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Interpersonal forgiveness in late childhood: Associations with peer status

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ABSTRACT

Although the topic of forgiveness has been studied extensively among adults, little is known about the factors that are associated with children's forgiveness. The current research addressed the question whether a child's social status in the classroom is related to the tendency to forgive offending peers. We particularly focused on two types of status: preference and popularity. We ran one study with two samples among 9–13 year-old children ($n = 577$) who completed a sociometric instrument and a self-reported forgiveness measure. We found some initial support that preference, but not popularity, is positively associated with forgiveness, even after accounting for transgression-specific characteristics, such as friendship bond with the offender and perceived offense severity. We discuss the theoretical implications among these findings for both understanding children's forgiveness, and the differential role of preference and popularity as social status indicators.

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Offenses and conflict are inevitable aspects of children's interpersonal lives. Children may gossip about each other, laugh at each other, or even exclude one another. Although often an initial impulsive response to interpersonal offenses is to do harm in return (e.g., Rose & Asher, 1999), such a retaliatory response may not help the offended child's individual well-being, and may further damage the relationship. In particular, children using hostile and retaliatory conflict strategies in response to offenses by peers have poor-quality friendships, and are less accepted by their peers (Rose & Asher, 1999; Troop-Gordon & Asher, 2005).

An alternative response is to react in a *forgiving* manner. Forgiveness can be defined as a prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor, such that negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward the transgressor are transformed

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into positive ones (e.g., Karremans & Van Lange, 2008). Several studies have looked at the motivational underpinnings of forgiveness among children, demonstrating that children are more inclined to forgive hurtful acts by friends than by non-friends (Peets, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2013; van der Wal, Karremans, & Cillessen, 2014). Generally, however, the precursors of forgiveness among children—when and why children forgive their peers—received only little empirical attention in developmental psychology (e.g., Denham, Neal, Wilson, Pickering, & Boyatzis, 2005; Flanagan, Vanden Hoek, Ranter, & Reich, 2012). Yet, being able to respond in a forgiving manner to negative peer experiences helps a child to restore valuable peer relationships, and may also decrease feelings of distress. Indeed, research suggests that forgiveness is positively associated with children's psychological well-being (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2012; van der Wal, Karremans, & Cillessen, 2016). Flanagan and colleagues, for example, showed how forgiveness may be a fruitful way of coping with negative peer experiences (Flanagan et al., 2012). In their study children were asked to remember and describe a time when another peer at school bullied or hurt them severely, after which their self-reported forgiveness was assessed. The results revealed strong positive associations between forgiveness and levels of self-esteem, and negative associations with social anxiety (Flanagan et al., 2012).

Provided the potentially powerful consequences of a child's forgiveness, it is important to understand when and why children forgive. Extending recent literature on this topic (Peets et al., 2013; van der Wal, Karremans, & Cillessen, 2017), the current research addresses the question of and how children's forgiving tendencies are associated with their peer status—a central construct in childhood peer relationships. It is well-established that children's well-being, and their affective and behavioral responses, are strongly linked to their status in the peer group (e.g., Schwartz & Gorman, 2011). For example, a child's peer status is an indicator of both prosocial and antisocial behavioral characteristics at present, and at a later age (e.g., Cillessen, Schwartz, & Mayeux, 2011). Given the fundamental impact of peer group status on children, an interesting topic to explore is whether and how children's peer status is associated with their forgiving tendencies toward offending peers. Specifically, the current research explored the role of two types of status (*preference* and *popularity*) in children's forgiving tendencies.

