

Maternal disapproval of friends in response to child conduct problems damages the peer status of pre- and early adolescents

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Background: Herein, we consider the hypothesis that mothers harm peer relations when they respond to child conduct problems by expressing disapproval of friends, which exacerbates the behavior problems they were presumably attempting to deter. **Methods:** A community sample of Lithuanian adolescents (292 boys and 270 girls, aged 9–14 years) completed surveys three times during an academic year. Classmate nominations indexed peer status (acceptance and rejection), self-reports described perceived maternal disapproval of friends, and peer nominations and self-reports separately gauged conduct problems. **Results:** Over the course of a school year: (a) conduct problems were associated with subsequent increases in perceived maternal friend disapproval; (b) perceived maternal friend disapproval was associated with subsequent decreases in peer status; and (c) low peer status was associated with subsequent increases in conduct problems. Full longitudinal, random-intercept cross-lagged panel mediation models confirmed that mothers who disapproved of friends were sources of peer difficulties that culminated in conduct problems and intermediaries whose response to child conduct problems damaged peer relations. Findings were stronger for peer rejection than for peer acceptance, suggesting that peers actively dislike those with mothers who intervene in peer relationships. **Conclusions:** Maternal disapproval of friends in response to child conduct problems damages the child's standing among peers, which then exacerbates behavior problems. This consequential cascade underscores the need for parent education about the potential deleterious consequences of well-intentioned interference in peer relations. Practitioners should be prepared to offer constructive, alternative solutions when youth present behavior problems. **Keywords:** Maternal disapproval of friends; conduct problems; peer status; rejection; acceptance.

Introduction

Conduct problems pose a special challenge to parents. Because most delinquency occurs outside the home and away from adult supervision, it is not unreasonable for parents to assume that peers bear some responsibility. It is also not unreasonable for parents to assume that they can forestall problems by limiting contact with suspect peers. Concurrent (Tilton-Weaver & Galambos, 2003) and longitudinal (Xiong, Qin, Wang, & Pomerantz, 2020) data indicate that North American parents act on such assumptions, disapproving and prohibiting friendships in the face of child conduct problems. Growing evidence suggests that their efforts are counterproductive, fomenting rather than discouraging behavior problems (e.g. Tu, Erath, & El-Sheikh, 2017). In the present study, we seek to explain these counterproductive outcomes, hypothesizing that parent meddling damages the child's standing among peers, which, in turn, exacerbates behavior problems. We test our hypothesis in a community sample of Lithuanian youth, ages 9–14, using three waves of data collected across the course of a single school year.

Parents shape peer relations, directly and indirectly. Indirect influences involve parental practices and aspects of family life that might affect the child's social competences but are not explicitly connected to the world of peers; direct influences include parental efforts to socialize or manage the child's peer context (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2019). Several studies have explored the indirect effects from parenting practices and styles to peer relationships through child social competence (e.g. Dickson, Laursen, Valdes, & Stattin, 2019). Far less is known about the consequences of parental efforts to manage friendships. When children are young, parents control opportunities and contexts for interactions with friends, determining who and how often the child affiliates with out of school. With the onset of adolescence, peer interactions increasingly take place outside the home and away from the watchful eye of adults (Laursen & Veenstra, 2023). Parents respond by adopting management practices. Verbal practices take precedent, often in the form of approving or disapproving friends and activities (Mounts, 2002). The practice is widespread. In one survey of North American parents, almost 2/3 of parents reported attempts to manage the peer relationships of their 10- to 14-year-old children (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999).

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Most parents who voice disapproval of friends do so to protect youth against presumed negative peer influence. In some cases, parents are responding to perceived friend delinquency (Tilton-Weaver & Galambos, 2003). In other cases, parents are reacting to behavior problems presented by their own children, on the assumption that peers are both instigators and accomplices that exert untoward influence (Xiong et al., 2020). Unfortunately, parental friend management can make matters worse. Longitudinal findings tie the practice of friend disapproval and prohibition to increasing involvement with deviant peers (Keijsers et al., 2012), mounting defiance against parental rules (Vansteenkiste, Soenens, Van Petegem, & Duriez, 2014), and rising levels of delinquency (Mounts, 2001; Tilton-Weaver, Burk, Kerr, & Stattin, 2013).

Why does parent disapproval of friends worsen conduct problems? Reactance models hold that youth object to perceived parental meddling in personal affairs and respond with defiance, increasing rather than decreasing delinquent acts and affiliates (Keijsers et al., 2012). Although pique is a powerful motivator, it does not capture changes in peer relations that may also drive behavior problems. We think it likely that a second, complementary process explains increases in delinquency among youth whose parents attempt to manage their friendships. We hypothesized that parent prohibitions damage the child's standing among peers, because it is uncool to have parents who interfere in social relations, because parent disapproval offends affiliates and undermines the quality of the friendship, and because prohibitions disrupt close ties without proffering ready substitutes. Consider each in turn. Children and young adolescents identify friendship as one of the first domains over which the child (rather than the parent) assumes decision-making authority (Smetana, Crean, & Campione-Barr, 2005). Those with parents who interfere in the personal domain of friendship may appear immature compared to those who assert the right to make such decisions for themselves. Little is known about partner reactions to parent–friend disapproval, but in romantic relationships, low levels of partner–family approval have been tied to subsequent decreases in feelings of love, satisfaction, and commitment (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). Low perceived relationship quality, in turn, is a strong indicator of friendship instability (Faur, Leggett-James, Kaniušonytė, Žukauskienė, & Laursen, 2024). Finally, peer difficulties could explain why parent disapproval increases the likelihood that delinquent peers will be selected as friends (Tilton-Weaver et al., 2013); given the choice between no friends and troubled ones, many youth opt for the latter. Taken together, we propose a model in which parent efforts to manage friendships drive up peer rejection (increasing the number of classmates who dislike the child) and drive down peer acceptance (reducing the number of classmates who like the

child); the loss of either form of peer status elevates the risk of conduct problems because it increases distress, challenges coping mechanisms, and forces the child to affiliate with peers who have low social status and who exhibit behavioral challenges or difficulties (Prinstein et al., 2018).

