



Friendships for Wellbeing?: Parents' and Practitioners' positioning of young children's friendships in the evaluation of wellbeing factors

Journal:	<i>International Journal of Early Years Education</i>
Manuscript ID	CIEY-2018-0029.R1
Manuscript Type:	Review
Keywords:	young children, friendship, wellbeing, parent perspective, practitioner perspective, Peer relationships

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Tables for Friendships for Wellbeing?: Parents' and Practitioners' positioning of young children's friendships in the evaluation of wellbeing factors

Table 1: Participants

(percentages larger than 10 rounded to nearest whole number)

Participants	Gender				Location of home (parents) or setting (practitioners)			Type of setting worked in		
	FEMALE	MALE	PREFER NOT TO SAY	COUPLE COMPLETING	RURAL	SUB-URBAN	URBAN	PRIVATE	STATE FUNDED	VOLUNTARY
Parents/ carers (155)	143 (92%)	8 (5.2%)	2 (1.3%)	2 (1.3%)	64 (41%)	60 (39%)	31 (20%)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Practitioners (285)	272 (95%)	11 (3.9%)	2 (0.7%)	N/A	77 (27%)	100 (35%)	108 (38%)	149 (52%)	100 (35%)	36 (12%)
TOTAL 440	440				440			285		

Table 2: Practitioners and the ages of children they worked with ($n=285$)

Children's ages	0-1	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	5-6	6+
Practitioners working with	29 (10%)	31 (11%)	51 (18%)	60 (21%)	48 (17%)	23 (8%)	43 (15%)

Table 3: Results from Item 13 (practitioner questionnaire) and Item 14 (parent/carer questionnaire): How important are the following to children's well-being? (rate each out of 10)

Category	Practitioner average score (and overall rank)	Parent/carer average score (and overall rank)
Good family relationships	9.79 (1)	9.62 (2)
Experiencing fun and laughter	9.78 (2)	9.64 (1)
Feeling good about themselves	9.76 (3)	9.6 (3)
Time and space to play	9.7 (4)	9.4 (5)
Feeling listened to	9.69 (5)	9.48 (4)
Expressing thoughts and feelings	9.35 (6)	9.38 (6)
Enjoying nursery or school	9.3 (7)	8.82 (7)
Enjoying physical activity	8.84 (8)	8.56 (10)
A sense of belonging in a community	8.83 (9)	8.08 (11)
The company of friends	8.67 (10)	8.65 (8)
Being good at listening to others	8.5 (11)	8.61 (9)
Financial security	6.98 (12)	7.67 (12)
Having religious or moral beliefs	6.89 (13)	6.44 (13)

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Table 4: Results from Likert scale Items:

(percentages less than 1 reported as actual figures, other percentages rounded up or down)

Children's well-being depends upon:	Parent/carer			Practitioner		
	Strongly agree/agree	Neutral	Disagree/strongly disagree	Strongly agree/agree	Neutral	Disagree/strongly disagree
Feeling safe	98	2	0	99	0	1
Having a good relationship with their parent/carer	98	1	1	98	0	2
Engaging in play	95	5	0	95	4	1
Having close relationships/friendships	93	7	0	92	7	0.4
Being able to cope with challenge	87	13	0	85	22	3
Speaking up for themselves	84	14	2	74	24	2
Having good health	83	15	2	78	17	5
Having a close bond with their keyworker/practitioner/childminder/teacher	75	21	4	96	3	1
A good relationship between parents and childcare professional	75	21	4	94	5	0.4
Feeling that they are doing well at school or nursery	69	26	5	78	18	4
Feeling part of a community	66	32	2	78	20	2
The family having enough money	45	44	11	37	39	24
Having religious beliefs	7	31	62	12	51	37

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Abstract

Friendship matters for young children's development, learning and experience of wellbeing. This paper emphasises the significance of young children's friendships for their wellbeing, especially in the context of early years settings. Findings are presented from two online questionnaires developed for the project, in which 155 parents/carers and 285 practitioners in England expressed their perceptions of what matters for young children's wellbeing. Data shows some ambivalence in the views of both parents/carers and practitioners about the importance of friendship in this context. Both groups gave low prioritisation to 'the company of friends' for children's wellbeing. As friendships are of central importance to young children themselves, this could suggest that adults and children may have different priorities, which raises questions about the extent to which young children's friendships are seen as important by adults. The paper concludes by proposing the need for practitioners in particular, but also parents, to consider their roles and priorities for children's lives within schools and nurseries, including how they might sensitively support and facilitate children's friendships in play, activities and everyday life.

Key words: young children, friendship, peer-relationships, wellbeing, parent perspective, practitioner perspective.

Introduction

Friendship matters for young children's development, learning and experience of wellbeing (Daniels et al., 2010; Hedges & Cooper, 2017; Kragh-Muller and Isbell, 2011; Murray and Harrison, 2005; Peters, 2003). In the context of this assertion, this paper discusses findings from an online survey in which 155 parents/carers and 285 practitioners in England expressed their perceptions of what is important for young children's wellbeing.

