers' goals as predictors of social and academic goal pursuit. *Applied Psychology*, 61(4), 605–633.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY # 1: FRIENDS PUSH FRIENDS TO BE THEIR BEST

When we think of good friends, we often think of those who give us a lot of emotional support—friends we go to when we need a boost or a non-judgmental listening ear. That’s vital for feeling safe and accepted. In addition, good friends challenge each other to grow and be their best. That sometimes means pushing them to do something they might not be fully motivated to do on their own. It means holding them accountable for their actions and helping them learn from failures or mistakes.

This 15-minute discussion-starter activity helps students think about their friends and peers who push each other to learn and grow—and the ways they do it.

Step 1

Say that strong relationships involve people challenging each other to grow, highlighting some of the information in the summary above. Some parts of challenging growth are:

- Expecting each other to be their best.
- Stretching people to go further.
- Holding each other accountable for our actions.
- Helping each other learn from mistakes or setbacks.

Ask students to call out examples of people (adults or youth) who push them to grow. This could include parents, teachers, coaches, friends and others. Just get enough ideas to prime students' thinking of the different ways people challenge them to grow.

Step 2

Give each student a piece of paper and some markers. **Have them think of one way a friend, classmate or other peer has challenged them to grow that has motivated them to be their best.** It can be a small thing or a big thing related to any part of their life, from school to sports to a hobby to academic success.

Step 3

Have students write that person's name on a sheet of paper (or they can draw a picture). (If they don't want to use the person's name, they can describe the person another way, such as "another member of the basketball team.") Underneath, have students write what this person says or does that challenges them to grow and live up to their potential.

Step 4

When students have all filled out their sheets, ask a few to share some of the things their friends, classmates or other peers do to challenge them. Write the key ideas on a whiteboard. Add examples until you have 10–15 listed.

Step 5

Have students review the list. Discuss these questions:

- Which of these examples do they find to be most motivating? What makes them motivating?
- Which examples happen a lot? Which ones don't happen much, but might be motivating if they were more common?
- Which strategies do they often use with their own friends, classmates or peers?
- Which strategies do they think they could try in the future? What do they think might happen? What might they do to make it a good experience?

Step 6

Collect all the sheets with examples of how students have experienced peers challenging them to be their best. Consider posting these (without names) in the classroom or sharing them with parents and teachers. Sharing the ideas reinforces how students help each other learn and grow.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY #2: RAISE THE BAR

This active game is best suited for a gym class or outside after-school activity where students need to burn off some energy. It can take 15–45 minutes, depending on how many students you have. You'll need a jump rope and, if available, a tumbling mat.

Step 1

Have two students hold opposite ends of the rope. In addition, ask two volunteers to “spot” (watch out for) and assist players who may trip. Instruct players that jumping over the rope means jumping with feet and legs moving together in the same direction. (This helps players avoid athletic heroics.)

Step 2

Start with the rope on the ground. Students line up and jump over the rope one at a time for the first round.

Step 3

Next round, the rope holders lift the rope slightly, keeping ends tight.

Step 4

Players continue to jump over the rope, and the rope holders continue to “raise the bar” with each new round. The objective is to clear the bar without touching any part of it. Players who touch the rope are out. The winner is the person who clears the rope at the highest level.

Step 5

After the game is over, sit together in a circle. **Ask:**

- Who “raises the bar” (sets expectations) for you in life?
What do they do?
- In what ways do those expectations encourage you?
- What makes some expectations frustrate you?
How do these expectations seem different?
- How do (or could) you “raise the bar” for others in this class?
What about for friends outside the class?