

## **Social-emotional competence and friendships: prosocial behaviour and lack of behavioural self-regulation as predictors of quantity and quality of friendships in middle childhood**

Emanuela Rabaglietti<sup>1</sup>, Maria Fernanda Vacirca<sup>1</sup> and Wilmante Pakalniskiene<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Torino (Italy); <sup>2</sup>University of Vilnius (Lithuania)

The aim of this study was to investigate the follow-up effects of certain components of children's social-emotional competence (e.g., prosocial behaviour and lack of behavioural self-regulation) and characteristics of friendship in terms of positive and negative qualities and extent of friendship network. Participants included 177 children attending two primary schools in North-West Italy. During the first wave, they ranged in age from 6 to 9 years ( $M=7.10$ ,  $SD=0.38$ ; 48% female). The second wave was collected one year later. Structural equation modelling indicated that prosocial behaviour was positively associated with both qualitatively and quantitatively positive aspects of friendships: children higher in prosocial behaviours were also higher in positive quality of friendship and in number of friends than the others. Furthermore, the lack of behavioural self-regulation was positively associated with negative quality of friendship, meaning that children higher in the lack of self-regulation were also higher in negative quality of friendships as conflicts. These associations did not vary by genders.

*Keywords:* Middle-childhood, friendship, social-emotional competence.

*Competencia socio-emocional y amistad: el comportamiento prosocial y la falta de autorregulación del comportamiento como predictores de cantidad y calidad de las amistades en la infancia media.* El objetivo general de este estudio es investigar, mediante un diseño longitudinal de dos años, los efectos en el tiempo de determinados componentes de la competencia social y emocional de los niños (por ejemplo, el comportamiento prosocial y la falta de autorregulación del comportamiento) y las características de la amistad en términos de cualidades positivas y negativas, y del tamaño de la red de amigos. En el estudio participaron 177 niños (6-9 años,  $M=7.10$ ,  $SD=0.38$ ; 48% mujeres) que, a T1, asisten a segundo curso de dos escuelas primarias en el Noroeste de Italia. Los modelos de ecuaciones estructurales indicaron que el comportamiento prosocial se asocia positivamente, tanto con la calidad positiva de la amistad, como con el tamaño de la red de amistad: los niños que obtuvieron una puntuación superior en conducta prosocial, también obtuvieron mayores puntuaciones en calidad positiva de la amistad y en el número de amigos, con respecto a los otros. Por otra parte, la falta de autorregulación del comportamiento se asoció positivamente con la calidad negativa de la amistad, lo que significa que los niños con mayor puntuación en falta de autorregulación también fueron superiores en la calidad negativa de las amistades, como el conflicto. Estas asociaciones no variaron por géneros.

*Palabras clave:* Infancia media, amistad, competencia social y emocional.

Having friends is an adaptive function that emerges in infancy and early childhood as friendships meet a number of social, cognitive, and emotional needs, facilitating individuals' ability to overcome complex developmental tasks (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Friendship is, at least from middle childhood, a voluntary and close relationship based on preference, attraction, and pleasure of reciprocal company (Bukowski, Newcomb & Hartup, 1996). However, the definition of friendship quality changes with age: school-age children list sharing and reciprocal help as positive elements in the relationship while adolescents add loyalty and self-disclosure as well (Baumgartner, 2008). Nevertheless, children and adolescents do not exclude negative aspects from friendship, such as rivalry, conflict, and the tendency to dominate other people (Bukowski, Hoza & Boivin, 1993; Burk & Laursen, 2005; Ciairano, Rabaglietti, Roggero, Bonino & Beyers, 2007). Thus, friendship may be defined as positive when cohesion prevails and negative when conflict predominates (Berndt, 2002).

However, we have still to individuate the factors that may affect friendship, contributing to modulating the possibility of having friends and the prevalence of positive and the negative components in friendships. In other words, we still do not know why some children have more extensive friendship networks than others and why for some children, friendship conflicts are more frequent than among others. It appears that, in middle childhood, children's behaviour is significant in influencing the extent of friendship networks as well as whether positive or negative characteristics prevail in friendship.

