The Reasons for Friendship in Preschoolers: An Empirical Study on Three to Six Year Old Children
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This work is aimed to explore the way children in pre-school age intend friendship, with practical references to the positive and negative sides linked to a specific partner. The research has involved 174 children (81 boys and 93 girls), from 3 to 6 year old. Each child was given an interview questioning the reasons for *liking* or *not-liking* the chosen friend. The results show the ability of children in justifying their choice for a specific partner based on practical reasons (i.e. his behaviour), as well as on friend's own personality and their relationship.
Key words: *preschool aged*, *friendship*, *interview*.

When children begin to attend kindergarten, they become active protagonists in the construction of friendships, bonds that, as has been shown by empirical studies (see Brophy-Herb *et al.*, 2007), promote adaptation and psycho-social wellbeing. As Rubin, Bukowski and Parker (1998) have argued, friendship is a voluntary relationship that implies a choice. In the early years of their lives, children begin to make active choices, looking for specific characteristics in potential friends, such as a similarity in terms of age or gender in addition to shared interests and activities. In addition, another important requirement, from middle-childhood onwards, is reciprocity; however, among the youngest children, friendship can exist even as a unilateral (one-sided) relationship (Hayes, Gershman, Bolin, 1980; Bombi, Pinto, 2000; Bombi, Bosco, Colantuono, 2002; Baumgartner, Bombi, 2005b; Gleason, Hohmann, 2006).

Relationships between children are characterised by aspects of both stability and instability. Friendliness, good behaviour and social competence constitute stability in relationships with peers (Denham, Holt, 1993). Fluidity (instability), on the other hand, is derived from momentaneous affective modifications within interactions, due to contingent situational variables (Hymel, 1983).

There are two principal theoretical approaches in the study of friendly relations; both views provide opportunities, but they also have limitations and focus on only one portion of this domain (Newcomb, Bukowski, Pattee, 1993; Baumgartner, Bombi, 2005a). In scientific literature, the ethological derivation

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approach is commonly employed, in which external observers objectively collect data on children's behaviour in their natural settings. The friendships criteria are aspects such as reciprocity and the amount of time spent together; the observers pick out these *silent skills*, the social abilities that cannot yet be expressed in language (Pratt, Garton, 1993). However, this presents a picture that includes many social skills that are present since the earliest years of a child's development. A limitation of this approach is the restricted amount of access available to private interactions, mental representations and feelings regarding friendship; moreover, when focusing only on behaviour, which is unavoidably characterised by a certain degree of fluidity, these studies provide a picture that appears to indicate the instability of relationships between preschoolers, even when deep bonds of friendship may be present.

The second approach to this subject is one of cognitive-developmental derivation that takes into account and investigates the *explicit skills* that children are aware of and able to express. Due to the use of interview methods, the child himself can provide information that external observers cannot otherwise obtain, regarding the perceptions, beliefs and feelings which affect the interactions in which the child is a protagonist. Nevertheless, when dealing with preschoolers, the results may sometimes be inaccurate due to the fact that their language is still limited and they lack the skill of abstract thought which could make it easier for them to conceptualise friendship. These factors may produce an image of a child endowed with poor social capabilities. We must, however, note the evidence produced by recent studies, through the use of verbal measures and appropriate interview techniques (such as having children speak about the concrete aspects of their friendships), which has demonstrated that children have some knowledge concerning friendship and enmity, and that this knowledge can be disclosed not only in terms of actions and behaviour, but also in terms of personal characteristics or internal states (Baumgartner, Bombi, 2005a; Baumgartner, Bombi, Di Norcia, 2007; Bombi, Di Norcia, Gangemi, 2008).

Other empirical evidence has shown how children are able to use information such as personal traits in order to provide self-descriptions, to describe others and also to foresee behaviours and mental states (Yuill, 1992; Cain *et al.*, 1997; Heyman, Gelman, 2000; Giles, Heyman, 2005; Meins *et al.*, 2006). This capacity for understanding the principal characteristics of people plays a fundamental role in the comprehension of social behaviour, as when the child gains expertise regarding the emotional states of others, this knowledge supplies him/her with a crucial skill implied in the developmental course and enables him/her to establish the friendly relationships that are fundamental for wellbeing in the subsequent stages of life (Schaffer, 1998).