Our model starts from the assumption that maternal friend disapproval is both a cause of escalating conduct problems, via increases in peer difficulties, and an intermediate link between conduct problems and peer difficulties. Two indirect effects are hypothesized. First, maternal friend disapproval should provoke conduct problems because it damages peer status (i.e. increasing rejection and decreasing acceptance). In this process, diminished peer status is posited as an intermediate step between maternal friend disapproval and child conduct problems, such that peers exclude children whose mothers intervene in friendships; peer difficulties, in turn, are responsible for escalating behavior problems. Second, relatedly, maternal disapproval of friends is posited as an intermediate step between conduct problems and diminished peer status, such that mothers respond to child adjustment problems by increasing efforts to manage friendships, which, in turn, creates further peer difficulties.

The hypothesized model ties together two distinct sets of findings: Parents attempt to manage friendships increase in response to child conduct problems (e.g. Xiong et al., 2020) and conduct problems increase in response to peer status difficulties (e.g. van Lier & Koot, 2010). Unique to the present study is the novel insight that maternal friend disapproval has counterproductive consequences for conduct problems because of the deleterious impact it has on peer status. A multi-informant, longitudinal design with three waves of data collected during a single school year enabled tests of direct pathways from maternal friend prohibition to conduct problems, and indirect pathways that encompass a three-step temporal sequence: (a) child conduct problems provoke maternal friend prohibition; (b) maternal friend prohibition degrades the child's standing among peers; and (c) diminished peer status (i.e. lower acceptance or higher rejection) precipitates disruptive behavior. To separate parental friendship management from other features of parenting known to shape adolescent adjustment, we included psychological control (i.e. intrusiveness and emotional manipulation), behavioral control (i.e. knowledge about and monitoring of activities and whereabouts), support (warmth and encouragement), and negativity (conflict and criticism) as concurrent covariates in the analyses. We focus here on the late childhood and early adolescent years, a time when the peer social world expands, free time with friends eclipses that spent with parents, and youth increasingly expect that adults should not interfere in choices about affiliates and activities (Laursen, 2018).

Methods

Participants

Participants included 562 (292 boys, 270 girls) students attending all six primary schools (Grade 4) and all three middle schools (Grades 5–7) in a mid-sized community in Lithuania. The sample consisted of 115 fourth graders ($M = 9.82$ years, $SD = 0.41$), 201 fifth graders ($M = 10.87$ years, $SD = 0.43$), 93 sixth graders ($M = 11.88$ years, $SD = 0.41$), and 153 seventh graders ($M = 12.76$ years, $SD = 0.45$). Of this total, 401 lived with both biological parents, 81 lived in single-biological mother households, 63 lived in biological mother/step-father households, and 17 had other living arrangements (e.g. grandparents). Nearly all families were ethnic Lithuanian.

Procedure

Written parent consent and student assent were required for participation. Letters of invitation were sent home to parents of all students ($N = 1,154$) in 45 classrooms. Participants in the present study were drawn from the 33 classrooms with participation rates above the 60% ($M = 72.3\%$, range = 60.7%–90.0%) level that is conventionally adopted to ensure the validity of peer nominations (Bukowski, Cillessen, & Velásquez, 2018). A total of 532 students participated at Time 1 Fall, 534 at Time 2 Winter, and 545 at Time 3 Spring. There were no statistically significant differences between those who did and did not participate at all three time points on any study or demographic variable.

Trained research assistants administered surveys on computer tablets during regular school hours. The same surveys were administered three times during an academic year: Fall (Time 1, September/October 2021); Winter (Time 2, February 2022); and Spring (Time 3, May 2022). The average time between data collection waves was 14.4 and 14.5 weeks, respectively. The project was approved by school officials and the university ethics committee [Mykolas Romeris University #6/-2020].

Measures

Instruments were translated from English to Lithuanian by a bilingual team of research assistants, and then back-translated by a separate team. Differences were resolved by discussion.

Peer nomination variables. Participants completed a standard peer nomination inventory. Presented with a roster of all participants, students identified those who best fit each descriptor: *Peer-reported conduct problems* ('Someone who acts out or disrupts class'); *Peer acceptance* ('Someone you like to spend time with'); and *Peer rejection* ('Someone you don't like to spend time with'). Unlimited same- and other-gender nominations were permitted. Nominations received were summed and standardized using a regression-based approach that controls for class size (Velásquez, Bukowski, & Saldarriaga, 2013).

Self-reported conduct problems. Scores from two similar ($r = .42-.55$) behavior problem inventories were averaged. The first consisted of five items from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 1997). The second consisted of five items from the Bergen Questionnaire on Antisocial Behavior (BQAB, Bendixen & Olweus, 1999). The same pattern of statistically significant results emerged when each was considered separately ($\alpha_{SDQ} = .72-.80$, $\alpha_{BQAB} = .83-.90$). Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*).

Perceived maternal friend disapproval. Participants completed the five-item friend prohibition subscale from the Parental Management of Peers Inventory (Mounts, 2001). Item scores were averaged ($\alpha = .82-.87$). Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*).

Potential confounds. To isolate effects on the target constructs, supplemental analyses included potential confounds as concurrent covariates. Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Internal reliabilities were acceptable ($\alpha = .82-.94$). Participants completed two measures of perceived maternal parenting practices: a three-item *behavioral control* scale (Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010) and a five-item *psychological control* scale (Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005). Participants completed two scales from the short version of Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985): an eight-item *maternal social support* scale and a four-item *maternal negativity* scale. Participants completed the six-item *emotional problems* subscale from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997). Finally, participants nominated up to five friends in the classroom, from which we identified the *number of reciprocated friendships*.

