Adolescents’ Perceptions of Peer Relationships

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Background

Adolescence is an important time for identity development. However, many adolescents are concerned about fitting in, or what might happen if they do not “go along” with their peer groups. One milestone that many people achieve in adolescence involves realizing their sexual orientation. LG (lesbian and gay) adolescents sometimes have a choice about whether or not to disclose their sexual orientation to others. This decision may have implications for adolescents’ friendships.

Study

We used a survey with hypothetical stories to understand how middle schoolers think about interactions with LG peers. Disclosing one’s sexual orientation to friends could result in a range of reactions, from positive support to teasing or bullying. We asked students to predict what would happen when a story character told a friend about their sexual orientation, and to say what they thought should happen in the same situation.

Results

Adolescents thought differently about what would happen versus what should happen:

- They expected a very wide range of possible outcomes for hypothetical LG peers who told their friends about their sexual orientation, everything from the friendship ending to the friends feeling even closer than before (blue graph).
- They strongly supported inclusion of LG peers, rating staying friends very positively (orange graph).

Ideas for Teachers, Administrators, and Parents

During middle school, attitudes about diversity are actively developing. Importantly, most middle schoolers in this study felt that LG peers should be included and supported in their identities, but they did not think that this reaction would be very common in peer groups. Schools have an important opportunity to set norms around acceptance, as part of both formal and informal curricula. By encouraging healthy and accepting friendships, we can promote positive environments for social development and emotional wellbeing for all adolescents.

For questions or comments about this study, please contact Reo Wang at yueyaowang@rochester.edu or Dr. Elenbaas at laura.elenbaas@rochester.edu.