Considering the evolution of friendship from infancy to adolescence, middle childhood presents a transition. In fact, during middle childhood, friendships start to be much more than the pragmatic friendship of pre-school aged children in terms of temporarily sharing activities and time as mainly determined by personal interests (being attracted by friends' games) (Fonzi & Tani, 1996). However, middle childhood friendships do not have certain characteristics of more mature adolescent friendships, such as self-disclosure, trust, and comparison to one's own experience, which are particularly relevant for girls and will last throughout life (Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 2006). In fact, during middle childhood, friendship is enriched by meaningful psychological dimensions such as reciprocity (Youniss, 1980), intimacy, help, loyalty, and trust (Howes, 1996), while it continues to be related to sharing play and concrete experiences with friends.

Considering the cognitive advancements that occur during middle childhood, where children begin to attribute increasingly refined and precise meanings to their own behaviors and those of others (Livesley & Bromley, 1973), we posit that behaviors related to friendship relationships take on a greater importance than in previous periods. Thus, we aim to explore the associations between certain behavioural dimensions of children's psychosocial adjustment and the characteristics of their friendships. In fact,

behaviour may make a child desirable and interesting instead of annoying and negligible. In addition, children's interactions are grounded in their behaviours, thereby enabling them to construct and consolidate friendships within equilibrate social comparisons (Berti & Bombi, 2005). However, children's behaviours in the peer context are influenced by social and emotional competences that they have acquired (Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009). Social competence can be defined as the capability of reaching one's own goals, maintaining in parallel good social relationships with the other people within different situations (Rubin *et al.*, 2006).

Children with different social and emotional competences behave differently with their peers because they use different relational strategies, differ in their proneness to cooperate or compete and ability to decode others' needs and desires, and modulate these needs and desires with personal competences while interpreting the expectation of the other on the self. Correlation studies have indicated that children who have reciprocated friendships are more socially competent than those who do not have such friendships (Hartup, 1993). Thus, we think that is interesting to investigate the association between aspects of children's social competence that may have a strong influence on their behaviour and various aspects of friendship, such as quality of friendship and extent of friendship network.

The present longitudinal study co-jointly considers two dimensions of social and emotional competence that may strongly affect friendship: prosocial behaviour and lack of behavioural control. More precisely, we aim to test whether prosocial behaviour and lack of behavioural control predict quality of friendship and extent of friendship network. Various studies have already investigated the association between social competence and friendship in middle childhood and adolescence, considering both sides of the association, quality of friendship on different aspects of social competence (McNamara & Wentzel, 2006), and the effect of social competence on friendship (Cillessen, Jiang, West & Laszkowski, 2005).

With respect to particular prosocial behaviour, consisting of helping, cooperating, sharing, and comforting (Batson & Powell, 2003), some previous studies have demonstrated that children with friends are also more cooperative and self-confident (Clark & Drewry, 1985) and more altruistic (McGuire & Weisz, 1982) than children without friends. Clark and Ladd (2000) found that the tendency to act empathically toward peers was positively related to the number of friendships and friendship quality. Furthermore, during middle childhood, children who are more requested as friends are also more prosocial and less aggressive than others (Berndt, Hawkins & Hoyle, 1986).

The other dimension of social competence included in the present study is behavioural self-regulation, which has received much less attention in relation to friendship with respect to prosocial behaviour. It was somewhat surprising to find that,

although behavioural self-regulation is an important aspect of competence in school-aged children, (Shieldsa, Cicchetti & Ryan, 1994), scholars have mainly concentrated on early childhood (Denham, McKinley, Couchoud & Holt, 1990; Rose-Krasnor & Denham, 2009) rather than middle childhood.