All items for each variable are listed in Table S1. Concurrent intercorrelations between the main study variables and the covariates are presented in Table S2.

Plan of analysis

Primary analyses. To examine the role of perceived maternal friend disapproval in the development of peer difficulties and conduct problems, longitudinal random intercept cross-lagged panel mediation analyses (RI-CLPM; Hamaker, Kuiper, & Grasman, 2015) were conducted in Mplus v8.10 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) using a Bayesian structural equation modeling framework with two-chain Markov Monte Carlo algorithms. A posterior predictive p -value (PPP) above .05 and a posterior predictive checking (PPC) confidence interval (CI) that includes a negative lower limit and a positive upper limit indicates acceptable model fit (Muthén & Asparouhov, 2012). The Bayesian adaptation of the approximate fit indices was applied together with their 90% credibility intervals: The root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) should be below 0.06 and the comparative fit index (CFI) should be above 0.95 (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2021).

Using a random intercept framework, the analyses examine (in the same model) direct and indirect within-person longitudinal associations between conduct problems (self- and peer-reported), perceived maternal friend disapproval, and peer status (peer-reported acceptance and rejection). The full longitudinal mediation design (MacKinnon, 2008) incorporated three waves of data from a single school year. Two indirect pathways in each model were considered. The first examined perceived maternal friend disapproval as a trigger for conduct problems through the damage it causes to peer status: Fall (Time 1) maternal friend disapproval to Spring (Time 3) conduct problems through Winter (Time 2) peer acceptance and peer rejection. The second examined perceived maternal friend disapproval as an intermediate link that helps to explain why conduct problems are detrimental to peer status: Fall (Time 1) conduct problems to Spring (Time 3) peer acceptance and peer rejection through Winter (Time 2) maternal friend disapproval. A statistically significant association from the Time 1 predictor to the Time 3 outcome is not a precondition for mediation. Tests of the association are not recommended and were not conducted (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The indirect effects were tested using a product term of the within-person regression coefficients between Time 1 → Time 2 and Time 2 → Time 3 paths.

RI-CLPM analyses offer several advantages over the traditional cross-lagged panel model (Hamaker et al., 2015), partitioning within-person longitudinal change from between-person differences and change. In the case of the present study, the RI-CLPM will separately gauge within-person effects (e.g. Child A perceives high maternal friend disapproval, which leads to decreases in Child's A peer status) apart group level, between-person effects (e.g. compared to children who perceive

below average maternal friend disapproval, children who perceive above average maternal friend disapproval tend to evince declining peer status).

Replication is a strength of the design. The analyses include two different forms of peer status (acceptance and rejection) and two different sources for reports of conduct problems (self and peer nominations). Four separate analyses capture all combinations of the variables: (a) peer rejection, peer-reported conduct problems, maternal friend disapproval; (b) peer rejection, self-reported conduct problems, maternal friend disapproval; (c) peer acceptance, peer-reported conduct problems, maternal friend disapproval; and (d) peer acceptance, self-reported conduct problems, maternal friend disapproval.

To improve power, temporal constraints (Widaman & Thompson, 2003) were added to analogous cross-lagged paths at consecutive time points (e.g. Fall (Time 1) peer status → Winter (Time 2) conduct problems and Winter (Time 2) peer status → Spring (Time 3) conduct problems) as long as they did not worsen model fit. Autocorrelations were not constrained to be equal; doing so worsened model fit. Constraining unstandardized coefficients to be equal across time does not produce equal standardized coefficients because the latter are calculated from unstandardized parameters and the standard deviations of both variables. Since the variances of the within components are not constrained to be invariant over time, standard deviations are allowed to vary over time (for more details, see Mulder & Hamaker, 2021).

Supplemental analyses. Multiple group analyses (Wald tests of parameter constraints, Bayesian adaptation) revealed no statistically significant differences on any cross-lagged or indirect paths as a function of child gender, grade (fourth/fifth vs. sixth/seventh), and household structure (two biological parents vs. all other) except one: The direct path from perceived maternal friend disapproval to peer-reported conduct problems was statistically significant for boys ($\beta = .17-.22, p < .001$) but not for girls ($\beta = .04-.05, p = .064-.094$). In additional analyses, potential confounding variables were separately entered into each model as a concurrent covariate. For peer rejection models (Tables S3 and S4), the same pattern of statistically significant direct and indirect effects emerged with one exception: With maternal behavioral control as a covariate, the direct effect from self-report and peer-report conduct problems → perceived maternal friend disapproval was no longer statistically significant. For peer acceptance models (Tables S5 and S6), the same pattern of statistically significant indirect effects emerged, but the inclusion of several different covariates diminished the direct effect path from self-report and peer-report conduct problems → perceived maternal friend disapproval to the point where it was no longer statistically significant. In addition, the inclusion of number of reciprocated friends as a covariate

diminished the direct effect path from peer acceptance → self-reported conduct problems to the point where it was no longer statistically significant.

Missing data. Item level missingness averaged 15.4%–16.5% across waves (range across variables = 2.8%–27.7%). Little's MCAR test indicated that data were missing completely at random, $\chi^2(15,038) = 15,286.92, p = .076$. Missing item-level data were imputed using an EM algorithm with 25 iterations. Wave-level missing data, due to student absence from school, were handled with FIML.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations between the main study variables. At each time point, there were statistically significant ($p < .05$) positive correlations between peer rejection and peer- and self-reported conduct problems; acceptance was negatively correlated with peer rejection and peer-reported conduct problems. Perceived maternal friend disapproval was positively correlated with peer rejection (Fall and Winter only), self-reported conduct problems, and peer-reported conduct problems (Winter and Spring only).