As described in a previous article (Authors, 2017) parents and practitioners agreed on the importance of aspects such as fun and laughter, good family relationships and young children feeling good about themselves. However when it came to positioning the importance of young children's friendships the findings were more mixed. **These findings provide an opportunity to pose the following research questions, which will be addressed in this paper:**

- Research evidence on the importance of young children's friendships and peer-relationships is growing: do the views of parents' and practitioners reflect this growing body of evidence?
- Do parents and practitioners sufficiently acknowledge the importance of young children's friendships, and, by implication, how peer relationships influence young children's wellbeing?

The relationships we form with others are central to our lives. As social beings we strive to connect, to form attachments, to love and be loved (Seligman, 2011; Stern, 2000; Trevarthen, 2009). The nature of friendship is associated with positive play interactions and activities together, and includes experience of enjoyment and affection (Hollingsworth et al., 2009). What children gain from their supportive friendships are positive exchanges, reciprocity, togetherness, intimacy, security, care, warmth, mutuality, affection, and joint attention (Alcock, 2013; Beazidou & Botsoglou, 2016; Engdahl, 2012). For the purpose of this article it is important to draw a distinction between friendship and peer-relationships, the former often linked to a more voluntary, selected and maintained emotional bond developed from peer-relations (Howes 1983, Hollingsworth 2009). However, we also wish to recognize the interrelationships between the two, in particular the ways in which friendship may develop out of children's opportunities to engage in peer relationships (Dunn 2004).

At the same time as the positive benefits of children's social experiences with peers, friendships and peer relations can also be significant stressors, such as when children do not have friends to play with or feel lonely and upset (Murray and Harrison 2005). In Kragh-Muller & Isbell (2011) study 4-5-year old children also expressed strong agreement that exclusion from friendship was amongst the worst aspects when considering what mattered most to their wellbeing in pre-school settings. Research equally evidences how experiences such as bullying, conflict and feelings of betrayal can be detrimental to children's wellbeing (Daniels et al., 2010). These data provide clear evidence of the importance of recognizing the link between young children's friendships, peer-relationships and their wellbeing.

Children's own views on friendship – and those of their parents and caregivers

A range of international studies (Fattore, Mason and Watson 2016; Kragh-Muller and Isbell 2011; Murray and Harrison 2005; Streelesky 2017, *inter alia*) evidence how children consistently express the significance of friendships in relation to their wellbeing. Fattore et al. (2016) cite the ways in which children themselves refer to the 'specialness' of friendship for their wellbeing, in particular the role of reciprocal affection, attachment and emotional support, but also in relation to agency. Murray and Harrison's (2005) findings demonstrate how friendships were part of what children enjoyed most about their first year of school. When Kragh-Muller and Isbell's carried out research with 4-5 year olds in Denmark and USA, they found that children put play and friendships in a predominant

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3 position in what was best about being in a childcare centre, with examples such as: ‘Child care is
4 nice, fun, really good. I have friends and play with them’ (Boy, aged five, in Kragh-Muller & Isbell,
5 2011: 23). **Similar priorities were expressed by the children** in a study of 4-6-year-old Canadian and
6 Tanzanian children’s school experiences, the three most important, and equally significant, aspects for
7 children were outdoors, play and friendship (Streelasky, 2017).
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12 **Children not only** recognise the importance of their friendships, they also have their own views about
13 **the adult’s role in supporting them** (Peters 2003, Einarsdottir 2016, Kragh-Muller & Isbell, 2011).

