

Children's interpersonal awareness of Friendship: A comparative study of children with vision impairment and their sighted peers

Dr Carolyn Palmer
Senior Lecturer
Flinders University
GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, 5001
Flinders.edu.au
Carolyn.palmer@flinders.edu.au

Abstract:

The use of Selman's stages of interpersonal awareness of friendship facilitated a study of the friendship patterns of children with severe vision loss, and children with no vision problems. The study also investigated children's understanding of the meaning of friend, and their criteria for judging friendship. The findings add to those of previous studies that suggest a relationship between vision loss and children's friendship understanding. The findings show that children with vision impairment vary in their stages of friendship understanding, in relation to sighted peers.

Key Words

Vision impairment, social competence, friendship understanding, peer relationships

For many years, educators have acknowledged the importance of facilitating the development of relationships and social interactions between young people with vision impairment and their peers. Concern has been expressed for the child who lacks the social competence needed to initiate and maintain satisfying, positive friendships (McCuspie, 1996, Wolffe & Sacks, 2000). Friendships are reported to be based on "affiliation and common interests" (Hartup, 1992, p. 177). Friends not only engage in social interaction, they socialise each other, support each other and foster self-esteem (Hartup & Stevens, 1999). A number of studies examine aspects of children's friendships in terms of predictors of friendship-making ability (McNamara & Wigfield, 2002), identification of children's friendship patterns (Michelson, Sugai, Wood, and Kazdin, 1983), and children's friendship understanding (Selman 1979). As a result friendships and peer relationships are recognised in the literature as areas for investigation.

MacCuspie (1996) views friendship as an important source of stimulation that impacts on both social and intellectual development. In her research she found that children with vision impairment have a different perception of a "best friend" to classmates with no vision problems. She reports that students who participated in her study consistently emphasised two criteria for friends, those who did not make fun of their eyesight and those who helped with problems. She notes that students with vision impairment tend to struggle with the concept of "best friends" and do not view them in terms of frequent or routine interaction. They are more uncertain than their sighted peers about the nature of friendship and their descriptions are different. She also notes that the sighted children believe that being the friend of a student with vision impairment requires effort. A further finding was that a student in her study who had no useful vision was restricted in his associations with peers to children who chose to initiate contact with him as playmates, and she assumes that children with severe vision loss will experience similar difficulties. Only one of the five students in her study had someone he identified as a "best friend" and who his classmates also perceived to be his "best friend". However, both boys were not considered part of "the group" by their classmates (p. 59).

MacCuspie found that other children with vision impairment in the study had “okay” friends and they were generally perceived by their classmates as “okay” friends. She interprets “okay” friends to be those peers whom a child chooses to mix with when “best friends” are not available (p. 59). She also notes that some children with vision impairment struggle with the concept of “best friends” as opposed to “okay” friends, and she surmises that:

Whether they lacked experiences with childhood friendships or their visual limitations resulted in a different experience, their verbalized perception of friendship was different from that of their classmates. (p. 59)

This study is designed to build on the findings of previous research. It is unique in that it investigates the interpersonal awareness of friendship of three groups of young people, those with albinism, those with vision impairment (not albinism) and those with no vision problems, from five perspectives: their perception of a friend, criteria for judging friendship, how they knew they were someone’s friend, what attracted them to their friends and at what stage of friendship awareness they were at.

METHOD

This qualitative study elicited children’s awareness of friendship using two measures: interview and Selman’s Friendship Dilemma for girls and boys (Selman, 1979). In the interview participants were asked “What is a friend?” They were also asked to explain how they knew they were someone’s friend, why someone was their friend and what attracted them to their friends. The Selman’s Friendship Dilemma, which was used to measure the level of interpersonal awareness of friendship that participants had reached involved responses to open-ended questions following the presentation of a story about a friendship dilemma. The children’s responses to both measures were recorded, transcribed and the results analysed.