Separate 2 (gender) × 2 (grade) ANOVAs were conducted with time as the repeated measure. Acceptance, rejection, perceived maternal friend disapproval, and peer- and self-reported conduct problems were the dependent variables. There were statistically significant main effects of gender [$F(1, 486) = 8.87-95.09, p < .003$] for peer-reported conduct problems ($d = 0.44$), self-reported conduct problems ($d = 0.18$), and peer rejection ($d = 0.14$), with boys presenting higher levels of each than girls. There were statistically significant main effects of grade for peer acceptance and peer rejection [$F(1, 500) = 5.88-14.73, p < .05$], with older students reporting higher peer acceptance ($d = 0.11$) and lower peer rejection ($d = 0.17$) than younger students. Finally, there was a main effect of time for peer acceptance and rejection [$F(2, 972) = 4.65-6.15, p < .01, d = .11$], which decreased over the

Table 1 Concurrent correlations, means, and standard deviations

Variable	1	2	3	4	M	SD
1. Peer rejection	–				1.84 [1.77, 2.02]	1.99 [1.93, 2.12]
2. Peer acceptance	–.28**	–			2.49 [2.29, 2.54]	1.87 [1.74, 1.98]
	[–.31**, –.21**]					
3. Perceived maternal friend disapproval	.18**	–.03	–		2.31 [2.30, 2.34]	0.99 [0.98, 1.04]
	[.08, .18**]	[–.07, –.02]				
4. Peer-reported conduct problems	.54**	–.12**	.14**	–	1.45 [1.43, 1.67]	3.00 [2.89, 3.05]
	[.50**, .57**]	[–.14**, –.11*]	[.08, .18**]			
5. Self-reported conduct problems	.15**	–.04	.25**	.28**	1.57 [1.56, 1.62]	0.53 [0.50, 0.58]
	[.11*, .18**]	[–.08, –.02]	[.21**, .30**]	[.12*, .31**]		

$N = 562$. Median values across the three time points are presented, with ranges in brackets. Perceived maternal friend disapproval and self-reported conduct problems were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Peer rejection, peer acceptance and peer-reported conduct problems represent the sum of nominations received from classmates, adjusted by the class size.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

course of the school year, and for peer- and self-reported conduct problems [$F(2, 972) = 3.63-6.45, p < .002, d = .08-.11$], which increased over the course of the school year.

Perceived maternal friend disapproval as a response to (peer- and self-reported) conduct problems and as a precursor to peer rejection

Figures 1 and 2 present results for peer- and self-reported conduct problems, respectively.

Within-subjects direct effects. At each time interval [i.e. Fall (Time 1) → Winter (Time 2) and Winter (Time 2) → Spring (Time 3)], higher peer- and self-reported conduct problems were associated with increases in perceived maternal friend disapproval, higher perceived maternal friend disapproval was associated with increases in peer rejection, and higher peer rejection was associated with increases in peer- and self-reported conduct problems. Recent guidelines (Orth et al., 2022) suggest that these effects were all large in magnitude except self-reported conduct problems → perceived maternal friend disapproval, which were medium, and peer rejection → peer and self-reported conduct problems, which were small (Fall → Winter only). In addition, maternal friend disapproval was associated with increases in peer- and self-reported conduct problems (Winter → Spring only). Finally, higher peer- and self-reported conduct problems

were associated with increases in peer rejection (Fall → Winter only).

Within-subjects indirect effects. Both indirect effects were confirmed: (a) Fall (Time 1) peer- and self-reported conduct problems to Spring (Time 3) peer rejection through Winter (Time 2) perceived maternal friend disapproval; and (b) Fall (Time 1) peer- and self-reported conduct problems through Winter (Time 2) peer rejection. Thus, initial conduct problems predicted increases in maternal friend disapproval, which, in turn, predicted increases in peer rejection. Further, initial maternal friend disapproval predicted increases in peer rejection, which, in turn, predicted increases in conduct problems.

Between-subjects effects. Peer rejection was positively associated with perceived maternal friend disapproval and with peer- and self-reported conduct problems. Perceived maternal friend disapproval was also positively associated with self- (but not peer-) reported conduct problems.

Perceived maternal friend disapproval as a response to (peer- and self-reported) conduct problems and as a precursor to peer acceptance

Figures 3 and 4 present results for peer- and self-reported conduct problems, respectively.