Children start to make important advances in their ability to regulate behaviours and emotion during their pre-school years (Yeates *et al.*, 2007). External sources of control are gradually replaced by internal mechanisms that become increasingly effective, adaptive, and stable (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). In middle childhood, such a regulatory strategy becomes even more sophisticated, thereby enabling children to reach good levels of ability in a number of important domains, including behavioural regulation and social competence (Lewis & Haviland, 1993). However, during middle childhood, children have to face new requests about the control of emotions and behaviours in different life contexts, such as school, family, and peers. When children enter primary school, they have to face for the first time specific requests of adapting their behaviour based on the rules of the school context. In other words, they have to inhibit physical movement for engaging in mental tasks over time and have to respect rules for controlling spontaneous behaviours (Smorti, 2001; Bonino & Reffieuna, 2007). Parents also reduce the tolerance to differences in individual rhythms of development of social competence. Finally, social play with peers also transforms in a competition ruled by specific norms and is thus characterized by less room for individual action (Berti & Bombi, 2005). To remain together in the class or to play together are elective situations for becoming friends and maintaining friendships.

Thus, exploring the association between behavioural self-regulation and characteristics of friendship is very important. Nevertheless, we did not find any previous study that had investigated this association in middle childhood. Furthermore, we did not find any previous study that had examined co-jointly the predictive relationships between two such different aspects of social competence as prosocial behaviour and lack of behavioural self-regulation as well as the quality and quantity of friendships in school-aged children.

### *Present Study*

In this study, as previously discussed, we considered the longitudinal association with an interval of one year between two different aspects of children's social competence (i.e., prosocial behaviour and lack of behavioural regulation) as well as three distinctive characteristics of children's friendship (i.e., extent of friendship network in terms of quantity of friends as well as positive and negative quality of friendship in terms of support and sharing and conflict, respectively). In addition, we sought to determine whether the pattern of these associations is similar or different in relation to children's gender.

Based on the previously mentioned literature, we expected to find positive associations between prosocial behaviour and both quantitatively and qualitatively positive aspects of friendships. As discussed, in middle childhood, the behavioural dimension is more important than other less touchable aspects in contributing at the construction of social relationships (Kandel, 1978). Thus, we expected that children higher in prosocial behaviour would be more likely to have both more friends and greater positive friendship quality than others. We further expected that the lack of behavioural self-regulation would be positively associated with negative quality of friendship, but not with positive quality of friendship or number of friends because we already know that a lack of behavioural control promotes more conflicts in relationships. However the presence of a high number of conflicts does not necessarily imply –especially in children, whose social relationships are not yet crystallized, but are rather under construction and easily changeable– the lack of different characteristics of the relationships, such as a high level of support by friends and an extensive friend network. Several scholars have already demonstrated that friendships may consist of both positive and negative aspects (Bukowski *et al.*, 1993) and that positive and negative dimensions may be differently balanced in the same relationship (Berndt, 2002).

Nevertheless, it is possible to hypothesize that the association between a lack of behavioural self-regulation and positive quality of friendship and quantity of friends differs between the two genders. In fact, in female friendships, verbal communication and intimacy –which can be prevented by a significant lack of behavioural self-regulation– may be more important than in male friendships especially in the construction of emotional support (Dunn, 2004). For this reason we want to control whether the patterns of underlying relationships between the behavioural manifestation of children’s social competence and the positive and negative characteristics of friendships are similar or different in boys and girls.

In summary, our goal is to explore the association between social and emotional competence at time one and qualitative and quantitative characteristics of friendship at time two. We also want to investigate the presence of gender differences in the previously mentioned associations.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The participants included 177 children (52% boys). During the first wave, the children were 6 to 9 years old ( $M=7.10$ ,  $SD=0.38$ ) and attending the second grade of two primary school in North-west Italy. The study was longitudinal. We collected two waves 12 months apart (at the beginning of two subsequent school years). Thus, during the second wave, children attended the third grade and were one year older.