The participants

Twenty-six students aged 8-16 participated in this study. Sixteen had severe vision impairment and nine had no vision problems. Of the sixteen participants with vision impairment, ten had albinism. The young people with vision impairment were selected on the basis of grade level, school location and vision status which was established from medical reports. Eight of the 10 with albinism attended their local school, and two attended a special facility for students with vision impairment along with the seven students with vision impairment (not albinism). The students with no vision problems attended their local metropolitan primary school. Their ages ranged from eight to thirteen.

Findings

Critical to social competence is the formation of, and maintenance of friendships. Although students, particularly at primary level, tend to change friends quite frequently for a range of reasons, it was considered important to establish the stage of friendship understanding of each student in the study and compare and contrast them. These findings are reported in three parts: (a) Children’s understanding of the meaning of friend, (b) their criteria for judging friendship, and (c) their stage of friendship understanding.

Children clearly differ in their views about friendship on aspects such as what makes someone a good friend, and what one needs to do in order to become friends with someone. The interviews provided information on what each student perceived a friend to be, and Selman’s Stages of Friendship Understanding (Selman 1979) elicited data that enabled the stages of friendship understanding to be established.

STUDENTS’ UNDERSTANDING OF FRIENDSHIP

In response to the first part of this study, the participants discussed their beliefs about friends. When asked the question *what is a friend?* similarities and differences emerged. Students with albinism perceived friends as somebody you like, somebody who understands you, somebody who loves and cherishes you, a person you play with at recess and lunch time and with whom you go to the library to borrow a cassette, CD or

book. Some students also perceived friends in terms of care and trust. They suggested that friends were others who looked after you, took care of and cared for you, played with you, helped you with bike stuff, gave you presents, and were allowed to come to your birthday. Friends were people you trusted, people who did not “back stab you”.

A friend, in the eyes of one student, was somebody who:

... watches out for you, looks after you and if you are upset, will play with you and let you into games and that. If you've got no recess or lunch they'll share their recess or lunch with you. They'll help you with work or something.

Other students with albinism described friends as, “agreeable”, “good people who were good to be with and spent a lot of time with you, who supported you when you really felt down, and who liked the same things”.

Students with vision impairment (not albinism) had similar views on friendship to both their sighted peers and those with albinism in that they all agreed that a friend was someone you liked being with, you could talk to and play with, a person you trusted and who was honest, someone who cared for you, and watched out for you.

Differences in the way the three groups of students defined a friend also emerged. Students with albinism were the only ones to view friendship in terms of someone who gave you presents, came to your birthday party, let you into games, did not back stab you, loved and cherished you and understood when you were down. Students with vision impairment (not albinism) were the only participants to mention that a friend was a companion, a person you spent time with, and a person who did things with you. Some students with no vision problems had other ideas again. These students, unlike their peers with albinism or vision impairment (not albinism), believed that a friend was someone you could rely on, had known for a while, shared the same interests and liked the same things, had a good sense of humour, could keep secrets, gave in to you and sometimes disagreed with you, knew how to have fun, and was someone you did not hate. One student from the sighted group also specified having a balanced reciprocal relationship. He said, “He wants to do what you do, and then what he wants to do.” The most frequently stated beliefs about what a friend was by students with albinism and students in the other two groups were as follows: someone you could trust, a good person, an honest person (9); someone who invited and included you in play (8), a person you liked being with (5); and one who would take care of you (5).

In summary, the data revealed that while there were some differences in students' understanding of what characterised a friend, generally they all believed that a friend was someone you liked being with, who cared for you, stuck up for you, was honest and trustworthy, and who could play without interfering. The most frequently stated beliefs by students across all groups related to honesty, trust, and inclusion in play. Some perceptions of students with albinism, compared with those of students in the other two groups, had negative connotations. They referred to peers who did not back stab you, who let you into games (suggesting others did not) and who understood you when you were down. Students with albinism were also the only children who interpreted friendship in terms of understanding, presents, invitations to birthday parties, inclusion in play, and no back-stabbing. By comparison, students with no vision problems valued reliability, confidentiality, the ability to have fun and take a joke, a sense of humour, similar interests and friendliness, while students with vision impairment (not albinism), who generally expressed similar views to those of students with albinism, were the only group who included companionship.