Peer status in late childhood

Although nearly all children belong to a group, they may vary in their status and level of inclusion in those groups; whereas some children are marginal and have lower status, others are more central and have higher status. Status in peer groups, however, is not a one-dimensional construct. Specifically, in late childhood, a distinction emerges between two types of status, 'preference' and 'popularity', and the distinction between them increases further across

adolescence (Cillessen & Borch, 2006; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). The extent to which a child is *preferred* ('liked') or not preferred ('disliked') is usually defined in terms of acceptance and rejection (Cillessen et al., 2011). The extent to which a child is seen as *popular* is mostly defined as a reputational measure of status, visibility, and impact in the peer group (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Cillessen et al., 2011). Although preference and popularity share a number of attributes, such as good leadership, prosocial behavior, and high-quality friendships, the two types of status also diverge in important ways. For example, popularity is associated with elevated levels of both physical and relational forms of aggression, whereas preference is not (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Moreover, popularity predicts risk taking, whereas preference is found consistently to predict low levels of risk taking (e.g., Mayeux, Sandstrom, & Cillessen, 2008). Hence, preference and popularity appear to be different types of status, and may therefore differently be related to children's forgiving responses toward offending peers.

Peer status and forgiveness

How may a child's status in the peer group be associated with forgiveness? Given the notion that conflict and disagreement are inevitable aspects of children's interpersonal lives (Hartup, French, Laursen, Johnston, & Ogawa, 1993), a child who is not able to constructively deal with such conflicts is likely to be easily left out from the group. Indeed, several studies have demonstrated that children who behave in a hostile manner to offending others have social skills deficits and are more likely to be less accepted by their peers (e.g., Bukowski, Laursen, & Rubin, 2018). Furthermore, well-preferred peers are often described as good at sharing, keeping promises, and making up after a fight (de Bruyn & van den Boom, 2005). Such findings suggest that *preference* would be positively associated with forgiveness. Put differently, a child that is well-preferred in the classroom would be more likely to forgive one's peers (i.e., Hypothesis 1: the preference-is-associated-with-more-forgiveness hypothesis).

Based on the extant literature on *popularity*, two competing predictions arise regarding the association between popularity and forgiveness. First, children who know how to behave interpersonally (i.e., having high-quality friendships, helping others) are often the ones with higher status (e.g., Bukowski et al., 2018; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). Moreover, popularity, but not preference, has been associated with higher levels of empathy in childhood (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009). Assuming that forgiveness requires well-developed social skills to preserve valuable relationships even when hurt (e.g., McCullough, 2008; van der Wal et al., 2014), such findings suggest that children's popularity level would be positively associated with forgiveness (i.e., Hypothesis 2: the popularity-is-associated-with-more-forgiveness hypothesis). At the same time, however, numerous studies have revealed the socially manipulative aspects of popularity, indicating that children who respond with aggression toward interpersonal

offenses may be the ones with a popular status (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006). Such findings suggest that popularity is negatively related to children's forgiveness (i.e., Hypothesis 2alt: the popularity-is-associated-with-less-forgiveness hypothesis). These competing predictions are in line with the extant developmental literature, where popularity is often portrayed as a 'mixed blessing' and associated with a set of both positive (e.g., de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002) and negative correlates (e.g., Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006).

The present research

In the present research, we explored the association between peer status, particularly preference and popularity, and forgiveness. Specifically, regarding preference, we predict that higher levels of preference are associated with more forgiveness (Hypothesis 1; e.g., Bukowski et al., 2018; de Bruyn & van den Boom, 2005). Moreover, based on previous theory and research, popularity may be associated with more, or with less, forgiveness (Hypotheses 2 and 2alt; e.g., LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Sandstrom & Cillessen, 2006). Importantly, we took into account transgression-specific characteristics, such as perceived friendship with the offender and perceived offense severity, that we know from previous research are important precursors of forgiveness (e.g., Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; McCullough, 2008). In addition, because research indicates that preference is more stable for boys than for girls in late childhood, whereas popularity is more stable for girls (Mayeux et al., 2008), we explored the moderating role of the gender of the offended child.

Peer status was measured using peer nominations (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Lansu & Cillessen, 2012). To measure forgiveness tendencies, we asked children to recall a past offense by one of their classmates, after which their self-reported level of forgiveness was measured (Flanagan et al., 2012).