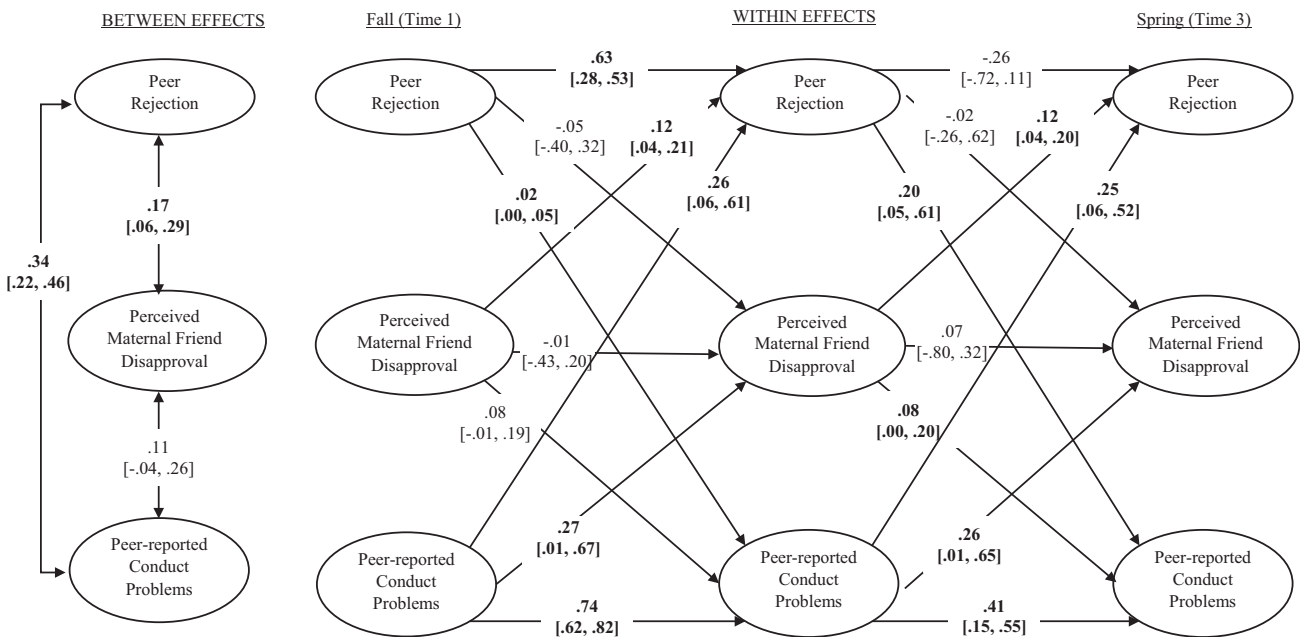


Figure 1 Perceived maternal friend disapproval predicts increasing peer rejection: peer-reported conduct problems as an antecedent and outcome. $N = 562$. Model fit was acceptable (PPP = .536, 95% CI [-31.187, 25.927], BCFI = 1.000[.977, 1.000], BRMSEA = .000 [.000, .055]). Standardized beta weights are presented, with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Concurrent correlations and autoregressive paths from Time 1 to Time 3 are included but not depicted. The model also included statistically significant indirect paths: (A) conduct problems to peer rejection through maternal friend disapproval ($\beta = .02$ [.00, .08]); and (B) maternal friend disapproval to conduct problems through peer rejection ($\beta = .01$ [.00, .05])

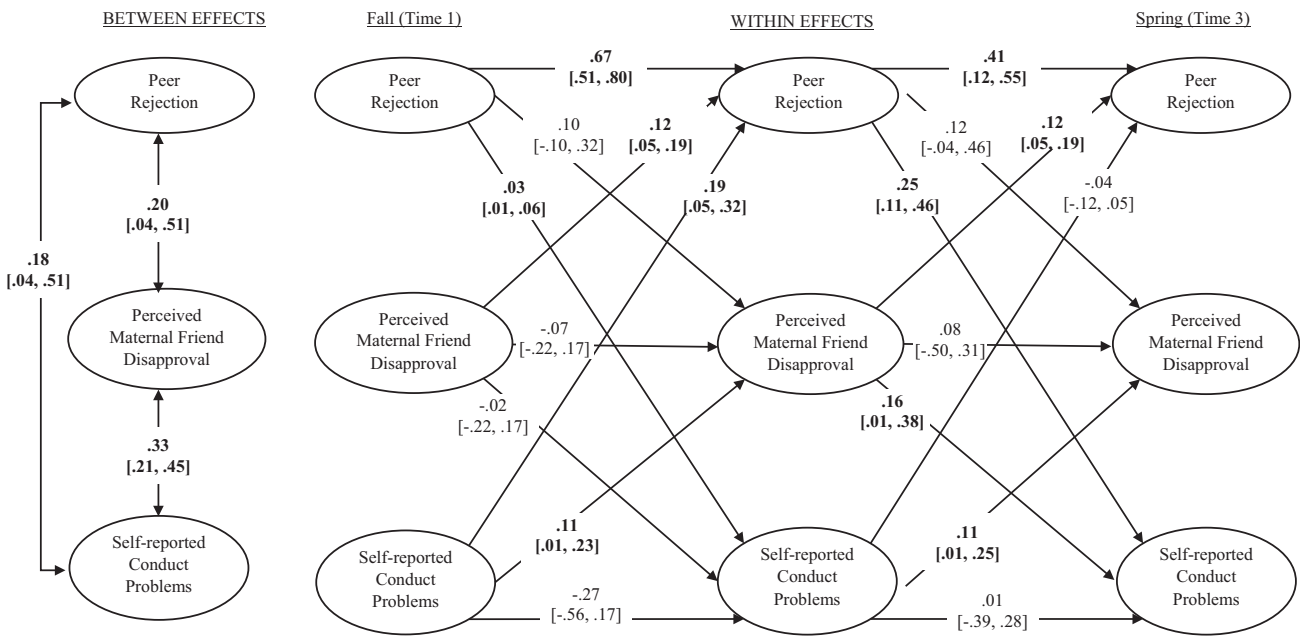


Figure 2 Perceived maternal friend disapproval predicts increasing peer rejection: self-reported conduct problems as an antecedent and outcome. $N = 562$. Model fit was acceptable (PPP = .551, 95% CI [-29.239, 26.163], BCFI = 1.000[.990, 1.000], BRMSEA = .000 [.000, .048]). Standardized beta weights are presented, with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Concurrent correlations and autoregressive paths from Time 1 to Time 3 are included but not depicted. The model also included statistically significant indirect paths: (A) conduct problems to peer rejection through maternal friend disapproval ($\beta = .01$ [.00, .03]); and (B) maternal friend disapproval to conduct problems through peer rejection ($\beta = .03$ [.01, .07])