Until now, few studies have explored the field of explicit explanations for the choice of one specific friend over another in preschool children. In this direction, Gleason and Hohmann (2006) investigated the explicit explanations which have

been provided for why children in this age range choose to be friends with one specific child over another, asking a sample of children why they liked being friends with a specific schoolmate; the results obtained highlighted an early capacity to talk about personal friendships and to describe them in terms of personal resources, regardless of the type of friendly relations (mutual/reciprocal versus unilateral).

1
Objectives and Hypothesis

The aim of this study is to explore how preschoolers explain the reasons behind friendship, without taking into account (for the moment) the inter-informant agreement. The sole purpose of this study is, in fact, to demonstrate that children are able to justify (provide explanations for) their choice of a specific partner and to present both positive and negative aspects related to this bond and to the choice of specific friends. This will involve not only describing the concrete elements of evaluation, but also supplying information referring to feelings and personal characteristics. We expect to find that this skill is in an early stage and that it will show a significant increase in the sample children as they increase in age between three to six years old.

2
Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 81 boys and 93 girls, subdivided into three age ranges: 48 little children (39-54 months), 73 middle children (55-66 months), and 53 big children (67-78 months). Participants attended 12 classes in six kindergartens in the city of Rome, within a lower or middle social class. With the exception of two of the classes that included exclusively children aged from five to six years old, the remaining classes included children of all the aforementioned ages, and were balanced in terms of gender.

2.2. Procedure

The interviews were conducted in a room made available by the schools and in the presence of the only interviewer. In the morning (for most cases), each child was individually interviewed, using a brief semi-structured interview about friendship (the average length of the interviews ranged between 5 and 10 minutes). These interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Without any visual support, we asked the child to think about every schoolmate whom he/she

played with on a regular basis, and once the child provided a list of names he/she was asked to concentrate his/her attention on one of them, the best friend, giving further explanations about their friendship. The questions included in the interview were: "Can you talk to me about you and X?", "Why do you like X?" and "Is there something you do not like about X?". The choice to have the children speak about both the positive and negative aspects of their friendships was guided by a desire to better understand the reasons behind the preferential choice of a particular friend.

2.3. Encoding and data analysis

The encoding system we adopted is based on those developed by Gershman and Hayes (1983) and Furman and Bierman (1983), which both consist of categories for investigating the reasons why someone likes their friend. The adaptation of these systems was performed using pilot interviews with children who were not included in the final sample. Ultimately, our encoding system is based on 16 categories which are exhaustive and mutually exclusive, 10 of which focus on the reasons for liking a friend and six referring to the reasons for disliking them. Digressions (rambling answers) or answers like "I don't know" were not included in the analysis.

The children were classified, on the basis of their global attitudes shown during the interviews (e.g. if they were unable to answer, oriented only towards positive or negative aspects or able to evaluate both positive and negative elements), and the frequencies of these categories have been compared using the Chi Square test.

The frequency of each category was calculated. The average numbers of reasons for appreciating and for not appreciating their friends were compared with the T of Student for paired samples.

As the children provided more than one motivation in the same category in only a few cases (for example, two positive behaviours as a reason for their appreciation), the categories were all recoded in a dichotomous shape (0 = absence; 1 = presence). Using these frequencies, we compared the different ages within the individual categories using the Chi Square test.

3
Results

Only 22 participants out of 174 digressed, or were unable to answer the questions. In contrast, 75 children provided reasons for why they appreciated their friends (N = 71) or reasons for non-appreciation (N = 4), and 77 of them spoke about their friend in both a positive and a negative way. Their age was not significant in this case (see TAB. 1).

TABLE 1
Ability to answer the questions in the interview

	Little	Middle	Big	Total
Digresses, not able to answer	12	9	1	22
Reason for appreciation or non appreciation	25	29	21	75
Reason for appreciation and for non appreciation	11	35	31	77
Total	48	73	53	174

The 152 children who were able to answer the questions supplied significantly more [$t(163) = 10,03$; $p < 0,01$] reasons why they appreciated their friends (mean 1,93) than reasons for non-appreciation (mean 0,76).