Method

Participants

Participants were children from grade four to six from 11 different elementary schools in the Netherlands. The data were collected in two samples with approximately one year in between each data collection (sample 1: $n = 295$; sample 2: $n = 282$). The study was conducted in agreement with the policies of the school where the data were collected and approved by the Institutional Review Board of our institution. Parents were informed in a letter (distributed by the schools) about the purpose and procedures of the study and had the option to decline participation.

In sample 1, a total of 327 children participated (participation rate 88.9%). We excluded children who did not complete the questionnaire because they

were absent ($n = 8$), could not think of a hurtful incident ($n = 10$), did not understand one of the measures ($n = 7$), or had missing data on one of the main variables ($n = 7$). A total sample of 295 children completed all elements of the study (132 boys and 163 girls). Participants ranged in age from 9 to 13 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 10.46$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = .61$).

In sample 2, a total of 335 children participated (participation rate 96.5%). Again, we excluded children who did not complete the questionnaire because they were absent ($n = 5$) or due to time constraints ($n = 12$), or because they could not bring to mind a hurtful situation ($n = 26$). An additional 10 participants were excluded because they did not follow the instructions (e.g., worked together with a classmate instead of on their own; $n = 7$), or had missing data on one of the main variables ($n = 3$). This yielded a final sample of 282 children, ranging in age from 9 to 13 years old ($M_{\text{age}} = 10.40$, $SD_{\text{age}} = .87$; 153 girls). After the data collection, participants received a small gift in exchange for their voluntary participation.

Procedure

Participants were tested in their own classroom for one hour. We started with a sociometric instrument to assess participants' status in the group. Next, participants were asked to bring to mind a past incident in which they felt hurt by one of their classmates (for a similar procedure, see Flanagan et al., 2012; van der Wal et al., 2014). Participants were asked to briefly describe what happened. Example descriptions were: 'A few days ago I heard my best friend gossiping about me' and 'She laughed at me because I was stuttering'. Participants then received questions about the offense. We proceeded by measuring participants' forgiveness level. Finally, participants were thoroughly debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Measures

Peer status

To assess children's social status in the classroom, participants received four questions. Specifically they were asked to name classroom peers who they liked most (1), liked least (2), were most popular (3), and least popular (4). Children could nominate a maximum of six peers for each question. Both same- and other-sex choices were allowed but no self-nominations. To guarantee confidentiality of the nominations, participants entered code numbers instead of names for each question. A final score for *preference* was calculated as the difference between the standardized liked most (1) and liked least (2) scores received and standardizing the resulting difference scores within classrooms. A final score for *popularity* was calculated as the difference between the standardized most popular (3) and least popular (4) scores received, again standardizing the resulting

difference scores within classrooms (for a similar way of calculating preference and popularity scores, see Lansu & Cillessen, 2012).

Questions about the offense

Participants were asked to what extent they were friends with that specific classmate at the time of the offense from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), and how severe they thought the offense was from 1 (*not severe*) to 7 (*very severe*) (see van der Wal et al., 2014, 2016).¹

Forgiveness

In the first sample, children's level of forgiveness was measured with a modified version of the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivation Scale (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998; van der Wal et al., 2014). As in previous research assessing children's self-reported forgiveness levels (van der Wal et al., 2014), we used 9 of the original 12 items. Example items were: When I think back to what my classmate did to me, 'I would like to take revenge', and 'I find it difficult to act in a friendly way toward him/her' (reverse-coded). Participants indicated their answers on a 7-point scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*). The mean of all items was our indicator of forgiveness, Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$.