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15 **These include** clear expectations about the adult’s role in relation to children’s play, friendships and
16 peer relationships. **Children emphasized that adults should avoid interfering in play, especially when**
17 **they did not know enough about the specific play scenario and child relationships, but they also had**
18 **views about how adults could help children to access play and peer-relationships** (Einarsdottir, 2014;
19 **Kragh-Muller & Isbell, 2011; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009).** **In Peters’ study, Anna’s**
20 **message was clear, that ‘The best thing adults could do to make school a better place would be to**
21 **make sure everyone’s got a friend’** (Anna, 8 years, in Peters 2003:51).
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29 **However, as both de Groot Kim (2010) and Dockett and Perry (2005) observe, what matters to**
30 **children and what matters to adults may be different, and what may sometimes be missing is adults’**
31 **(parents/carers’ and practitioners/caregivers’) full understanding of children’s relationships as ‘the**
32 **affective and connective bonds where children exercise agency’** (Vincent, Neal and Iqbal, 2016: 484).
33 **In practice, in nurseries and childcare centres there may be competing demands, including issues such**
34 **as the availability of places for children in different settings, balancing factors such as age and gender**
35 **in group composition, administrative procedures, or lack of knowledge about children’s preferred**
36 **companions. Practitioners (and parents!) also face many competing demands on their time, and**
37 **pressures in relation to expected and specific academic outcomes** (Dockett and Perry 2005, Hedges &
38 **Cooper 2017, Vincent et al. 2016). Hedges and Cooper (2017), for example, showed how**
39 **practitioners’ busy schedules may hinder them seeing the complex and intricate verbal and non-verbal**
40 **negotiations that take place in friendships. This was realized when a group of early years**
41 **professionals took part in analysing video clips and identified how friends may rely on one another for**
42 **support and comfort, engage in disagreement and debate, accommodate other perspectives and**
43 **develop shared understandings.**
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54 **Vincent et al.’s (2016) findings were that teachers see children’s friendships as fluid and**
55 **shifting. This may be in opposition to how the children themselves experience friendship.**
56 **Dunn (2004) found that friendships even amongst toddlers can be deep, and last for many**
57 **years. The adult has a responsibility for supporting children in maintaining and developing**
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3 these important relationships. This may be especially the case when children either have low
4 acceptance amongst peers or are rejected by them, and find it difficult to find playmates,
5 resulting in more negative school perception and adjustment which then influences their
6 engagement and learning (Ladd, 1990 Ladd et al., 1996; Mize & Ladd, 1990), as well as at
7 times of high anxiety and potential stress for children. There is a considerable body of evidence
8 to suggest that especially crucial times are ones of change and transition, both within the day and
9 across the year. Peters (2003) emphasises the need for both practitioners and parents to prepare
10 children for transition, supporting new and continued friendships before and after transition, and with
11 a particular focus on children that did not settle or appear to have formed friendships early on. Within
12 the daily routines, Peters' (2003) and Alcock's (2007) studies further suggest that children's
13 friendships may be especially crucial during breaks and at lunch time, and are also valuable for
14 scaffolding each other in class activities. Attention to aspects such as grouping/pairing of children, for
15 example at times of transition, and considerations of how the setting may accommodate children's
16 friendships and preferred playmates, may be a key ingredient in support of their wellbeing (Margetts,
17 2002).

Wellbeing

18 Wellbeing is a concept which is of considerable interest for researchers, policymakers and
19 practitioners in education (Joloza, 2013). The range of work in the area reflects its origins in
20 a range of disciplinary perspectives, all of which have their own foci (Mashford-Scott et al.,
21 2012). Thus, in conceptualizing wellbeing and developing the research tools for this study a range of
22 existing work in the area was considered and drawn upon. These included, *inter alia*, Bradshaw
23 (2002); Fauth and Thompson (2009); Laevers (1994); Mayr and Ulich (2009); Roberts (2010); Ryan
24 and Deci (2000); Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000); Seligman (2011) and UNICEF (2007,
25 2013). An emerging picture is of some consensus about the value of an approach which
26 incorporates both objective and subjective measures (Statham and Chase, 2010), as can be
27 observed in the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Index of
28 Children's Wellbeing, which includes material wellbeing, educational wellbeing, health and safety,
29 family and peer relationship, behaviour and risk and subjective wellbeing (UNICEF 2016). This is
30 further reflected in the approach derived from Positive Psychology, and in particular in Seligman's
31 (2011) PERMA framework of five elements of well-being: Positive emotion, Engagement,
32 Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment.

Friendship and wellbeing

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3 In an effort to bring together both friendship and wellbeing, and to locate them in a wider research
4 literature, we draw here on Seligman's (2011) PERMA as an organizing framework for a discussion
5 of the literature. This framework identifies five areas of wellbeing: Positive emotions, Engagement,
6 Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment, or 'PERMA' (Seligman, 2011). Each dimension is
7 closely interlinked with the others and all need to be considered in the context of young children's
8 wellbeing.
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13 *Positive emotions and Relationships in friendship: The P and R of PERMA*

14 As referred to above the links between young children's positive peer relationships and friendships,
15 their social development and the experience of positive emotions has received growing attention.
16 Friendship interactions are a vital part of children's developing social skills, and include routines and
17 attitudes such as engagement in problem-solving, the understanding of everyday events and activities,
18 creativity, reasoning and symbolic understanding (Lillard et al., 2012). In these interactions children
19 develop their understanding of others' minds and emotions, and the links between others' beliefs and
20 actions (Astington, 1994). Fattore et al. (2016) highlight the emphasis children themselves put on
21 their emotional attachments to friends, and the sense of them 'being there' for them.
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30 Alcock (2013) and Engdahl's (2012) research shows how, from a very young age, children use their
31 bodies, gaze, gestures, senses and other communicative signs to actively and purposively co-create
32 connecting activity. In this they share playful thoughts and feelings, where laughter and imitation,
33 mirroring, gift giving and receiving are used alongside shows of affection, with this co-constructed
34 activity confirming their inter-subjectivity and togetherness. This research with toddlers evidences
35 the significance of early emotional bonds, relationships and exchange of positive emotions, where
36 already in toddlerhood, children create a togetherness, in an evolving, dynamic process, which is
37 verbally and non-verbally negotiated, co-constructed and co-regulated, encompassing reciprocity,
38 mutuality of affection, and attunement to one another's needs (Alcock, 2013; Engdahl, 2012).
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46 Evidence also points to the positive effect of successful relationships with peers on self-esteem and a
47 sense of social competence (Gauze et al., 1996). Children who maintain positive relationships during
48 childhood may have a higher chance of being successfully sociable in their peer groups in the future
49 as they feel that are capable of making friends, which, as a result, can boost confidence and self-
50 esteem (Engle, McElwain & Lasky, 2011; Lavoie et al., 2007). Friendships can further protect against
51 feelings of low self-worth and low self-esteem as children feel they are able to communicate with
52 their friends and are not alone, especially if they have previously experienced discrimination in other
53 peer groups (Barrett & Randall, 2004; Fox & Boulton, 2006). Similarly the lack of friendship, and
54 presence of conflict and bullying, may have an adverse effect on children's feeling of worth (Barrett
55 & Randall, 2004; Daniels et al., 2010; Murray & Harrison, 2005).
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Perhaps one of the most important aspects of friendship is that, for children as well as adults, it is voluntary, in contrast to family relationships. The bond is different (Fattore et al., 2016), and, importantly, may be one over which children have a sense of more control than in other relationships. This sense of control may be particularly crucial for wellbeing (Layard & Dunn, 2009; Statham & Chase, 2010).