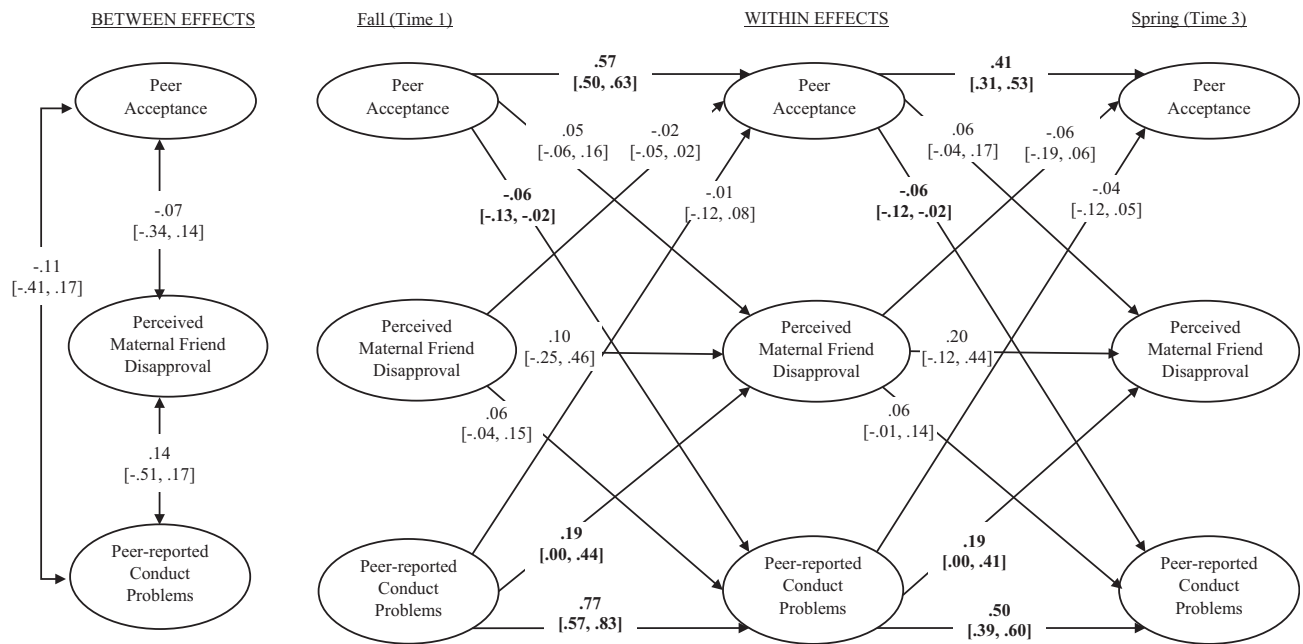


Figure 3 Perceived maternal friend disapproval predicts decreasing peer acceptance: peer-reported conduct problems as antecedent and outcome. $N = 562$. Model fit was acceptable (PPP = .607, 95% CI [-33.459, 24.071], BCFI = 1.000[.996, 1.000], BRMSEA = .000 [.000, .049]). Standardized beta weights are presented, with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Concurrent correlations and autoregressive paths from Time 1 to Time 3 are included but not depicted. The model also included statistically significant indirect path (A) conduct problems to peer acceptance through maternal friend disapproval ($\beta = -.01$ [-.04, .00]); and nonsignificant indirect path (B) maternal friend disapproval to conduct problems through peer acceptance ($\beta = .00$ [-.00, .00])

Within-subjects direct effects. At each time interval, higher peer- and self-reported conduct problems were associated with increases in perceived maternal friend disapproval. Higher peer acceptance was

associated with decreases in peer- (but not self-) reported conduct problems. Perceived maternal friend disapproval was not associated with changes in peer acceptance in either model. Finally, higher