The participants were representative of the population of children attending primary school in this part of Italy. Regarding relevant structural indicators, our sample was comparable to the general Italian population (ISTAT, 2007). Most of the children were born in Italy (95%) and had at least one parent who was of Italian origin (86% of mothers and 90% of fathers). With respect to level of education, 42% of the fathers and 31% of the mothers had completed compulsory education, 41% of the fathers and 56% of the mothers had completed high school, and 17% of the fathers and 13% of the mothers had earned a university degree. With respect to employment, 18% of the fathers and 14% of the mothers worked as managers, entrepreneurs, and professionals; 81% of the fathers and 59% of the mothers were white or blue collar workers or artisans; and 27% of the mothers were housewives. The only two structural indicators that differed from those of the general Italian population were the proportions of divorced families and unemployment, which were both lower in our sample: Only 2% of the families were divorced and 1% of the fathers were unemployed.

#### *Procedure*

The study was conducted in two primary schools in North-West Italy. The sample initially comprised 189 children attending the second grade in these schools. Attrition analyses were used to test differences between participants present at both time points and participants lost at follow-up on socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, family structure, and parents' education) and behavioural measures used in the study. No significant differences emerged for any of the variables.

Parents provided consent for children to participate, in accordance with Italian law and the ethical code of the Professional Psychologists Association in Italy; students also assented to participate. Children completed the questionnaire, which was administered by trained research staff during classroom time.

We collected information about structural social and demographic indicators using a questionnaire that children brought home to their parents. A total of 94% of the parents completed this questionnaire and returned it (in a closed envelope) to school the following week. We did not find any difference in the study variables between the children whose parents completed the parent questionnaire and those whose parents did not. The parent questionnaire was completed by mothers (59%), fathers (14%), or both parents (27%). The administration of the questionnaire lasted approximately one hour. Parents' completion of the questionnaire required about 15 minutes. We did not offer any incentive for participation in the study. No family refused to participate.

#### *Measures*

We administered a self-reported questionnaire twice at a one-year interval. This included the Friendship Quality Scale (Bukowski, Hoza & Boivin, 1994), a

measure of friendship quantity, and subscales of psycho-social adjustment (Caprara & Pastorelli, 1993).

*Psychological adjustment at wave 1.* To measure psychosocial adjustment, we used 22 items (Caprara & Pastorelli, 1993). Responses were made on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 3 (many times). We considered two dimensions of psychosocial adjustment. The first dimension is prosocial behaviour, which consisted of five items: to comfort someone that is sad, to keep friends and mates company, to try to help others, to share with friends things I like, and I embrace my friends (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.55$ ).

The second dimension was lack of behavioural self-regulation. This dimension consisted of 17 items: I shout, I stop someone when he/she is talking, I play noisy games, I disturb someone, I do not stay quiet, I play dangerous games, I fight (not for fun), I pull punches and kicks not for fun, I tease someone, I hurt my mates, I threaten someone, I bite to hurt my mates, I quarrel with older children, I talk badly of classmates, I insult classmates, I jostle and I do capers with others, and I make fun of classmates (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.83$ ).

*Friendship-related measures during wave two.* Number of friends was used to assess children's perception of the extent of their friendship network. Considering the young age, we used one item that measured the extent of friendship: "How many friends do you have?" Response choices included: *0-Few* (to count them, one hand is enough), *1-Many* (to count them, I have to use at least two hands).

*Positive and negative quality of friendship.* To measure friendship quality, we used 22 items of the Friendship Quality Scale (Bukowski *et al.*, 1994). Responses on a 4-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very). We considered two dimensions of friendships.

The first dimension, positive quality of friendship, is linked to support, confidence, and sharing. This dimension consisted of 18 items: spending time together, talking about problems, helping and being helped, receiving defence in troubles, sharing funny things together, being happy for her/his successes, finding a solution for conflicts, thinking about her/him even when she/he is not present, sharing snacks at snack time, friend does things that make me feel special, and friend invented funny things (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.83$ ).

The second dimension, negative quality of friendship, is linked primarily to conflicts. This dimension consisted of four items reflecting feelings about frequent fighting, being angry even after the fight is over, disagreeing about many things, and reciprocal teasing (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.66$ ).

We reported descriptive information and correlations among the study variables in table 1.