Engagement, Meaning and Accomplishment as wellbeing dimensions in children's friendship-, peer- and play-culture: The E, M and A of PERMA

Alongside research into children's **friendship**, peer- and play-culture as a sociological and rights-based study **extend upon the understanding of young children's** positive relationships with friends and **wellbeing**. One of the most important skills that we can acquire is the ability to interact and engage with others (Beazidou & Botsoglou, 2016; Hartrup, 1992; Stern, 2000; Trevarthen, 2009). The research by Corsaro (2000, 2003), Löfdahl (2005), Rutanen (2007) and Alcock (2007, 2013) **has provided detailed accounts of the traits of peer culture and** evidences how children **engage in, develop and share a collective consciousness, a state of being aware of and responsive to their environment,** within their peer- and play-cultures. They share and negotiate knowledge, values, routines, codes and expressive symbols in their efforts to make meaning. In their play and interactions children's repeated actions and co-adjustment become 'interpretive reproduction', placing children as active and collective interpreters of values, culture and rules (Corsaro, 2000, 2003), and supporting their understanding of their world and the wider world around them. **Play, and particularly pretend play, has been seen as crucial in this process of engagement and meaning making in friendship and peer relationships (de Groot Kim 2010; Löfdahl, 2005; Rutanen,2007; Corsaro 2000, 2003; Howes 1996).** Howes (1996), for example, describes the experience of a child who did not speak any English when starting school. Bringing in her own doll facilitated engagement in pretend play with other peers, which may support the development of intimacy in friendship.

The studies into children's friendship-, peer- and play-cultures also refer to the dimensions of counter-culture, and even subversion (Löfdahl, 2005; Rutanen,2007; Corsaro 2000, 2003). Koch (2018) shows how closely children's perceptions of wellbeing are linked to this dimension of counter-culture. **A counter-culture means; where** children thrive in the in-between – in between activities and adult rules - in ways that support meaningfulness and accomplishment for the children. In the negotiation of rules and interactions **both** between children, and between children and adults, rules are (re-) created, demanding high levels of self-regulation, respect and courage from all parties in the negotiation of power and rights (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Koch, 2018). The imitation of rules and interactions encompasses transformation, challenging rules of social etiquette, and including tensions and contradictions, humour and playfulness, inclusion and exclusion (Corsaro 2000, 2003; Alcock, 2007;

Chesworth, 2016; Löfdahl, 2006). This is significant not only to bear in mind for young children's engagement, autonomy, feeling of meaning and accomplishment, but also in regards to the role of the adult as guiding or intervening in young children's relationships (Cosaro 2003).

There is further evidence of the importance of friendship for what Seligman (2011) refers to as accomplishment, or achievement. The experience of friendship in school and nursery may influence academic achievement. Crucially, there is strong evidence to suggest a positive relationship between friendship and children's social relationships with peers and the development and display of self-regulation (Eisenberg, Valiente & Eggum, 2010; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011; Robson, 2016) and problem-solving capability (Campbell, Lamb & Hwang, 2000; Löfdahl, 2005).

The Project

The research described here forms part of the xxxx Project 'xxxx'. Overall findings are reported in Author et al. (2017). This paper focuses particularly on parent/carer and practitioner views on the importance of young children's friendships for their wellbeing. The theoretical framework draws on Positive Psychology (Seligman 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), with its focus on wellbeing, health and quality of life, and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which conceives of wellbeing in terms of three main components: competence (cognitive aspects); relatedness (social aspects, deriving from relationships with significant others) and autonomy (self-regulation and identity, that is, the emotional/motivational aspects of wellbeing). Implicit in both is the idea of the potential for the well-being of all to be enhanced and promoted, in contrast to perspectives which have focused more on the amelioration of negative wellbeing in individuals.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted via online questionnaires posted on a number of websites for either parents/carers or early childhood professionals, which resulted in 155 parent/carer responses and 285 practitioner responses, from across England. The term practitioner is used in England to cover a wide range of roles and qualifications in the early years workforce (Nutbrown 2012). Table 1 shows details of gender and location of participants (self-identified).

