

The evolution of friendship throughout our lives

Friends: something we all hope to have in our lives. How do our friendships change throughout our lives? To begin with, let's define friendship; as stated by the Oxford Dictionary, friendship is: "the emotions or conduct of friends- the state of being friends", "a relationship between friends", or "a state of mutual trust and support" (although the latter refers to armed nations and not individuals unable to wage war on one another!). While this is all well and good, it is a bit vague, skirting around the point by defining friendship as, well, friendship. A more scientific definition of friends (from the National Library of Medicine on the Neurotheology of Friendship) states friends are: "pairs of individuals that engage in bi-directional affiliative (nonaggressive, nonreproductive) interactions with such frequency and consistency so as to differentiate them from nonfriends." which basically translates to 'friends are people you like and hang out with a lot'... so friendship really is defined as friendship. In light of this new-ish information, let's take a look at the beginnings of friendships: those of childhood.

To be honest, I'm not friends with any of the people I hung out with during Primary School. Even then, I would wander the playgrounds looking for someone to chat to when my main friend didn't want me (looking back she was a bit of a 50/50 friend- she would only like me half the time) until I eventually came across Elizabeth*. Now, Elizabeth was my first friend in primary school but over time I was hanging out more and more with Lottie* ("my main friend"). However, Lizzie always made room for me when I was feeling lonely, and I am grateful for that. While that drama was happening, I was always consistent with the children of my parent's friends- Daisy*, Hannah* and Zoe* - we are all still friends to this day. Though we don't see each other often (and don't actually text much either) whenever we do meet up, we click and fall back into old patterns. This leads me to believe that friendships made during school are transient; the absence of daily contact we grew dependent on disables us from maintaining contact via other methods; while friendships formed outside of the rigid structures of school flourish due to the lack of that daily contact, enabling us to continue our friendship. Another contributing factor is the time spent together: school friends are forced to spend time together, and lots of it, while outside-of-school-friends aren't obligated to interact, meaning they are friends because they really want to, and not because they have no other option- though they might be if the parents are friends themselves.

The impact of these friendships I find is hard to measure, as personally I do not remember their formations nor their impact on me, my personality, and views at the time, though I would say as a kid I was pretty imaginative and optimistic. I remember Daisy and Zoe sharing those traits with me, and us playing make-believe together, while Hannah and Lizzy were more nonchalant, preferring long conversations and just each other's company. Lottie was also imaginative, making

up stories all the time, yet she forced me into roles that suited her instead of letting me create my own. I can see all of these traits reflected in me today: I love creative writing and long talks and am also a people-pleaser (though that could come from other sources too). While we were too young to have solid views on influential topics, my current friends reflect a lot of my opinions, yet whether they are influencing me or I them or us simply sharing them regardless of what the others think- once again I do not know?

Peer pressure is a big issue when it comes to adolescent friendships, however I am lucky to exist at least partially outside of the influence of this, in the fact that all of my friends and I are weird as hell. I feel free to say whatever comes across my mind and not be judged for it, although and unfortunately some others may, such as a fellow student who wishes to stay anonymous, who says, “when the majority of a friend group have similar opinions on something, you may choose not to express your own opinion for fear of being judged. This leads to an alteration in your personality and viewpoints, meaning you can’t really be who you are, and that’s not right.”. Peer pressure is not only verbal: my friends have inspired me to join clubs and that, unlike the negative connotations peer pressure is known for, has benefitted me positively (it has been shown that friendships with positive features correlate with greater involvement in school and general self-esteem, but I didn’t think the former would come from peer pressure). Being dragged to Choir has given me opportunities to sing, however if I do it around my brother, I’ll get my foot stomped on; signing up for Harry Potter Club has allowed me to develop my debating skills (over favourite/least favourite character, book, movie, etc), and just generally to have a good time. Not only have clubs benefitted me this way, they have also allowed me to make more friends- the shared interest of Harry Potter Club has rejuvenated a bond between myself and some other girls, who in the past I never really talked to, and multiple year groups coalescing for Choir has allowed for interactions with students in younger years whom with otherwise I wouldn’t have socialised.

I have only had access to these opportunities and the ability not to be judged because I’ve found people who accept me. Finding ‘your people’ can be hard, a survey found that 51% of Britons said they thought so too, and I’ve been lucky in the sense that LGBTQ+ people tend to unknowingly cluster together, as shown in the “One Of Us!” section of The Dysphoria Bible, a blog on the transgender experience- “Trans people subconsciously tend to gravitate towards each other’s friendships, both out of a need for peers who think and act the same as us without judgments, and due to a kinship of social ostracization. This is not exclusive to trans people, of course, and occurs with all types of queer people, but the way it has a rippling effect is quite powerful.” and by the fact that my school friendship group constitutes of a myriad of identities: a lesbian, an aro/ace, a transgender, a bisexual,

and a singular cishet person, but a very strong ally often assumed to be queer herself.