Table 1. Intercorrelations Among and Descriptive Information about Prosocial Behaviours, Lack of Behavioural Self-regulation, Positive and Negative Quality of Friendship, and Number of Friends

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Prosocial behaviour	--				
2. Lack of behavioural self-regulation	-.13 <sup>+</sup>	--			
3. Positive quality of friendship	.29**	-.06	--		
4. Negative quality of friendship	.14*	-.02	.19*	--	
5. Number of friends (few/many)	.01	.31**	-.03	.03	--
<i>M</i>	12.27	25.79	.68	56.44	7.01
<i>SD</i>	1.98	6.72	.47	8.26	2.66

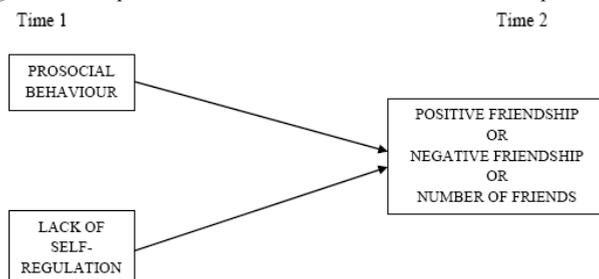
Notes: <sup>+</sup> *p*<.10; \**p*<.05; \*\**p*<.01

*Plan of Analysis*

To examine associations of children’s behaviour with children’s friendship quality and number of friends, we performed structural path analyses using Mplus 5.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2006). We also used multiple group analyses to examine the possible moderating effects of children’s gender. For all analyses, we used full information maximum likelihood (FIML) because we used raw data as the input and some of the data were missing. FIML techniques are thought to provide less biased estimates than listwise or pairwise deletion (Schafer & Graham, 2002) and are appropriate even when data are not missing at random or completely at random (Little & Rubin, 2002). The proportion of missing values may be calculated using a covariance “coverage” matrix, which provides an estimate of available observations for each pair of variables. The minimum recommended coverage is 0.10 (Muthén & Muthén, 2006). In this study, the coverage in the models ranged from .94 to .99.

All structural models were evaluated using three goodness-of-fit indices: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990); Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) (Browne & Cudeck, 1993); and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) (Tucker & Lewis, 1973), also known as the Bentler-Bonett Non-Normed Fit Index. CFI and TLI values greater than .90 represent an adequate fit to the data (Bentler & Bonett, 1980); values greater than .95 suggest a good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1998). RMSEA values less than .08 represent reasonable errors of approximation; values less than .05 indicate a close model fit with the data (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

Figure 1. Conceptual model of children’s behaviour and friendship over time



The conceptual model is presented in figure 1. Variables at Time 1 were correlated with each other. In the multiple group analyses, we constrained paths to be equal between groups and then compared models with and without equality constraints using  $\chi^2$  difference tests.

## RESULTS

### *Relations between Children's Behaviours and Friendship Quality*

We asked if children's prosocial behaviour and lack of behavioural self-regulation affected positive and/or negative friendship quality. The model tested is shown in figure 1. Both models –with positive and negative friendship as an outcome variable– were fully saturated and thus had a perfect fit ( $\chi^2=000$ ,  $df=0$ ,  $p=.00$ , CFI=1.00, TLI=1.00, RMSEA=.00). The models indicated that children's prosocial behaviour affects positive friendship (Est=.33,  $p<.001$ ), while their lack of self-regulation affects negative friendship quality over time (Est=.26,  $p<.001$ ). Results also indicated that lack of self-regulation does not have any effect on positive friendship over time (Est=-.02,  $p=.766$ ). Children's prosocial behaviour does not affect negative friendship (Est=-.05,  $p=.512$ ). The multigroup analysis suggested that no statistical differences existed in these results between boys and girls. Thus, it seems that, the better children behave, the better friendships they could have while not being able to control their own behaviour could lead to worse friendships.