TABLE 1

Table 2 shows details of the ages of children that practitioners worked predominantly with.

TABLE 2

Procedures and research tools

Two questionnaires were developed, for parents/carers and practitioners, drawing on previous literature. The process of development was deductive, in that we used *a priori* categories and areas derived from existing literature into wellbeing, in particular young children's wellbeing, including Bradshaw (2002), Fauth and Thompson (2009), Laevers (1994), Mayr and Ulich (2009), Roberts (2010), Ryan and Deci (2000), Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Seligman (2011) and UNICEF (2007, 2013) *inter alia*. Ten areas of well-being were established, **which reflect the range of areas prevalent in existing literature**. These are all addressed in items in the questionnaires, and include both objective and subjective ideas of well-being:

- Community and culture,
- Emotional/spiritual,
- Family,
- Financial/material,
- Learning and education,
- Personality/behavioural,
- Physical – health and safety,
- Play,
- Self-concept, subjective well-being,
- Social.

The questions in both the parents/carers' and practitioners' questionnaires were identical, with the exception of one additional work context-related question for practitioners (see Appendix A).

Analysis and Coding strategy

The resulting data afford both quantitative and qualitative analysis: such mixed method research design and data analysis is suggested by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) as particularly useful in the context of educational research. The majority of items used either Likert scales (**Items 14–26/15–27**) or numerical scoring. Uncorrelated t-tests were carried out on these items (see Author *et al.* 2017 for full data).

One item in both questionnaires provided the opportunity for free text responses: 'Please add anything else below that you think children's well-being depends on' **and it is therefore useful to examine the narrative qualitative data from Item 13/14 alongside the quantitative ranking.** Responses were independently coded by 2 members of the research team, resulting in the identification of 283 comments in 17 categories. In assigning items to categories, inter-rater agreement was 96%, with non-

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3 agreement on 10 items out of 283. These 10 were then resolved (see Author et al., 2017 for full table
4 and discussion).
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7 **Ethics**

8 Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of xxxx, and British Educational Research
9 Association (BERA) Guidelines (2011) were complied with. All participants were assured of
10 anonymity.
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14 **Results**

15 Quantitative data on parent and practitioner views on children's friendships were derived from
16 a questionnaire rating exercise (see Table 3), and from the Likert scale items (see Table 4).
17 Qualitative data came from parent/carer and practitioner comments in response to the free text
18 item in the questionnaire: 'Please add anything else below that you think children's well-being
19 depends on'.
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26 As can be seen in Table 3, the data from the rating exercise show that parents/carers and
27 practitioners expressed similar views on what they believed were important factors in young
28 children's well-being, prioritising aspects such as good family relationships, feeling good about
29 oneself and experiencing fun and laughter. Their lowest priorities were also similar, and
30 concerned financial security and having religious or moral beliefs. Neither group rated young
31 children's peer relationships highly, with 'the company of friends' at 8 out of 13 in the parent
32 score and 10th in the practitioner score.
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39 **TABLE 3**

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42 The data from the Likert scale item 'Children's well-being depends on: Having close
43 relationships/friendships' show more positive endorsement of friendship by both parents and
44 practitioners (see Table 4), and it is placed 4th highest in the percentage of participants who
45 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Understandably, both groups identified 'feeling
46 safe' as their major priority for young children's well-being, and good relationships between
47 children and their parent/carer were seen as equally vital. The item 'engaging in play' was also
48 highly placed. Interestingly, having close relationships/friendships came close behind, and was
49 scored by parents at 93 percent agree/strongly agree and by practitioners at 92 percent. **Both**
50 **groups scored this aspect** more highly than aspects such as children speaking up for themselves
51 and being able to cope with challenge, feeling as if they were doing well at nursery, feeling
52 part of a community and health. As with the rating exercise, the family having enough money
53 and having religious beliefs were seen as least important. The areas of particularly significant
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3 difference between parents and professionals, namely the items ‘Having a close bond with their
4 keyworker/practitioner/childminder/teacher’ and ‘A good relationship between parents and
5 childcare professional’ are considered in Author et al., 2017.
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10 TABLE 4

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13 Unrelated t-tests were carried out which showed that, despite this broad agreement, some
14 categories were significantly more important for one group than the other. Full data are presented in
15 Author et al. (2017). Here it is worth noting data relevant particularly to the topic of friendship. The
16 rating item ‘The company of friends’ and Likert scale item ‘having close relationships/friendships
17 showed no significant difference between parent/carers’ and practitioners’ views. It is also useful to
18 look at other items which could have implications for friendship. Of these, two were more significant
19 for practitioners: ‘Time and space to play’: $t(182.6) = 2.898, p < .004$, small/medium effect size $r =$
20 $.28$ (NS), and ‘Enjoying nursery or school’: $t(198.3) = 2.91, p < .004$, small/medium effect size $r =$
21 $.28$. A further rating item, ‘Experiencing fun and laughter’ was not significant. Likewise, for the
22 other relevant Likert scale item, ‘Engaging in play’, there was no significant difference between
23 parent/carers’ and practitioners’ views
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31 Comments in response to the free text item were made by 86 practitioners (30%) and 37
32 parents/carers (24%). A total of 283 comments were identified and coded, with 75 comments
33 from parents/carers (average 2 categories per parent) and 208 from practitioners (average 2.4
34 categories perpractitioner).
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40 Of the 208 free text comments from practitioners and the 75 comments from parents/carers
41 friendship elicited the lowest number of comments, with only 1 parent comment:
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44 Different circles of friends e.g. neighbourhood, school, through sports/clubs.