STUDENTS' CRITERIA FOR JUDGING FRIENDSHIP

To seek answers to the second aspect of the study, students were asked to explain their criteria for judging friendship, how they knew they were someone's friend, why someone was their friend and what attracted them to their friends. The purpose of asking about friendship from these perspectives was to tease out their ideas with a view to eliciting richer data. The students' responses provided a range of perceptions, many of which overlapped, thus serving to validate the reliability of their answers.

Children with albinism generally based their beliefs about friendship on companionship, caring, sharing, kindness, having fun, honesty, assistance and others liking them. Three of the 10 students with albinism

believed that playing with you and asking you to play was a sign that you were their friend, and three thought stopping someone bothering you and sticking up for each other was also an indication of friendship. Waiting for you, going to each other's house and sleeping over were each thought important signs by two students. One student was very clear. She said, "they told me". Students with albinism generally agreed that peers who played with them, let them play, stuck up for them, and stopped someone bothering them were friends.

Although participants from the three groups included a variety of ways they knew someone considered them to be a friend, four principal reasons emerged from the data. These reasons were playing with you and letting you play, helping you in some way, being kind to you, and having been friends for a long time. Whereas students with albinism and students with vision impairment (not albinism) agreed that looking after each other and sticking up for each other were signs of friendship, the group of young people with no vision impairment and those with albinism agreed that lending, borrowing and giving you things, sharing the same things, and not teasing you and making your time miserable were also signs of friendship. The responses of the three groups of students are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Knowledge of Friendship

Students' responses to the question, "How do you know that you are their friend?" (N = 25) showing the stage of development according to Selman's Stages of Friendship Understanding

Comment	Albinis m	VI	No VI	Stage
Always come to me if they need things/lend me money when I need it. If I want something they'll give it to me (then I owe them)	2		2	1
They are not pushy			1	2
We always share the same things	1		2	3
Invite you to places			1	2
Play with you and let you play with them/ask you to play	3	1	3	2
They are fun /Don't bore you	1		1	2
Don't make your time miserable/Don't tease	1		1	1
Talk to me/tell each other stuff/talk to each other		1	3	2
Play games			1	2
Tell jokes		1	1	2
Help with school work//help me/Study with me	1	1	2	1
Take turns			1	2
Been friends for a long time	1	2	1	2
Because I see them every day at school			1	0
Gave me a Christmas Card			1	1
Kind/nice to me	1	1	1	1
Stop someone bothering me/stick up for each other/look after me, look after each other try to keep out of trouble	3	1		1
He hangs around and waits for me/comes around at recess and lunch to go to the library/ canteen or somewhere	2			1
Asks me over to sleep over/ Comes round to my house	2	2		2
They like me	1			2
Tell the truth/no lies	1			2
Buy me things and I buy them things	1			2
Rings me every night	1			1
They told me	1			0

In summary, similarities in children's criteria for knowing they were someone's friend were noted between students with albinism and their vision impaired (not with albinism) and sighted peers. These similarities related to duration of the friendship, assistance, kindness and inclusion in play.

Similar responses were given when students were asked to respond to the second part of this aspect of the study. They were asked, "Why are they your friends?" A summary of the reasons given by students with albinism are as follows: "because they like the same things", "stay over night", "play", "talk", "call on the telephone", and "cause they like me", because they are "caring", "friendly", "trustworthy", "will share", "help with work", "tell jokes", "don't play practical jokes on you", "smash you up", or "turn their back on you". Some students with albinism also valued kindness, caring, sharing, willing interaction and help. The

length of time the friendship had existed was also a factor that was included. One student with albinism was quite vocal in his view that a friend was someone who helped him. He said:

They help me if somebody is hurting me. Sometimes if I fall over they help me up. Help me with something.