In the second sample, children's forgiveness was measured with a modified Dutch version of a forgiveness scale developed by Maio, Thomas, Fincham, and Carnelley (2008) (see also van der Wal et al., 2016). This measure is easier to understand for children than the TRIM, and consisted of six items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*), with items such as, 'If I think back to what my classmate did to me, 'I see my classmate as positively as before', and 'I can easily forgive my classmate'. The mean of the six items was our indicator of forgiveness, Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$.²

Plan for data analysis

Correlations were first conducted to examine associations among children's peer status, forgiveness, friendship with the offender, and offense severity, for boys and girls separately, and compared using Fisher's *r*-to-*z* transformations. Next, two hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine whether

¹Only in the second sample, at different schools, we instructed half of the children to think back to a hurtful incident by a classmate that is their friend, and the other half to think of an incident by a classmate that is not their friend. Afterwards, as a manipulation check, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they were friends with the classmate at the time of the offense from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). We used this measure (i.e., manipulation check in sample 2) as our indicator of perceived friendship in subsequent analyses. It is important to note, however, that the manipulation in the second sample did significantly affect children's forgiving responses, $F(1, 280) = 69.65, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .20$. That is, children who recalled a hurtful incident by a friend reported more forgiveness, $M = 5.12, SD = 1.54$, than children who recalled a hurtful incident by a non-friend, $M = 3.61, SD = 1.51$.

²Both studies were part of larger data collections, in which we also assessed several other sociometric nominations (e.g., bully, victim, relational aggression), children's executive control capacities, and narcissistic tendencies.

peer status explained a significant amount of variance of children's forgiveness after controlling for friendship with the offender, offense severity, and gender (entered simultaneously in the first step). In the second step, preference and popularity were entered. In the third step, the products of preference and gender as well as popularity and gender were entered to test for moderation. Independent variables were centered prior to creating interaction terms.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Descriptive statistics and tests of gender differences are reported in Table 1. We only found significant gender differences in sample 1. In particular, girls scored significantly higher on preference and perceived offense severity than boys. In sample 2, we did not replicate these significant gender differences, and neither found other differences between boys and girls.

Correlational analyses are presented in Table 2. The correlations were computed for boys and girls separately. Replicating previous findings, we found consistent significant correlations in both samples for boys and girls between preference and popularity (e.g., van den Berg, Lansu, & Cillessen, 2015), friendship and forgiveness (e.g., van der Wal et al., 2014), and offense severity and forgiveness (e.g., Fehr et al., 2010). Of primary interest to the present study, in both samples we found significant positive correlations between preference and forgiveness for boys. In addition, in both samples we found a significant negative correlation between friendship and offense severity, again for boys.

Regression analyses

As can be seen in Table 3, the overall models of sample 1 and sample 2 were significant, explaining respectively 20 and 31% of the variance in children's

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for main study variables.

		Sample 1				Sample 2			
		Boys		Girls		Boys		Girls	
		<i>n</i> = 132		<i>n</i> = 163		<i>n</i> = 129		<i>n</i> = 153	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	Preference	-.18 ^a	1.06	.14 ^a	.89	-.03	1.03	.06	.94
2.	Popularity	.06	1.17	-.06	.84	.07	.99	-.05	.97
3.	Forgiveness	5.09	1.40	4.87	1.42	4.35	1.78	4.36	1.63
4.	Friendship	3.30	2.07	3.54	2.08	3.33	2.20	3.05	1.92
5.	Offense severity	4.74 ^a	1.64	5.17 ^a	1.58	5.00	1.65	5.19	1.68

^aMeans were significantly different by gender.

Table 2. Correlations for main study variables.

	Sample 1								Sample 2							
	1		2		3		4		1		2		3		4	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1. Preference																
2. Popularity	.40**	.50**							.45**	.43**						
3. Forgiveness	.28 ^a	.05	.30**	-.02 ^a					.33**	.35**	.06	.09				
4. Friendship	.18 ^a	-.01	.21*	.06	.36**	.21*		.14	.14 [†]	.03	.14 [†]	.40**	.33**			
5. Offense severity	-.02	-.03	-.12	.04	-.30**	-.34**	-.17*	-.03	-.28**	-.24*	-.09	.03	-.46**	-.49**	-.22*	-.16*

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$ (two-tailed); ^aCorrelations were significantly different by gender.

