

About Peer Contagion Effects

Over several decades, researchers have explored how peers influence each other. A special concern has been on the potential contagious impact of grouping together youngsters who manifest inappropriate behaviors (e.g., in therapy programs, special education classes).

Raymond Zhang, an undergraduate working at our Center reported:

During my time at a school for children with disabilities and behavioral problems deemed unmanageable for public schools, I experienced some of these iatrogenic effects. Many of the students came from homeless shelters, foster homes, or single-family households; most were also minorities. Classes were often chaos, frequently cut short by tantrums or outbursts and students learned slowly at best. Students would feed off each other's energy, becoming even harder for teachers to control and instruct, and one student's bad day would affect everyone.

Some Research on Iatrogenic Effects of Grouping Adolescents Manifesting Misbehavior

Dishion and his colleagues were influential leaders in this line of study. In 2011, Dishion and Tipsord highlighted the matter in an article entitled "Peer contagion in child and adolescent social and emotional development" published in the *Annual Review of Psychology*.* The abstract states:

Evidence suggests that children's interactions with peers are tied to increases in aggression in early and middle childhood and amplification of problem behaviors such as drug use, delinquency, and violence in early to late adolescence. Deviancy training is one mechanism that accounts for peer contagion effects on problem behaviors from age 5 through adolescence. In addition, we discuss peer contagion relevant to depression in adolescence, and corumination as an interactive process that may account for these effects. Social network analyses suggest that peer contagion underlies the influence of friendship on obesity, unhealthy body images, and expectations. Literature is reviewed that suggests how peer contagion effects can undermine the goals of public education from elementary school through college and impair the goals of juvenile corrections systems. In particular, programs that "select" adolescents at risk for aggregated preventive interventions are particularly vulnerable to peer contagion effects. It appears that a history of peer rejection is a vulnerability factor for influence by peers, and adult monitoring, supervision, positive parenting, structure, and self-regulation serve as protective factors.

*T.J. Dishion & J.M. Tipsord (2011). Peer contagion in child and adolescent social and emotional development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62, 189-214. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.093008.100412.

In a 2015 study, Reynolds and Crea reported a study on multiple factors related to peer influence processes of adolescent delinquency and depression using data from Waves I and II of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health).** The abstract states:

Random-effects longitudinal negative binomial models were used to predict depression and delinquency, controlling for social connection variables to account for selection bias. Findings suggest peer depression and delinquency are both predictive of youth delinquency, while peer influences of depression are much more modest. Youth who are more connected to parents and communities and who are more popular within their networks are more susceptible to peer

*The material in this document is an edited version of a project report by Raymond Zhang as part of his involvement with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

The center is co directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu

influence, while self-regulating youth are less susceptible. We find support for theories of popularity-socialization as well as weak-ties in explaining social network factors that amplify or constrain peer influence. We argue that practitioners working with youth should consider network-informed interventions to improve program efficacy and avoid iatrogenic effects.

**A.D. Reynolds & T.M. Crea (2015), Peer influence processes for youth delinquency and depression, *Journal of Adolescence*, 43, 83-95 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0140197115001074>

In 2019, McCoy and colleagues reviewed 26 studies to highlight gender differences in adolescent susceptibility to deviant peer pressure in order to better understand processes that contribute to adolescent risk-taking behavior.*** The abstract states:

The review revealed two primary trends: (1) compared to adolescent females, adolescent males appear to be more susceptible to peer influences that encourage risk-taking behaviors, or (2) there is no consistent gender difference in susceptibility to such peer influences. Only two studies reviewed suggested adolescent females to be more susceptible to deviant peer pressure than adolescent males. The discussion offers two useful perspectives that may explain the two trends in the literature. First, gender role socialization theory is consistent with the observed trend that adolescent males are more susceptible to deviant peer pressure for risk-taking behaviors than females as they seek alignment with the masculine ideal. Second, the conceptual and methodological issues, such as using typically male-dominated risk-taking tasks and assessments (i.e., delinquency scale) to measure both males' and females' outcomes, may obscure underlying patterns of gender differences in susceptibility to peer influence. Future researchers are encouraged to empirically examine these trends in order to create appropriate interventions.

***S.S. McCoy, L.M. Dimler, D.V. Samuels, & M.N. Natsuaki (2019). Adolescent susceptibility to deviant peer pressure: Does gender matter? *Adolescent Research Review*, 4, 59–71. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs40894-017-0071-2>

Suicide has been a highly visible concern related to contagion effects. The contagious impact of the suicide of a peer, a famous person, media presentations, and more are widely debated. The recent uproar over the Netflix series about an adolescent girl's suicide (*13 Reasons Why*) is a prime example.

As stated in a 2017 article in *Scientific American* discussing the role of fiction:

It is well known that suicide can be a contagious phenomenon. "Copycat" suicides are seen in local clusters from time to time. Any possible causes of such contagion should be taken seriously, but the science shows that the role that fiction can play in inspiring suicide is at best unclear

(<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/13-reasons-why-and-suicide-contagion1/>).

Some Implications for Schools

Grouping students with behavior and emotional problems together clearly can have unwanted consequences. Negative peer influences can lead to misbehavior; misbehavior can be contagious. Minimizing such negative outcomes is one of the motivating factors for the inclusion movement in special education and for pairing up disruptive students with positive models.

A study in the Netherlands “examined whether a careful rearrangement of the classroom seats could promote social acceptance and more prosocial behaviors for children with externalizing problems, and limit the potential negative consequences for classmates sitting next to them” (van den Berg & Stoltz, 2018). The sample for this randomized controlled trial consisted of 64 classrooms with 221 fourth- to sixth-grade children selected by their teachers because of elevated levels of externalizing behavior. Students with disruptive behaviors were seated (1) next to a student who was well-behaved and well-liked (by other students) and (2) well away from other students with disruptive

behaviors. (The researchers caution that students well-liked by teachers may not be well-liked by fellow students). The abstract states:

Results showed that over time children with externalizing behavior were better liked by their seatmates and showed fewer externalizing problems according to the teacher. This was particularly the case when students sat next to a well-liked and prosocial buddy, or when they were initially disliked. Classmates who sat next to a child with externalizing problems did not become more aggressive or less prosocial over time. Yet their social status did decrease slightly over time as a result of the rearrangement. We discuss implications and future directions for research on classroom seating arrangements to support children with externalizing problems.

Y. van den Berg & S. Stoltz (2018). Enhancing social inclusion of children with externalizing problems through classroom seating arrangements: A randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 26, 31-41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1063426617740561>

So, specific practices such as the seating arrangements described above can help counter misbehavior contagion effects; they may also counter social rejection when misbehaving students become better liked. But, a big picture perspective calls for a much greater institutional approach.

Student misbehavior, of course, is a constant stressor for staff and students in and out of the classroom. Countering contagion effects is important. However, the larger concerns are effectively improving school climate and reducing the achievement and opportunity gaps. In this respect, we stress developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing behavior, learning, and emotional problems, and doing so in ways that promote student engagement and enhance equity of opportunity for success at school. For an in-depth presentation of these matters, see

>*Improving School Improvement*

>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*

Both accessible at: http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html