A similar comment was made by a student with vision impairment (not albinism) who claimed that other students helped him and stuck up for him.

They're nice to me. They stick up for me when someone else pays me out or something, they stick up for me.

The individuals with vision impairment generally had similar understandings about why each was someone's friend. Participants in both groups believed that peers were their friends because they played with them and cared for them.

Students with albinism had views in common with students with no vision loss such as having the same interests, liking each other, and sharing. Over all, students with no vision loss based their selection of friends on whether they knew them well, spent time together, lived near each other, had things in common, were in the same year level at school, could discuss things without going straight into arguments, could trust each other, and whether they knew how to have fun. One student selected friends because they had Pokemon cards and skateboards. Another chose friends because they shared, bought each other things, and invited each other to the movies. A third said, "They lend me stuff, they're kind".

On the whole, responses to this question by students with albinism reflected a slightly more mature understanding of friendship than those of students with vision impairment (not albinism), some of whom based friendship on saying "hello", students sitting next to them, talking to them, letting them join in. One student intimated that being together all the time made them friends. Students with vision impairment (not albinism) also believed that friendship was indicated when peers looked after them, hung out with them, and communicated with them.

In summary, the information gauged from the question "why are they your friends?" elicited similar responses to the previous question, "how do you know you are their friend?" Once again the students indicated they valued kindness, sharing, caring, invitations to play, and being included in activities. They also highlighted having similar interests, sharing, caring, being liked and spending time together, and they believed that friends didn't play practical jokes on you, "smash you up" (one student) or turn their back on you. When these responses were contrasted with the views of their peers with vision impairment (not albinism) and no vision loss, similar beliefs were noted between all three groups of students.

The third part this question focused on why students were attracted to their friends. All three groups reported that they were attracted to others because of personal attributes such as trustworthiness, a sense of humour, their ability to communicate and their similar interests. When asked what they liked about their friends, five students with albinism liked them because they played with them, let them play or played games they liked. Caring, helpful, friendly and nice were attributes noted by another four students with albinism. Students with albinism made specific comments regarding what attracted them to their friends. One student was attracted by his friends' creativity:

They think up ideas.

Another student liked company and he appreciated the fact that his friends

... go to the library with me.

The camaraderie, generosity and involvement attracted another student with albinism to his group of friends.

They let me in on games and they are mostly cheerful and happy all together and they stick up for each other ... they buy me things and they let me ride their bikes and they help fix my bike ...

Friends were described as:

... good to have around.

And their humour, appropriate interaction and propensity to share were appreciated.

They don't boss other people and they are just fun to have around ... They've got a sense of humour. Like, if they've got a game to play, they'll let me join in and all that. ... Because they share.

One of the older students with albinism valued the support from both his girlfriend and his best friend:

My girlfriend is very caring and she listens to everything I say and my best friend, he sticks up for anything I have got, like if I have a problem he will stick up for it with me and he will listen to things that I have got to say and he will help me with things ... I can tell him things and he won't tell, because I'll trust him anyway, but I mean he wouldn't go around and tell other people at my school.

Students with vision impairment (not albinism) reported that they liked their friends for some different reasons also. Being nice, humorous, conversation initiators and having similar interests were valued by one student:

We both stay together, and we have got exactly the same hair cut and different clothes and she likes to use the bow and arrow and watch TV ... she runs real fast ... she always picks up my pencils.

Another was attracted to "nice" individuals who initiated conversation:

They start a conversation. They are nice people.

Getting on well and humour were noted:

They are funny ... we just get on pretty well.

Being part of a group, being looked after and conversation were other attractions:

We all hang out together. She tries to keep me out of trouble. We talk lots ... about Internet and things like that.

Students with no vision loss liked their friends' senses of humour, friendliness, interest in sport, and sense of equality. Individuals in this group made the following comments in relation to what they liked about their friends:

Their sense of humour mostly, and their jokes and stories they come up with. Because I can talk to them they're friendly and have a sense of humour, and I can trust them and they've got the same interests. They all like soccer? Yes sport.