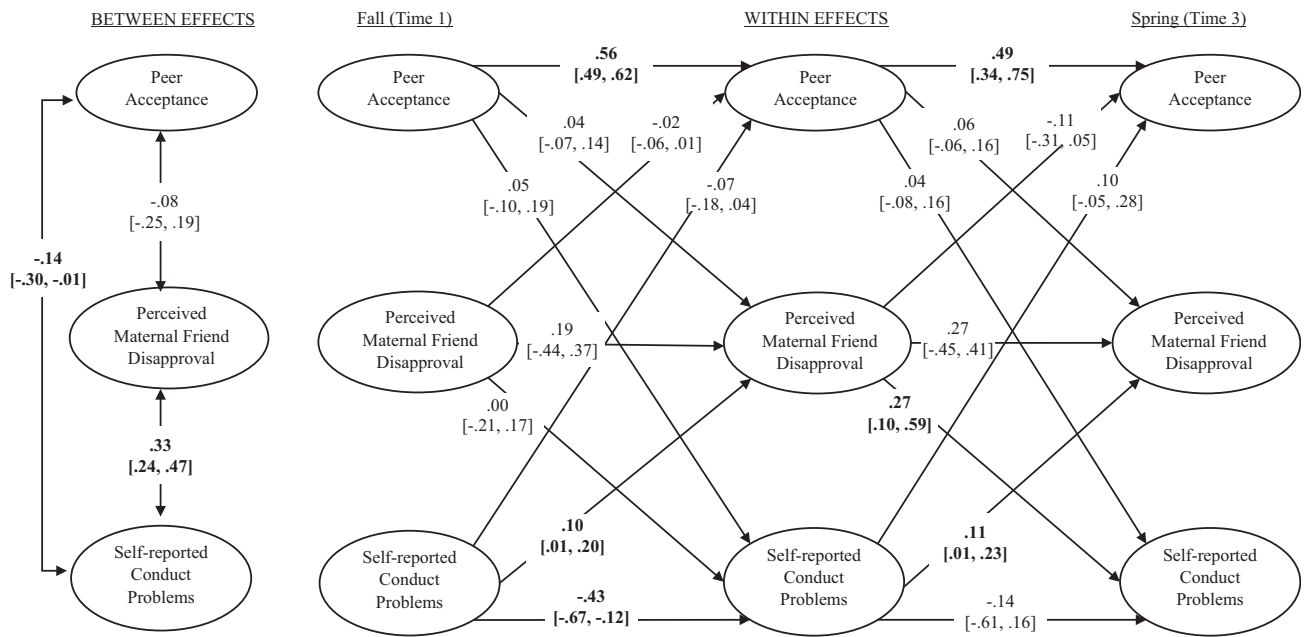


Figure 4 Perceived maternal friend disapproval predicts decreasing peer acceptance: self-reported conduct problems as an antecedent and outcome. $N = 562$. Model fit was acceptable (PPP = .611, 95% CI [$-31.674, 24.463$], BCFI = 1.000[.993, 1.000], BRMSEA = .000 [.000, .044]). Standardized beta weights are presented, with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. Concurrent correlations and autoregressive paths from Time 1 to Time 3 are included but not depicted. The model also included statistically significant indirect path (A) conduct problems to peer acceptance through maternal friend disapproval ($\beta = -.01$ [$-.03, .00$]); and nonsignificant indirect path (B) maternal friend disapproval to conduct problems through peer acceptance ($\beta = .00$ [$-.01, .00$])

perceived maternal friend disapproval was associated with increases in self- (but not peer-) reported conduct problems (Winter → Spring only). Recent guidelines (Orth et al., 2022) suggest that the statistically significant cross-lagged effects in these models were large in magnitude for peer-reported conduct problems → perceived maternal friend disapproval, medium for self-reported conduct problems → perceived maternal friend disapproval, and small for peer acceptance → peer-reported conduct problems.

Within-subjects indirect effects. Both models revealed statistically significant indirect effects from Fall (Time 1) peer- and self-reported conduct problems to Spring (Time 3) peer acceptance through Winter (Time 2) perceived maternal friend disapproval. Thus, initial self- and peer-reported conduct problems predicted increases in maternal friend disapproval, which, in turn, predicted decreases in peer acceptance. Indirect effects from Fall (Time 1) perceived maternal friend disapproval to Spring (Time 3) peer- and self-reported conduct problems through Winter (Time 2) peer acceptance were not statistically significant.

Between-subjects effects. Self- (but not peer-) reported conduct problems were positively associated with perceived maternal friend disapproval and negatively associated with peer acceptance. The association between peer acceptance and perceived maternal friend disapproval was not statistically significant.

Discussion

Maternal efforts to intervene in peer relationships by prohibiting friendships in response to child conduct problems appear to backfire. Our sequential (but not causal data) suggest that mothers who countered conduct problems by disapproving friends inadvertently damage the child's relations with peers, exacerbating their conduct problems. Put simply, the results imply that maternal attempts to remedy child behavior problems by advocating for different affiliates appear to make matters worse as the child becomes alienated from peers. Adjustment difficulties follow. The present study is unique in that it offers a potential explanation for how peer difficulties arising from perceived maternal disapproval of friends aggravate conduct problems. Our study ties together findings that youth conduct problems elicit maternal disapproval of friends (Kaniušonytė, Žukauskienė, Bakaitytė, & Laursen, 2022; Xiong et al., 2020) and findings that low peer status amplifies conduct problems (van Lier & Koot, 2010).

The first step is easy to understand: Mothers inclined to blame peers for the delinquent behavior of their children assume that limiting exposure to problem peers will reduce problem behaviors. Concurrent correlations, interpreted as evidence that Canadian parents respond to delinquency with efforts to manage peers (e.g. Tilton-Weaver & Galambos, 2003), have been corroborated with longitudinal findings from North America (but not China) using exclusively self-report data (Xiong et al., 2020).

Replicating these findings in Lithuania with both self-reports of conduct problems and peer reports of disruptiveness is important because it suggests that the practice of parent friendship management is neither a uniquely North American phenomenon nor a product of shared-reporter variance.

It is less obvious why perceived maternal friend prohibition is associated with subsequent increases in peer rejection. Several possibilities spring to mind. To minimize organizational hassles, peers may avoid contact with someone whose movements are restricted. Marginalization may precipitate declining social status. Youth may report restrictions, and their reasons, to friends. Or mothers may express their disapproval directly to friends. Neither may be welcomed by recipients. Across the late childhood to early adolescent years, mothers report that decisions about personal and social matters were made jointly with children; these are the first domains in which older adolescents evince unilateral decision-making (Wray-Lake, Crouter, & McHale, 2010). Thus, age-mates increasingly expect young adolescents to have a say in personal matters; maternal interference in peer relationships may be interpreted as a signal that mothers are making unilateral decisions about child companions and activities. Friends may respond by spreading contempt or ridicule throughout the peer group. Social opportunities wither as peers avoid affiliating with someone who is depicted as uncool. Finally, adolescents who consider parental disapproval of friendships as an inappropriate intrusion into personal affairs and a violation of autonomy may respond by embracing oppositional norms (Van Petegem et al., 2016) and initiating affiliations with deviant peers (Keijsers et al., 2012). In so doing, they may alienate the remainder of the peer group. Weaker, uneven findings for peer acceptance suggest that maternal disapproval of friends is more likely to elicit active disliking from peers, rather than merely reducing the number of peers who enjoy the child's company.