### *Relations between Children's Behaviour and Number of Friends*

We asked if children's prosocial behaviour and lack of self-regulation affect friendship quantity (i.e., number of friends). The model tested is shown in figure 1. This model was also fully saturated, thereby having a perfect fit ( $\chi^2=000$ ,  $df=0$ ,  $p=.00$ , CFI=1.00, TLI=1.00, RMSEA=.00). The model indicated that children's prosocial behaviour affects positive friendship (Est=.33,  $p<.001$ ), while their lack of self-regulation affects the number of friends over time (Est=.16,  $p<.05$ ), however, lack of self-regulation does not have any effect on number of friends (Est=-.01,  $p=.892$ ). The multigroup analysis suggested that no statistical differences exist in these results between boys and girls. Thus, the results suggest that better behaviour could lead to having more friends.

## DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore the longitudinal association during a one-year interval between two relevant components of children's social competence (i.e., prosocial behaviour and lack of behavioural self-regulation) and quantity (i.e., number of friends) and quality of friendship (i.e., positive and negative quality). We

expected positive associations between prosocial behaviour and both positive quality of friendship and number of friends as well as a positive association between lack of behavioural control and negative quality of friendship.

Our findings demonstrated that, what Cillessen *et al.* (2005) found in adolescence also occurred in middle childhood—namely, prosocial behaviour is positively associated with different positive characteristics of friendship. In our study, this association includes quantitative and qualitative indicators of friendship. Cillessen *et al.* (2005) study included four different qualitative characteristics of friendship (closeness, companionship, receiving help, and security).

Furthermore, as expected, the lack of behavioural self-regulation predicted higher levels of negative quality of friendships. Children who had great difficulties in controlling their behaviour also had friendships characterized by high levels of conflicts.

How can we interpret these findings? With respect to the association between prosocial behaviour and positive quality of friendship, we can interpret it taking into account behavioural homophily generally found in friend dyads. Friends usually resemble each other in several aspects; the similarity between them may be explained both by way of the selection mechanism—that is, friends tend to select each other because they are similar—and by influence mechanism or socialization (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Popp, Laursen, Kerr, Stattin & Burk, 2008). A good quality friendship among children is likely to be due to the similarity between two friends; in this case both friends behave in a supportive and cooperative way toward one another, contributing to the establishment of a good quality relationship. Some previous studies have already demonstrated an association between prosocial behaviour and similarity. Newcomb and Bagwell's (1995) study showed similarities in prosocial behaviours among friends. Recently Güroğlu and colleagues (2007) highlighted that prosocial behaviours are so strictly linked to mutual liking, cooperation, and reciprocity that friendships involving such a profile are likely to be characterized by the highest level of similarity. Haselager *et al.* (1998) found a greater similarity for prosocial behaviour among children who are friends with respect to children who are not friends.

Homophily in friend dyads may also explain the association between lack of behavioural self-regulation and negative quality of friendship. In this case, friends who have similarly high levels of a lack of behavioural self-regulation may also have great difficulties in mastering the relationship in a competent manner, causing an increase in conflicts and stress because of the relationship. Unfortunately, the association between lack of behavioural self-regulation and dyadic similarity in friendship has not yet been supported by any study. Nevertheless, we think that children's behaviour affects the quality of their friendship. In fact, it is reasonable to conclude that difficulties in regulating one's own behaviour with respect to rules of social plays, turns of talking, an excess of spontaneity in reactions, and the tendency of putting oneself in dangerous or

socially disapproved of situations may cause conflicts with friends and may have negative consequences for friendship.

Furthermore, with respect to the association between social and emotional competence and quality of life, we cannot exclude a different –although not alternative– interpretation that obviously needs to be tested in a specific study. Children with high levels of prosocial behaviour and children with high levels of a lack of behavioural self-regulation may interpret the internal dynamics of friendship differently. In other words, children with high levels of prosocial behaviour may also be more likely than children with low levels to see in a friend's behaviour the aspects that connote friendship positively, such as intimacy, confidence, and support. Conversely, children with a great lack of behavioural self-regulation may be more likely than others to see in a friend's behaviour the aspects that connote friendship negatively, such as conflicts.