Another way to make friends is online. I have multiple online friends, though not all have been met via social media, the majority through PGL (a summer camp of sorts) who now live too far away to meet up with again. I chat daily with these people, as opposed to only occasionally with the friends I have never met in real life (IRL). Could the physicality of IRL friendships influence the way we view people? Well of course; there is always the risk that online friends are not who they say they are as opposed to the knowledge that IRL people are genuine, and even so, there must be something more... Perhaps when you have not met someone, your brain automatically fills in an expectation of what they look like and how they act, often in an unrealistically positive light. This could cause a part of you to trust them beyond what is reasonable, while a rational aspect of you is sceptical, leading to mixed feelings and uncertainty.

College and University are great experiences, and can also lead to the creation of many new friends, nevertheless- do they last further than education? Balancing work, a potential family, aging parents, and friends may lead to a shortage of time spent with the latter. And while time with quality friends may be increasingly hard to find, 43-46% of 16-39-year-olds say they have friends that they do not bother to see. Why is this? According to the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, as adults move away from the smaller, tight-knit friendship groups of adolescence, they tend to expand their social networks to include multiple social circles whom they are less dependent on and are seen as more replaceable. They may also become more aware of their emotional well-being, and see that some friends are not worth keeping, “[for example, an emerging adult will often end a friendship for self-preservation] if maintaining frequent contact with an emotionally draining friend generates stress and decreases one’s well-being”.

While emerging adults may not have as close of friendships as adolescents, the friends that remain into middle adulthood show to be highly stable, as opposed to those found in earlier life. Studies of friendship in childhood and early adolescence show that between $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of childhood friendships dissolve over the span of an academic year. On the other hand, friendships formed in early adulthood that I have viewed tend to last: for example, my mum has been friends with Daisy’s mother for 22 years. This could be because of the mobility and freedom that emerges in adulthood. Envision this: you’re 10, and have started doing ballet, or basketball, or swimming, any kind of club really, and you get to know the other people who go there really well, you really like them. You have interesting conversations and laugh a lot. You really love your new friends. But then, your mum decides not to take you to this club anymore. Your ties are severed, and there’s little to no chance you will meet up with these people again. But you get over it, this is only one of the many times your friendships have been outside of your control. “You’ll make new friends,

honey” she says. She’s right, but it doesn’t stop the sting. Fast forward a decade or two, you have the ability to drive yourself to clubs, you can control whether you see your friends or not. Even if you decide to withdraw from the activity, you will be able to exchange phone numbers and keep in contact; thus a stability is formed. While parents can influence their children’s friendships, can children influence their parents’ friendships the same way? My dad met a family friend of ours through my brother’s Little Kickers football club when he (my brother) was 4 and have remained friends for 8 years. My brother is still friends with the son of that family friend, yet it is doubtful whether they would be if it were not for my dad bonding with his and making a lasting friendship.

What about friendships in different settings? Workplace friends, childhood friends, pity friends, family friends; which is the ‘best’? Workplace friends may merely be tolerated, not particularly wanted outside of work, though good to keep one company during the nine-to-five of daily life. Pity friends are close- like the name suggests, pity friends are people you do not actually like but stay in touch with because you feel sorry for them. These are obviously not very good friends, without whom one would do just fine, so obviously do not place very high on the rankings of friends. Pity friends, I think, would come last as the relationship is based on dishonesty and false interest. I would hesitate to even call these friends. On the other hand, workplace relationships - while partially disliked – are not very strong, with nothing to lie about (other than the occasional, “oh yeah, I love your new shirt!” when in fact you dislike the shirt very passionately, and secretly wish for it to shrink in the wash, to lose its colour, or just to stop existing altogether.) There’s a very fine line between family friends and childhood friends, both of which are loyal and positive (though often not seen as often as everyday friends, those who you may meet up with after work or on the weekends).

As We Get older, friends become more important than ever. As stated by the National Library of Medicine, “Unmet social needs can lead to loneliness and social isolation, which in turn can cause health to decline. In contrast, older adults with strong ties to family and friends are more likely to retain independence, a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and effective physical and psychological functioning longer”. It is evident that friendships in the elderly are not only beneficial to mental wellbeing, but also physical health, delaying depression, dementia, and ultimately death itself. With a free schedule, seniors tend to spend their days doing hobbies, spend time with family, and most importantly socialising with friends, who also have a great deal of time on their hands. However, it is inevitable that people are to die. With the death of loved ones, loneliness increases rapidly; said by AgeUK to cause “increased blood pressure, risk of cardiovascular diseases, stress, impairment in immune system function, and sleep quality”. Considering this, it is essential to inhibit feelings of loneliness in these times, not only for the sake of emotions but

also its consequences. There are many charities who specialise in keeping the elderly company, through phone calls and meet-ups.

In conclusion: friends are amazing. They are there for you all your life, from their formation in childhood, or adolescence, or university, through to their end whenever that may be. Early friends influence you in subtle ways, becoming a core part of who you are, while teenage friends help and hinder your views and personality's development. Friendships in early adulthood are broad and many, narrowed down later on to create loyal friends, who share time and opinions with you, and good friendships in old age help to increase your lifespan, physical health, and mental wellbeing.

*Names are changed to protect identity