Table 3. Regression results for the prediction of forgiveness from preference, popularity, friendship, offense severity, and gender.

	Forgiveness			
	Sample 1		Sample 2	
	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.17**		.30**	
Friendship		.25**		.29**
Severity		-.30**		-.42**
Gender		-.05		.05
Step 2	.02 [†]		.04**	
Preference		.11 [†]		.23**
Popularity		.05		-.06
Step 3	.02 [†]		.001	
Preference X Gender		-.04		.01
Popularity X Gender		-.10		.02

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

forgiveness. The regression of sample 1 revealed significant effects of friendship and offense severity on forgiveness. Interestingly, in Step 2 a marginally significant positive effect of preference was found: Children who are better liked by their peers also reported more forgiveness, although the effect size was small. Interaction terms were not significant in Step 3. The regression of sample 2 replicated the positive effects of preference, friendship, and offense severity on forgiveness.

In summary, these findings suggest that in late childhood peer status is associated with forgiveness in such a way that children's preferred status in the classroom corresponds with more forgiveness—even after accounting for perceived friendship with the offender, offense severity, and gender of the offended child.

Discussion

The goal of the present research was to explore whether children's status in the peer group is related to their forgiving tendencies in the classroom. In two samples of children in late childhood, we found some support that preference is positively associated with children's forgiveness, while popularity is not. Thus, we found evidence for our first hypothesis regarding the role of preference (see also, Bukowski et al., 2018), however, we did not find evidence for either alternative hypotheses regarding the role of popularity. That is, the extent to which children are socially accepted in the peer group was positively associated with the level of forgiveness they reported regarding a specific past incident with a classmate. Importantly, the predictive value of preference for children's forgiveness was significant even after controlling for transgression-specific characteristics, such as levels of friendship with the offender and perceived offense severity. The findings point to the role of peer group dynamics, and in particular preference, in children's forgiving tendencies.

The extant research on the topic of forgiveness in children has mainly focused on specific individual child characteristics (e.g., Flanagan et al., 2012; van der Wal et al., 2014), or the relationship between the victim and offender (e.g., Peets et al., 2013). Yet, children spend much of their time with peers. Hence, in addition to individual child characteristics and the specific relationship between offended child and offender, when children are hurt by a peer, the event ultimately is embedded in the context of the peer group. An important question therefore is how social standing in the peer group is associated with forgiveness processes. The present findings reveal that preference and forgiveness are positively associated, and there are several ways of how to interpret this association. An assumption underlying much research on peer status is that social standing is the result of children's skills and abilities. From that perspective, being preferred in the peer group may be viewed as a result of children's ability to forgive their peers. In support of this, some studies indicate that individuals do not attain status by bullying and intimidating others, but by acting generously and altruistically toward others (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009).

An alternative pathway is one in which peer experiences drive the development of specific social skills. Preferred children have many positive experiences in the peer group that allow them to build and practice their behavioral competencies. These youths are likely to interact with other skilled peers, who further model and reinforce efficient interpersonal functioning (Aikins & Litwack, 2011). It could also be that there are feedback loops between preference and forgiveness, such that preferred children have the skills to act forgivingly toward offending peers which, in turn, may increase their preference again. Future prospective and longitudinal research whereby children's status in the peer group is measured *before* and *after* an offense is needed to better understand such directional pathways (see, e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

Lastly, specific personality characteristics, such as agreeableness, may lead to a higher preferred status in the peer group (Jensen-Campbell et al., 2002), and may also be associated with children's tendency to forgive. Future research should address whether these (not incompatible) explanations may account for the link between preference and forgiveness.

In the present research, we only found associations between preference and forgiveness, and not between popularity and forgiveness. This is in line with previous research findings indicating that there are significant differences between being preferred and being popular in the peer group. In contrast to being liked (i.e., preference), popularity emphasizes social prominence, visibility, and peer reputational salience (e.g., Cillessen et al., 2011). Numerous studies have documented both positive (cooperation, leadership) and negative (aggression, being stuck-up) attributes of popularity (de Bruyn & Cillessen, 2006; LaFontana & Cillessen, 1998). As forgiveness generally involves prosocial skills to preserve valuable relationships in the wake of an offense, this may help explain why we

only found associations between preference and forgiveness, as preference is usually associated with positive social skills.