With respect to the association between prosocial behaviour and the lack of behavioural self-regulation as well as the perceived extent of children's friendship network in terms of having few or many friends, as expected we found that only prosocial behaviour is associated to the quantity of friends after one year. This finding seems to confirm –although from a different perspective given that we used children's perception of quantity of friends and not popularity– the strong interconnections between prosocial behaviour and popularity that some previous studies have already underscored. Children who are more popular are also more prosocial (Berndt *et al.*, 1986). In addition, children high in prosocial behaviour are also more popular in the school context (La Fontana & Cillessen, 2002). Both children and adults believe prosocial behaviour is an important element of friendship (Berndt, 1981). A further –but not alternative– explanation concerns the fact that children with a high inclination for prosocial behaviour may also be more available to live social relationships in a trustful and constructive way, positively interpreting social cues. In a kind of virtuous circle, confidence and positive interpretation of social cues may also lead these children to perceive extensive and rich friendship networks.

We did not find any association between the lack of behavioural self-regulation and the positive quality of friendships and extent of friendship network. In other words, having some lack in behavioural self-regulation makes it more likely for children to be involved in conflicts with friends but does not have other affects on children's friendship –at least not in terms of support from friends and number of friends. This finding is not surprising considering that we investigated a normative group of children: none of our children was indicated for conduct disorders. Thus, it seems reasonable that, in this normative group, conflict and disagreement with friends are episodic and do not affect social relationships in general –especially the capability of the children in establishing and maintaining satisfactory and adjusted peer relationships, as

some previous studies have suggested (Bombi, 1993). This picture would probably have been quite different considering different groups of children, especially those indicated for conduct problems such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In fact, ADHD is characterized by various deficits in attention, impulsivity, and motor hyperactivation that sometimes make it very difficult and even impossible for normal social development and integration for children high in the disorder (Biederman, 1998). To compare normative and not normative groups of children with respect to the association between social competence and quality and quantity of friendships would have been interesting in order to disentangle characteristics of the conduct disorder and conditions that are frequent in normative developmental paths.

Finally, we did not find any gender differences in the patterns of the investigated associations between social competence and characteristics of children's friendship. Although some gender differences have been found in friendship structure (Rose & Smith, 2009) and functioning (Martin & Fabes, 2001), among girls more than boys in prosocial behaviour toward their friends (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987), children's social competence –at least in terms of prosocial behaviour and lack of behavioural self-regulation– seems to affect quality and quantity of friendship in a similar way in both boys and girls.

This study has several limitations, including the limited sample size, the use of a homogenous normative group of children, and the fact that we had only two waves. Having a wider sample, including both normative and non-normative groups of children, and more than two waves would have certainly enabled us to deepen our analyses of the processes underlying the association between children's social competence and characteristics of their friendship. In addition, we used a weak indicator to evaluate the extent of the friendship network –namely, an approximate number of friends. However, considering the young age of the children, we wanted to avoid the bias that could have been introduced by the potential lack of full mastery of calculation processes of some children. Furthermore –and probably even more important– despite acknowledging the importance of moving further from a individual to a dyadic approach to analyzing relational processes, we presented here findings that are still collected at the personal level. However, we already planned to extend our focus to the analyses of the friend dyad by using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) (Kashy & Kenny, 1999), which integrates a rigorous theoretical approach to interdependence in social relationships with appropriate procedures for testing it (Cook & Kenny, 2005).

Our findings confirmed the central role, in middle childhood, of children's behaviour with respect to the characteristics and quality of their peer relationships. Furthermore, from middle childhood, the capability of having friends and positive quality of friendships may be meant as an effective indicator of the development of wide

social, cognitive, and emotional skills (i.e., an adequate level of social competence) (Berndt, 2004; Hartup, 1996).

This relevant information can be used in planning educational interventions for this age group. Such interventions also have to address children's construction of good social and emotional competence by enhancing the life skills that promote adjusted behaviour and high quality of relationships in particular.

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