One thing is certain: Low peer status, especially rejection, is tied to increases in conduct problems. Rejected children may be excluded from social interactions with typically developing peers, depriving them of the opportunity to develop age-appropriate social skills (Vitaro, Boivin, & Poulin, 2018). Similarly, rejected children may be insensitive to social cues that might otherwise discourage disruptive behavior (Banerjee, Watling, & Caputi, 2011). Rejection may affect social information processing patterns, increasing the tendency for hostile attributions and aggressive responses (Lansford, Malone, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2010). Finally, rejected children respond to exclusion with heightened distress, which is tied to disruptive behaviors (Will, van Lier, Crone, & Güroğlu, 2016). Here too the findings for acceptance were less strong, with associations predicting self-reported conduct problems at the between- but not the within-person level, and with associations

predicting peer-reported conduct problems at the within- but not the between-person level. It is not unusual for peer acceptance to have weaker associations with externalizing behaviors than peer rejection (e.g. Janssens et al., 2015); rejected children are more apt than low accepted children to affiliate with age-mates who are not only disliked but who are also aggressive and disruptive.

Replication is a strength of the study. Two different measures of conduct problems yielded the same results. Peer and self-reports of conduct problems were separately linked to subsequent reports of maternal disapproval. In turn, perceived maternal disapproval preceded increasing peer rejection and higher peer rejection preceded increasing peer- and self-reported conduct problems. Findings for peer acceptance also replicated one of the two indirect effects that emerged for peer rejection: Conduct problems at the outset of the school year were tied to diminished peer acceptance at the conclusion, via escalating maternal disapproval. Also worth noting is that the magnitude of most of the direct effect paths of interest was of considerable magnitude (Orth et al., 2022). Put simply, these are nontrivial findings. Further, replicating direct effects described in previous studies (Xiong et al., 2020), we found pathways from perceived maternal friend prohibition to conduct problems and from peer status to conduct problems (van Lier & Koot, 2010). Nor are we the first to note the absence of gender differences in the interplay between peer status and behavior problems (Ladd, 2006). Parent responses to child conduct problems do not typically yield gender differences (e.g. Yan, Ansari, & Peng, 2021) and we did not expect to find any; our finding that maternal friend prohibition predicted increases in peer-reported conduct problems for boys but not girls requires replication.

Some scholars may be unfamiliar with Lithuania, a Northern European country that is a member of the European Union. Child development trends in Lithuania resemble those in other European communities where youth attend school in small, homogeneous cities (Kaniušonytė & Žukauskienė, 2018). With that said, some mothers in the current study were children when the country was part of the Soviet Union, when conformity and obedience were prioritized (Gorlizki & Khlevniuk, 2020). Although three decades of freedom have brought numerous changes, most Eastern European countries still report somewhat higher levels of traditional parenting practices, compared to their Western European counterparts (Maslauskaitė & Steinbach, 2020). The extent to which traditional parenting practices encompass friendship prohibition is not clear.

Caveats should be noted. The data were collected the first year after schools shut because of the pandemic. Many parents were undoubtedly extra vigilant about the company their children kept, although it is not clear that associations between variables were different as a consequence. Some

might argue that our exclusive reliance on child reports to measure friend prohibition is a limitation, although a case can be made that the impact of parenting depends more on how the child perceives and interprets the actions of the parent than on how the parent reports them (Stattin & Kerr, 2000), particularly given that child and mother reports of friend management are, at best, only weakly correlated (Mounts, 2007). Our sample included youth ranging in age from 9 to 13. On the one hand, concerns about expanding autonomy and the right to make independent decisions about friends are likely to grow stronger with age, suggesting that our results may underestimate the adverse impact of maternal friend disapproval during the mid- and late adolescent years. On the other hand, youth may be better able to hide parent opinions about companions from friends, suggesting that our results may overestimate the adverse impact of maternal friend disapproval during the mid- and late adolescent years. Caution is warranted in generalizing the findings to different age periods.

The urge to intervene when confronted with deviant child behavior is understandable. We do not blame parents who blame friends. Findings from the present study, however, suggest that the temptation to respond by prohibiting affiliations should be resisted because it tends to make a bad situation worse. Other alternatives hold promise. Parents should focus on maintaining positive relationships because children who are close to parents internalize their values, and seek peers with similar values (Vansteenkiste et al., 2014). Parents can create opportunities for constructive peer engagement in supervised settings and encourage participation in adult-sponsored clubs and activities, potentially limiting deviant conduct (Branje, Mastrotheodoros, & Laursen, 2021). Finally, parents should recognize that warmth and support can be effective buffers against untoward peer pressure in academic (e.g. Marion, Laursen, Kiuru, Nurmi, & Salmela-Aro, 2014) and behavioral arenas (e.g. Havewala et al., 2021), potentially disrupting the downward spiral of peer problems and adjustment difficulties (e.g. Rudolph, Monti, Modi, Sze, & Troop-Gordon, 2020).

Supporting information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article:

Table S1. Self-report Questionnaire Items.

Table S2. Concurrent Correlations Between Study Variables and Control Variables.

Table S3. Hypothesized Direct and Indirect Effect Paths with Concurrent Covariates. Peer Rejection and Peer-Reported Conduct Problems Model.

Table S4. Direct and Indirect Hypothesized Effect Paths of a Model with Peer Rejection and Self-Reported Conduct Problems when Control Variables Included as Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 Controls.

Table S5. Direct and Indirect Hypothesized Effect Paths of a Model with Peer Acceptance and Peer-Reported Conduct Problems when Control Variables Included as Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 Controls.

Table S6. Direct and Indirect Hypothesized Effect Paths of a Model with Peer Acceptance and Self-Reported Conduct Problems when Control Variables Included as Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3 Controls.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Key points

- Youth problem behavior poses a special challenge to families. Parents often assume that friends bear responsibility for the delinquent conduct of their offspring, as instigators and accomplices, and respond by attempting to limit peer contact. Unfortunately, such efforts are counterproductive.
- Findings from the present study indicate that parent disapproval of friends in response to child conduct problems damages the child's standing among peers, which tends to exacerbate behavior problems.

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