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46 Parent

47 Likewise there was only one practitioner comment:

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50 Having friends

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57 It is worth setting the low number of free text responses about friendship in context. Family
58 relationships, for example, were highlighted in 17 parent comments and 5 practitioner
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3 comments, and the two areas with the highest scores, namely self-concept and love and being
4 loved, were mentioned 42 times and 31 times respectively (Author et al., 2017).
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10 11 **Discussion**

12 *The (lack of) recognition of children's friendships in early years practice?*

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14 The data from the questionnaires provide a context in which to consider the two questions set out in
15 the Introduction:
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19 • Research evidence on the importance of young children's friendships and peer-relationships
20 is growing: do the views of parents' and practitioners reflect this growing body of evidence?
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- 22 • Do parents and practitioners sufficiently acknowledge the importance of young children's
23 friendships, and, by implication, how peer relationships influence young children's
24 wellbeing?
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28 As shown in the review of literature, a growing number of studies over the last 30 years have
29 highlighted the significance of young children's friendships and peer relationships. At the same time,
30 there is also evidence to suggest that the importance of friendship is not always sufficiently
31 recognised in research and practice (Carter and Nutbrown 2016; de Groot Kim, 2015; Hedges &
32 Cooper, 2017; Vincent et al., 2016). This is interesting in light of the findings from the current study,
33 as practitioners and parents both present a mixed picture of how children's friendships are seen for
34 their wellbeing. The low placing of 'the company of friends' (8 out of 13 in the parent score and 10th
35 in the practitioner score), particularly by practitioners, and only one comment about friendship from
36 parents and one from practitioners may reflect a similar lack of clear recognition in the samples here.
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44 At the same time, both parents and practitioners recognised the importance of play, and, along with
45 having close relationships/friendships both had over 90% agree/strongly agree assessments. The item
46 'engaging in play' was highly placed, and this may be important to note, as it is possible to infer that
47 parents and professionals might see play as a site for friendship.
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52 Acknowledging, valuing and prioritising children's friendships is a full hearted undertaking involving
53 negotiation, compromise and social responsibility, and embodying both risk and challenge for adults
54 (Hedges & Cooper, 2017). Any engagement with children's friendships is a challenging emotional
55 encounter, in which all parties may be dealing with conflict, feelings of upset, anger, exclusion,
56 alongside more positive emotions (Carter and Nutbrown 2016; Acar, Hong & Wu 2017). This
57 demands both significant time and supportive collaboration amongst staff and with parents. It may
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3 also be considerably more challenging to facilitate than aspects such as 'time and space to play',
4 'enjoying physical activity' and 'engaging in play', all of which were rated more highly by
5 participants.
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9 The research findings from Acar et al. confirm the complexity of adult roles in supporting young
10 children's friendships, showing that 'young children are more likely to show positive peer interactions
11 during child-directed activities' (2017:14). They also found that 'some level of teacher presence is
12 likely to inhibit negative peer interactions, and teachers' social scaffolding may add more positivity to
13 the context of peer interactions' (ibid: 14). This may be very pertinent here, especially given the low
14 rating for 'the company of friends' by practitioners in the rating exercise. There is evidence to suggest
15 that practitioners focus their time mainly on adult-directed and adult-initiated activities (Maynard &
16 Chicken, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), and may, as a result, miss the expressions of friendship
17 inherent in child-directed ones, and thus may not afford friendship high importance as a result. In
18 effect, it is just not apparent to them in much of their activity. At the same time, the finding that adults
19 can be a force for the inhibition of negative peer interaction and promotion of positive interaction
20 (Acar et al., 2017) suggests the importance of becoming involved in children's activities.
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30 Becoming involved in children's activities necessitates practical, pedagogic and ethical decisions. As
31 previously identified, children's peer culture exists in the in-between, and outside the watchful eye of
32 the adult, and it can be a difficult balance about when to support, extend or intervene in children's
33 interactions and when to step back and allow for children's own negotiating and problem-solving
34 competences (Corsaro 2003; Koch 2017). There are also ethical decisions to be made about entering
35 into young children's very intimate encounters, and a need to consider children's rights to privacy,
36 especially in the context of early years settings where children accrue many hours of personal and
37 private life experiences (Lofdahl, 2005). In the current study it may even be that, albeit
38 unconsciously, parents and practitioners placed less emphasis on the role of friendship for children's
39 wellbeing ('the company of friends') for this very reason, in that that they saw friendship as a private
40 matter for children themselves, and not an arena for adult involvement. In this context it is important
41 to note that relationships could equally be interpreted as family relationships and that the high Likert
42 scale rating for 'having close relationships/friendships' may have been interpreted more widely as
43 relationships of all kinds, including those between adults and children, and thus an area of legitimate
44 involvement, and over which adults could potentially exercise more control.
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55 Whilst the current study did not solicit participants' views about wellbeing in the context of particular
56 events or routines, the research evidence suggests that the company of friends may be crucial,
57 particularly at times of stress and change (Margetts, 2002, Peters 2003). One example of this is the
58 role of friendship at times of transition, where peer-attachments can provide feelings of safety and
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3 security, and where play with friends can allow for exploration of the challenges of adjusting to new
4 rules, routines, environments and people (Murray and Harrison 2005; Strelasky 2017). Interestingly,
5 transition and routines have been found to be the least likely occasions for seeing positive peer
6 interactions (Acar et al., 2017). However routine contexts such as snack and mealtimes can become
7 playful interactional spaces for the exchange of and play with language and rehearsal of social and
8 communicative rules and skills. They can become a space where children and adults make collective
9 and internal sense of cultural norms and rules, while re-creating and reinterpreting these, becoming
10 active agents not only in their own culture, but also in the institutional culture, creating a sense of
11 togetherness (Alcock, 2007). Participants' endorsement of items such as 'experiencing fun and
12 laughter' and 'enjoying nursery or school' (1st/2nd and 7th respectively in rating exercise) suggest that
13 both parents and practitioners believe it is important for children to experience such events as playful
14 opportunities for interaction.
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23 The benefits of friendship require continued maintenance and the development of strong peer
24 relationships, positioning the adult with a responsibility for supporting children in maintaining and
25 developing these important relationships, especially when children are struggling with friendships
26 (Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 1996; Mize & Ladd, 1990; Howes, 1996; Peters 2003). Looked at alongside
27 our findings, it suggests the need for adults to have a very strong recognition of, and clear
28 commitment to, friendship as a key factor in young children's wellbeing.
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34 *Ways forward in supporting young children's friendship and wellbeing*