Well, I just like how they are... Occasionally a few of them can get a bit bossy, but when they do, they know that nobody else likes them, so they'll just stop, they won't go on and bore us. We haven't got braggers or anything; people who think they are better than someone else. We are all on the same level, that's what I like. They are just good people because they are all friendly and that's what I like.

They liked the fact that their friends played sport with them:

Because they play sports, like soccer and basketball, ride the bike and roller blade.

Some students liked friends who sat next to them in class and who invited them to their house:

Sam sits next to me at school and invites me over a lot and Paul, he invites me over a lot and is friendly, the same with John and, oh yes, there is another friend Dave and he invites me over heaps

Another student liked his friends because they shared, were of a similar age, and they got on well together.

What I like about them is they are nice, they share, they are young, they are the same age as me, and well, we get together all the time.

To summarise, while there were a number of similarities in the reasons given by the participants as to why they were attracted to their friends, one noticeable difference emerged. This was the attraction of sighted students to children who played sport.

STAGES OF FRIENDSHIP UNDERSTANDING

The aspect of this study, focuses on the findings from the Selman interview that was designed to measure students' understanding of friendship and allocate them to the five stages of interpersonal awareness of friendship, that Selman claimed followed a hierarchy. The five stages as outlined in Selman and Selman (1979) are: Stage 0: Momentary Playmates (ages 3-7 years); Stage 1: One-way Assistance (ages 4-9 years); Stage 2: Two-way Cooperation (ages 6-12 years); Stage 3: Mutual Sharing (ages 9-15 years); Stage 4: Autonomy and Interdependence (12 years and older).

These stages of interpersonal awareness of friendship were assessed across various content aspects that represented unique features of the friendship concept according to Selman, Jaquette and Lavin (1977). Selman identified six unique features. However, for the purpose of this study only five were assessed, as termination of friendships was not a focus of this research. The features of the friendship concept that were investigated were *Formation, Closeness and Intimacy, Trust and Reciprocity, Jealousy and Exclusion, and Resolving Conflicts*.

In order to establish reliability, an independent examiner rated the transcripts of three students and coded and scored them. The ratings placed the students in very similar stages of development. The mean average issues score for one rater was calculated at 1.1, which was very close to the average issues score of 1.2 calculated by the second rater.

Whereas six of the 10 students with albinism, with ages ranging from 8 to 16, were found to be operating at a level of competency for their age and four were below, four of the seven students tested with vision impairment (not albinism), who ranged in age from 11 to 13, were at an appropriate or higher stage and three were below. The nine students with no vision problems ranged in age from 8 to 13 years. In the area of friendship formation, one student with no vision loss was below his chronological age level, two boys were above, and six were at an appropriate stage of development. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Stages of Friendship Understanding