Although research on forgiveness among children is scarce, one of the most robust facilitators of a child's forgiveness seems to be rooted in the relational context. Specifically, in line with the notion that forgiveness has evolved presumably to reestablish and restore valuable relationships with others (e.g., McCullough, 2008), children are generally more willing to forgive an offending classmate who is a friend, rather than a casual peer (e.g., Peets et al., 2013; van der Wal et al., 2014). Yet importantly, well-preferred children were more likely to forgive, independent of whether the offending child was a friend or non-friend, and independent of how severe the offense was. This underscores the idea that a child's forgiveness capacity does not just depend on the nature of the offense and the relationship with the offender: the child's status in the classroom uniquely contributes to understanding his or her level of forgiveness regarding a specific offense with a classmate.

Limitations and future research

We should note some limitations. First, given the correlational nature of the present studies, and as we have discussed above, an important question remains whether a higher preferred status leads to more forgiving responses, whether children's forgiving responses lead to a higher preferred status, or both. Second, the two samples revealed some inconsistent findings regarding the associations between status and forgiveness for boys and girls separately (see Table 2). Relatively *preferred* boys tended to be more forgiving in both samples, whereas for girls we found this positive association only in sample two. Moreover, relatively *popular* boys tended to be more forgiving in sample two, but not in sample one. For relatively popular girls, in none of the samples we found associations between popularity and forgiveness. It is difficult to pinpoint precisely what may have caused these inconsistent findings, as status and forgiveness are complex constructs that may be influenced by various relational and contextual factors (i.e., perceived friendship between victim and offender, perceived severity of the offense, gender of the offending child, etc.). However, it is important to note that the main analyses (associations between status and forgiveness, including all third variables; Table 3) revealed a consistent pattern of findings. Nevertheless, it is important for future research to replicate and extend the present findings. Third, in the present studies we did not take into account the status level of the target peer. Yet, peers not only influence others but are also susceptible to the influence from others. For instance, a recent study by Peets and Hodges (2014) revealed that adolescents who behaved aggressively toward liked others were perceived as most popular, suggesting that popularity is more likely to be ascribed to those adolescents who target other high status peers. Future research taking into account status levels of both peers involved in the conflict

should test whether acting in a forgiving manner toward a preferred or popular peer is also associated with higher status of the forgiving child.

Furthermore, the current studies were conducted among children aged 9 to 13 years old, who were in their final years of elementary school. Although children already may have learned that it is socially important to forgive, it is only around this age that they seem to understand the concept of forgiveness (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Denham et al., 2005). Moreover, children's peer relations in late childhood are relatively stable (e.g., LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002). Yet, one may wonder whether the present findings are restricted to this age group, or may be generalized to other developmental stages. Previous studies indicated that the positive association between preference and popularity for boys seems to attenuate, or even disappear, throughout adolescence (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). This may suggest that the positive association between preference and forgiveness is especially salient for boys in late childhood. This is an important issue for future longitudinal studies.

As an important final note, the present findings may have interesting practical implications. Given that preferred children are relatively more forgiving, these children may play a role in guiding their peers to be and respond more forgivingly. For example, as preference is a determinant of imitation and role modelling (e.g., Over & Carpenter, 2013), making such forgiving strategies of preferred children visible and salient in the classroom might prompt classmates to respond more forgivingly in conflict.

Conclusion

Children spend much of their days in the company of their peers. Not surprisingly, their lives are strongly affected by their status in the peer group, including the degree to which they are accepted and seen as being popular. The current research highlights that children's preferred social status is positively related to how they respond to offending peers, and as such obtains a richer view on how social status is related to the way children restore and maintain close bonds with others.

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