35 Given the research evidence cited here which points to the central importance of friendship for young
36 children's wellbeing, the apparent ambivalence of participants' emphasis on its importance, and the
37 scant evidence in the specific commentary (2 brief comments), raises some concerns. It also suggests
38 the need for examination of ways in which adults can recognise and support children's friendships
39 more explicitly, whilst acknowledging the complexity of such activity. As noted earlier, children's
40 friendships, peer- and play-cultures occupy a complex position. Adults may not have a full
41 understanding of the importance of 'the affective and connective bonds' of friendship that Vincent et
42 al. discuss (2016: 484). as a site for the exercise of agency. This may also mean that adults do not
43 sufficiently recognise the significance, depth and often enduring nature of the children's relationships
44 (Vincent et al., 2016; Fattore et al. 2016; Alcock, 2013; Engdahl, 2012; Dunn 2004).
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53 This article therefore calls for explicit acknowledgement of the power of young children's friendships
54 for their wellbeing, by keeping this in the forefront when thinking about priorities and practice.
55 Practitioners (and parents!) face many competing demands on their time, and pressures in relation to
56 expected and specific academic outcomes (Hedges & Cooper, 2017; Vincent et al., 2016; Dockett and
57 Perry 2005). However, the evidence of the importance of friendship for young children's wellbeing,
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3 and, in turn, the evidence of the centrality of wellbeing for young children's development (Bagdi &
4 Vacca, 2005; Barblett & Maloney, 2010; Seland, Sandseter & Bratterud, 2015; Spratt, 2015), suggests
5 that time to understand and support young children's friendships and peer relationships may be time
6 well spent.
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11 Reflecting the research we cite on peer and play culture (Alcock, 2007, 2013; Corsaro, 2000, 2003;
12 Löfdahl, 2005; Rutanen, 2007), and children's positions on friendship (Kragh-Muller and Isbell 2011;
13 Fattore et al. 2016; Peters 2003), we do not advocate any sense of the technical teaching of friendship
14 skills. Such an approach may result in a narrow focus on aspects such as emotional and behavioural
15 self-regulation (Clack, 2012, in Vincent et al., 2016) rather than wider engagement in facilitating and
16 supporting peer relationships and friendships. The danger inherent in a 'teaching' of individual skills
17 approach is that it may lead to situations in which lack of friends becomes a child's personal deficit,
18 rather than a collective responsibility. This may have pertinence in light of the findings in the current
19 research. As noted above, participants may have felt that friendship was a more private domain, in
20 which they played less part than, for example, providing time and space to play, or ensuring children
21 felt safe. However, if that is the case, this may carry with it the risk that responsibility for making and
22 keeping friends falls very heavily on the shoulders of the children themselves.
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31 **Conclusion**