Results across five areas of friendship for all groups of participants (students with albinism, students with vision impairment but not albinism and students with no vision loss) using Selman's Stages of Friendship Understanding (Selman & Selman, 1979)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Formation of Friendships</i>	<i>Closeness & Intimacy</i>	<i>Trust & Reciprocity</i>	<i>Jealousy & Exclusion</i>	<i>Resolving Conflicts</i>	<i>Average Issues Score</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Age in Years</i>
Albinism								
Sam	Stage 0(1)	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 2	Stage 2(1)	1.4	0 - 2	9
Jan	Stage 1(2)	Stage 1	Stage 1	Stage 0(1)	Stage 1(2)	1.0	0 - 2	9
Trish	Stage 1(0)	Stage 1(0)	Stage 1	Stage 1(2)	Stage 3(2)	1.27	0 - 3	9
Tim	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 3(2)	Stage 2(3)	Stage 2(3)	2.5	2 - 3	14
John	Stage 1(0)	Stage 2	Stage 2(1)	Stage 1	Stage 2(1)	1.4	1(0) - 2	8
Josh	Stage 3	Stage 3	Stage 3(2)	Stage 3(2)	Stage 2(3)	2.7	2(3) - 3	13
Don	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 2(1)	Stage 2(3)	Stage 1	1.6	1 - 2(3)	11
Sara	Stage 1	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 2	Stage 2	1.6	1 - 2	8
Tom	Stage 3(2)	Stage 2(3)	Stage 2	Stage 2(3)	Stage 3(2)	2.4	2 - 3(2)	11
Jim	Stage 3(4)	Stage 4(3)	Stage 3(2)	Stage 2(3)	Stage 3	3	2(3)-4(3)	16
Vision impairment								
Judy	Stage 1(2)	Stage 1(2)	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 2(1)	1.5	1 - 2	13
Tessa	Stage 2	Stage 2(1)	Stage 1	Stage 2(3)	Stage 1(2)	1.4	1 - 2(3)	11
Ian	Stage 2	Stage 2(1)	Stage 0(1)	Stage 2	Stage 2	1.6	0(1) - 2	13
Alice	Stage 1	Stage 1(2)	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 1	1.3	1 - 2	13
Toby	Stage 3	Stage 2(3)	Tape problem	Stage 2	Stage 2(3)	2.4	2(3) - 3	12
Travis	Stage 2(3)	Stage 2(3)	Stage 3	Stage 3	Stage 3	2.7	2(3) - 3	12
Kim	Stage 2	Stage 2	Stage 1(2)	Stage 2(1)	Stage 2	1.8	1(2) - 2	11
Sighted								

Jesse	Stage 1(0)	Stage 1	Stage 1(0)	Stage 0	Stage 0	0.5	0 - 1	10
Ben	Stage 1(2)	Stage 1(20)	Stage 3(2)	Stage 1(2)	Stage 3(2)	1.9	1(2) – 3(2)	9
Mat	Stage 3(2)	Stage 3(2)	Stage 3(2)	Stage 3	Stage 3	2.8	3(2) - 3	8
Luke	Stage 2(3)	Stage 2(3)	Stage 2(3)	Stage 1(2)	Stage 3(2)	2.2	1(2) – 3(2)	10
Dennis	Stage 3(2)	Stage 3(2)	Stage 3(2)	Stage 2	Stage 3(2)	2.5	2 – 3(2)	12
Ray	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 2(3)	Stage 2(3)	Stage 2	2.3	2 - 3	9
Gill	Stage 3	Stage 3(2)	Stage 3	Stage 3	Stage 3	2.9	3(2) - 3	12
Jay	Stage 3(20)	Stage 2	Stage 2	Stage 3(2)	Stage 2	2.2	2 – 3(2)	13
Mark	Stage 3	Stage 3	Stage 2	Stage 2	Stage 3	2.6	2 - 3	13¹

***Scoring clarification:** Stages in the table are represented either as pure scores or major/minor scores. In items with major minor scores, the major/minor stage is shown in the following manner 0(1). This means that the greater frequency of student scores in that particular item of the Scale were located at a Stage 0 and a minor number of scores were located at Stage 1.

When average ages and average issue scores of the three groups of students were compared, the majority of students with albinism (60%) were operating at their age level, as were four students (57%) with vision impairment (not albinism). However, eight students with no vision loss (89%) were operating at their age level or better. The age mean for students with albinism was 10.8 and the mean average issues score was 1.9 (ages 6-11.4 years), the age mean of students with vision impairment (not albinism) was 12.1 and their mean average issues score was 1.6 (ages 6-9.6 years) and the age mean for students with no vision loss was 10.7 and the mean of their average issues score was 2.2 (ages (6-13.2 years). Clearly, students with albinism overall, were operating a lower stage of friendship understanding than students with no vision loss, but at a higher stage of friendship understanding compared with their peers with vision impairment but not albinism. A table showing whether students were above, below, or at an average level of friendship understanding for their age in the five categories assessed can be seen in Table 3

To sum up, the students who were the most consistently above average in their perceptions of friendship, as shown by the data gauged using Selman’s Dilemma interview procedure (Selman 1980), were the students with no vision problems. By comparison, students with vision impairment (not albinism) had the highest incidences of below average performance. Students with albinism were generally operating at a more appropriate stage of friendship understanding than their vision impaired peers, however, when compared with the sighted cohort, it was clear that their stages of friendship understanding were less consistent for their age.