From the analysis of the frequencies and percentages in each category, as shown in TAB. 2, we can observe the occurrences (although it is minimal in some cases) of all the categories considered in the study.

TABLE 2
Crude frequencies (F) and percentages (%) of answers

Categories and encoding criteria	F	%
1. *Common activities*: the "doing together", including playing.	19	5
2. *Proximity/Acceptance*: he comes next to me, we stay near one to the other, his look, he lets me play with him, he always chooses me, I go to his home, etc.	21	6
3. *Affects*: I like him to be my friend, I love him , he's sympathetic, we get on well, we never fight, we have fun together, etc.	51	14
4. *Prosociality (to share, to give, to take, to help)*: he gives me candies, he let me play with him, etc.	9	2
5. *Personality*: he is intelligent, he is good, he is kind, etc.	31	9
6. *Positive Behavior*: he speaks well, he tells me I'm good at things, he makes me laugh, etc.	27	7
7. *Positive Physical Characteristics*: I like him because his skin is clear, he's tall, etc.	45	12
8. *Attributes/Possess of Objects*: I like him because he has a new hairpins, I like his shirt, etc.	25	7
9. *Global Appreciation*: there's nothing wrong with him, I like everything about him.	17	5
10. *Other Positive Reasons*: other idiosyncratic reasons not included in the categories above (I like his last-name, I like is mom, etc.).	13	4

(segue)

TABLE 2 (*seguito*)

Categories and encoding criteria	F	%
11. *Aggressiveness/Contrast*: he gives me pushes, he hits me, we fight, he took my games away from me, etc.	21	6
12. *Distance/Rejection*: he doesn't want me, he doesn't want to play with me, etc.	21	6
13. *Negative Behavior*: he plays the fool, I don't like him when he throws our games or when he is bad to me etc.	36	10
14. *Negative Physical Characteristics*: I don't like him because he's voice is low, because he's dark-haired, etc.	10	3
15. *Negative Possession/Attributes*: I don't like him for his pony-tail , because he cut his hair, etc.	11	3
16. *Other Negative Reasons*: idiosyncratic reasons not included in the previous above negative categories (I don't like his little brother).	5	1
Total	362	100

The Chi Square values calculated for age for each individual category on the single categories show significant differences in two categories: personality (χ^2 = 11,98; p < 0,01) (FIG. 1) and distance (χ^2 = 6,37; p < 0,05) (FIG. 2). The following figures illustrate the percentages in the distribution of these categories. A tendency towards statistical significance also emerged for the categories of "appreciated behaviour" (χ^2 = 5,54; p = 0,06) and of "aggression/contrast" (χ^2 = 5,78; p = 0,055).

FIGURE 1
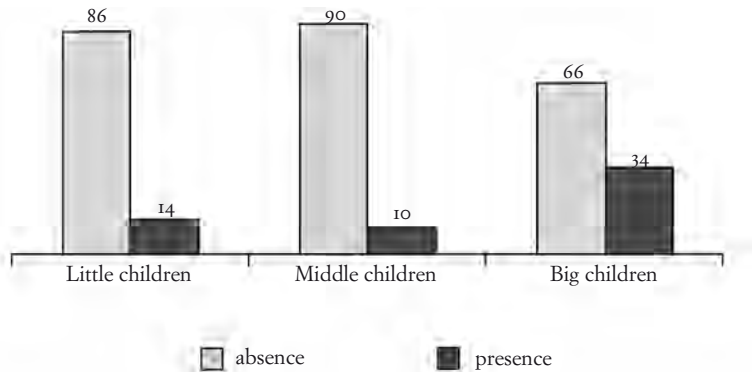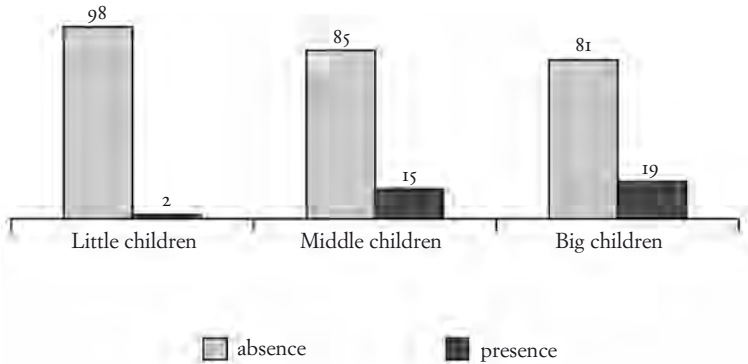Percentage of answers for personality category