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33 One of the starting points for this project was that, whilst a term like wellbeing is in common use both
34 in society in general and in the context of schools and nurseries, it was not clear whether parents and
35 practitioners shared a common understanding of its meaning when they were discussing the children
36 they cared for. As reported here and in Author et al. (2017), there were many areas of agreement. One
37 of these was the role of friendship, and in that context both parents and practitioners appear to share
38 some ambivalence about its importance. There is, of course, no suggestion that either group neglects
39 the idea of the importance of children's friendships. Rather our evidence suggests that they may not
40 be as convinced about the role of friendship in contrast to, for example, having good family
41 relationships, or feeling safe. This may mean that they are not always clear about why friendship
42 might be important, and what it might mean for young children's wellbeing. In this they may also be
43 somewhat at odds with the children themselves, for whom friendship may be a driving factor in their
44 reasons for going to nursery or school, and for whom it may play an underpinning role in their sense
45 of belonging, connectedness and attachment (Fattore et al., 2016; Kragh-Muller and Isbell, 2011;
46 Murray and Harrison 2005; Peters, 2003)
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57 A sense of wellbeing is, of course, complex, and may be engendered by a range of intertwining
58 factors. Both parents/carers and practitioners here highlighted young children's self-esteem, and sense
59 of feeling good about themselves, as highly crucial to their wellbeing. A range of research (Daniels et
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3 al., 2010; Gauze al., 1996; Lavoie et al., 2007) attests to the reciprocal relationship between self-
4 image and friendship, with one potentially having a positive (and lasting) impact on the other. If this
5 is so, a clear conclusion of this study concerns the necessity for adults around young children to
6 recognize that self-esteem, a factor they prioritise for children's wellbeing, may be sustained and
7 developed by the support they themselves give to the friendships of the children they care for.
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12 **Sensitive observation and recognition of the importance of children's friendships and peer**
13 **relationships needs to be at the forefront of early years practice. The work of a range of researchers**
14 **and practitioners is helpful here, in particular in recognition of the children's own views about the**
15 **adult's role in relation to children's play and peer relationships (Einarsdottir, 2014; Kragh-Muller &**
16 **Isbell, 2011; Peters 2003; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). In these studies the children**
17 **were clear. Adults, they felt, had roles as authorities that could provide information, and enforce rules,**
18 **whilst also acknowledging the children as competent people. They often said that they did not want**
19 **adults to intervene in their play, noting that adults often did so when not knowing the play, or that**
20 **they interrupted their play with routines. The children did want adults to help them find play mates**
21 **and to enter into play groups or to find a place in peer groups. They also wanted adults to play with**
22 **them if they did not have any children to play with or if invited to take part in play or in solving**
23 **issues. The evidence suggests the need for sensitivity on the part of the adult, in which the question is**
24 **not a simple binary of whether to intervene and get involved or not, but rather how to do so (and**
25 **when) in ways that support children's activity, friendships, and sense of personal control.**
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37 In the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, opportunities for young children's spontaneous play outside in
38 their neighbourhoods have diminished (Tovey, 2013). As a result, early childhood and school settings
39 may be particularly crucial in providing sites in which children can make and nurture friendships, and
40 be part of peer-cultures. This adds further urgency to the need for practitioners, in particular, to
41 consider their roles in this respect, and to look at practices, routines, and priorities for children's lives
42 in schools and nurseries. **Along with Carter and Nutbrown (2016), we recommend that more attention**
43 **be given to 'pedagogy for friendships', where adults value and respect young children's friendships,**
44 **have knowledge about these, and, whilst recognising children's agency, prioritise and plan time and**
45 **space for friendships and peer relationships.**
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Appendix A: Excerpts from Parent/carer questionnaire and Practitioner questionnaire

Item 14 (parents/carers) / Item 13 (practitioners)

How important are the following to children's well-being?

Please give each item a rating from 1-10.

1= not important to 10 = very important. You can select the same rating more than once.

Good family relationships		Time and space to play	
Enjoying nursery or school		Experiencing fun and laughter	
Being good at listening to others		A sense of belonging in a community	
Expressing thoughts and feelings		Financial security	
Feeling good about themselves		Feeling listened to	
The company of friends		Enjoying physical activity	
Having religious or moral beliefs			

Other:.....

Items 15-27 (parents/carers) and Items 14–26 (practitioners) followed a similar Likert scale format, with the instruction to:

Please circle the most applicable words to show how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about children's well-being.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree
Strongly Agree

Children's well-being depends on:

Having a good relationship with their parent/carer

Speaking up for themselves

The family having enough money

Feeling safe

Feeling that they are doing well at school or nursery

Being able to cope with challenge

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3 Feeling part of a community

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5 Engaging in play

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7 Having close relationships/friendships

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9 Having a close bond with their keyworker/ practitioner/ teacher/ childminder

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11 Having religious beliefs

12
13 Having good health

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15 A good relationship between parents and childcare professional

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17 Item 28 (parents/carers) and Item 27 (practitioners)

18
19 Please add anything else below that you think children's well-being depends on.

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Peer Review Only