DISCUSSION

Studies of children’s perceptions of friends and their understanding of friendships reveal that young people with severe vision impairment may have difficulty in establishing peer relationships because the quality of social interactions is affected by the child’s level of understanding, by limited or non-existent visual information (Palmer, 1998; Sacks, Kekelis & Gaylord-Ross, 1992), and by visual status and setting (D’Allura, 2002). For these reasons it is not surprising that variations occurred in all areas relating to friendship understanding of young people with vision impairment and their sighted peers.

Understanding of the meaning of friend

While similarities existed between the perceptions of students with albinism and their sighted and vision impaired peers (not with albinism) regarding the meaning of a friend, differences existed between the three groups also. Children from all three groups described friends as caring, honest, trustworthy, and helpful. In addition, they thought that friends looked after you, did things with you, liked and understood you, a person you could talk to and play with. Differences were also noted. Children with albinism tended to allude to being left out, teased, needing to be looked after, and needing understanding. Children from the sighted group included factors like reliability, confidentiality, having a sense of humour, and sharing the same interests, aspects that children with albinism did not list.

Criteria for Judging Friendship

Friends were judged by children with albinism according to the length of time the friendship had lasted, the way they interacted, whether they invited you to play, included you in play, waited for you and protected you. Kindness, assistance, invitations to sleepovers, regular phone calls, and giving presents were also listed by children in this group as indicators of friendship. Children with no vision problems and those with vision impairment (not albinism) also included the duration of friendship, assistance, kindness, and inclusion in play in their lists of criteria for judging friendship.

Students with albinism liked their friends for very similar reasons. Again supportiveness, and willingness to play, were listed. In addition, fun to be with, caring, sense of humour, similar interests, verbal interaction, and trustworthiness were also included in the response to this question. The major difference between the views of children with vision impairment and their peers with no vision problems to this question was the attraction to children who played sport, that was not included by children with vision impairment (not albinism).

Stages of Friendship Understanding

In terms of friendship understanding, according to the data collected and analysed using the Selman Dilemma and associated interview questions (Selman, 1979), more than half of the students with albinism showed immaturity in some aspects of their friendship understanding as assessed using the Selman interview. Variations also occurred in the stages of development of the seven students with vision impairment (not albinism) in terms of the formation of friendships. Three were well below their chronological age level in their ability to form friendships, one was borderline, one was at an appropriate stage and one was at an advanced stage. The nine sighted students on the other hand presented a more consistent picture. Only one student was below his chronological age level, four were at an appropriate stage and three were above.

Using the average issues and chronological ages as a gauge, the results indicated that students with albinism were at a more age-appropriate stage of friendship understanding than students with vision impairment (not albinism), but they were not as competent as their sighted peers.

Conclusion

Establishing friendships is complex. It involves a range of behaviours, social understandings and knowledge in order to establish, maintain and develop satisfying social relationships with others. In an environment where social interaction is valued it is essential that children have access to appropriate social skills training by informed professionals. When children have vision impairment it is critical that professionals understand how this condition may limit friendship understanding, social behaviour and the development of peer relationships. The inability to use vision efficiently in social situations, understand social dynamics, and possibly look different from classmates makes these children more vulnerable, and more at risk of social isolation. Not only do these children have to deal with functioning differently in a school culture that values academic success, sporting ability, and conformity, they have to achieve in an environment that is not always conscious of their difficulties, appropriate to their needs, and valuing of diversity.

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