FIGURE 2
Percentage of answers for distance category

4
Discussion and Conclusions

This study has investigated, using verbal measures, preschool children's skills in terms of explaining the reasons behind friendship. Unlike previous studies, in addition to investigating the reasons why children appreciate a friend, we also investigated critical aspects of their friendly relations, asking these children to indicate why they did not like that same friend.

Thanks to the framework provided by the questions included in the interview, which confirmed our initial hypothesis, it emerged that, from a very early age, children are able to justify their selection of a specific partner and to provide both positive and negative aspects of the relationship and specifically of the chosen friend. It is worth noting that they provided significantly more positive than negative aspects. This skill, which had already been developed at approximately three years old, in a manner which we can define as almost sophisticated, evolves during the subsequent periods of development, showing a leap of complexity in four to five year old children. During this age frame, the reasons that the children are able to provide in order to describe positive and negative valences develop significantly, later achieving more articulate forms of expression in the older children.

The children often described their friends using concrete terms, such as physical characteristics, behaviour and the aggressiveness of the partner, although there were also many explanations given in terms of affective elements and personal characteristics. Just a few children gave idiosyncratic answers and, when this happened, the subjects were generally little children.

This initial data analysis supplied some elements of interest. First, it demonstrated the capacity of children, from a very early age, to talk about an abstract theme such as friendship in terms of "affects", showing that they did not have to link it to situational variables. Second, at each age that we examined, the data showed that particular attention was paid to the other's physical characteristics: in general, children tend to see physical aspects as very important when choosing a friend. This is important evidence in terms of education, because it helps us to consider the influence of potential negative stigma due to physical characteristics at an early age, and the influences that this stigma can have regarding the child's adaptation within a groups of peers.

As the children got older, a significant proportion told us even more about personal characteristics (which were clearly positive as they influenced their decision to be friends) and, when the friendship did not go well, they spoke in terms of distance; that is, one of the major aspects of non-appreciation that we discovered related to physical and relational distance. As well as the capacity to ascribe personological traits to another person, the ability to feel upset at the perceived intention of the friend to remove him/herself from the relationship assumes a certain relevance if considering the "theory of the mind". These factors are not casual elements; in fact, these aspects connected to the relationship acquire more and more importance during the course of development.

In line with earlier studies (Baumgartner, Bombi, 2005a; Gleason, Hohmann, 2006; Baumgartner, Bombi, Di Norcia, 2007; Bombi, Di Norcia, Gangemi, 2008) we have explored the ways in which children represent the concept of friendship. We observed how they possess, from an early age, an ever increasing framework defining what personal characteristics they look for in potential friends. In addition, if encouraged, they are able to verbalise these "tacit skills" that are often difficult to investigate using verbal measures.

Using these results as a start point, we intend to perform further in-depth analysis and to combine our data with the data gathered using the other measures that were administered to the same sample of children.

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Riassunto

Questo lavoro si propone di esplorare il modo in cui i bambini di età prescolare spiegano l'amicizia, facendo riferimento ad aspetti positivi e negativi legati ad uno specifico partner. Hanno partecipato alla ricerca 174 bambini (81 bambini e 93 bambine), di età compresa tra i 3 e i 6 anni. È stata somministrata un'intervista semistrutturata in cui si chiedeva a ciascun bambino di esporre i motivi di *apprezzamento* e *non apprezzamento* circa l'amico scelto. I risultati mostrano la capacità dei bambini di giustificare la scelta di uno specifico partner introducendo sia aspetti concreti (ad esempio il comportamento) che aspetti relativi alla personalità dell'amico e alla relazione con quest'ultimo.

Parole chiave: *età prescolare*, *amicizia*, *intervista*.