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Perceived maternal disapproval of peer affiliates forecasts child friendship dissolution

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Abstract

Parents who express disapproval of their children's friends presumably do so to disrupt the affiliation. This study examines the efficacy of this practice. Participants included 394 students (200 boys, 194 girls) attending public schools in Lithuania (ages 9–14). Nearly all were ethnic Lithuanian. Three times, across 2 school years, participants completed surveys describing perceptions of friendship social support and maternal disapproval of peer affiliates. Stable reciprocated best friends ($N = 197$) were identified from friend nominations during the Fall and Winter of the initial school year (2021). Approximately one-third of reciprocated friendships later dissolved. Longitudinal dyadic mediation analyses indicated that perceived maternal disapproval of friends predicted subsequent friendship dissolution, directly and indirectly through friend perceptions of declining social support.

Keywords maternal friend disapproval, friend support, friendship dissolution

Lay summary

How do parents influence whether children's friendships last? In this longitudinal study of Lithuanian youth ages 9–14, perceived maternal disapproval of friends predicted a greater likelihood that friendships would end across time. Maternal disapproval was also associated with lower perceived social support in the friendship, which in turn predicted later friendship dissolution. These findings are consistent with the idea that parental disapproval may shape friendship outcomes not only directly but also indirectly by altering relationship processes. The study adds to developmental research on parent involvement in peer relationships by showing that attempts to manage children's friendships may have consequences for both friendship stability and the quality of support children experience with friends.

Many parents do not approve of the company their children keep. Some are not shy about expressing their opinions. Sometimes the grounds for disapproval are apparent: Maternal attempts to manage (a category that includes monitoring, guiding, supporting, and prohibiting) friendships grow in response to problems presented by children (Xiong et al., 2020) and their friends (Tilton-Weaver & Galambos, 2003). One form of peer management has the potential to be particularly disruptive: Expressions of disapproval. What motivates parents to condemn the friendships of their children? Presumably they do so to prompt their children to seek different companions, and, as a consequence, discontinue the disapproved friendship. Which raises the question: Are parent efforts in this regard successful? We don't really know. To learn more, we examined child perceptions of maternal friendship disapproval as a predictor of self- and best friend reports of friendship stability, tracking a sample of 9–14-year-old Lithuanian students over the course of three semesters. We hypothesized that maternal disapproval of friends would anticipate friendship dissolution, directly and indirectly, by undermining participant perceptions of positive features of the affiliation.

Peer management practices are widespread. Almost 2/3 of North American parents reported attempts to manage the peer relationships of their 10- to 14-year-old children (Furstenberg et al., 1999). Rates with which parents express their disapproval of friends are not typically reported, but mean scores often rank above the midpoint, indicating that, in cultures around the world, children and adolescents agree with statements indicating that parents do not shy away from criticizing and condemning

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friendships (e.g., Mounts, 2001; Qin et al., 2025; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2013). These efforts are understandable: Parents seek to steer children away from untoward influence. When children are young, parents control opportunities and contexts for interactions with friends, determining who, where, and how often the child affiliates with out of school (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2019). Across the transition from childhood to adolescence, however, peer interactions increasingly take place outside of the home and away from the watchful eye of adults (Lam et al., 2014). Responding to a developmental uptick in conformity to peers (Laursen & Veenstra, 2023), parents must increasingly rely on indirect control techniques that include sharing opinions about the child's companions and activities, and encouraging, discouraging, and prohibiting affiliations with specific peers.

We focus here on a specific form of peer management practices, namely disapproval of friends. Disapproval encompasses parent efforts to change a child's companions by discouraging specific peers as friends or affiliates, perhaps also prohibiting shared activities and time spent together (Mounts, 2001). Disapproval is distinct from monitoring, which is defined as supervision of and knowledge about child whereabouts and activities. The latter focuses on seeking and sharing information, which can be done in the context of autonomy granting. In contrast, disapproval almost always involves parent intrusion on adolescent autonomy. Two studies of Swedish and Chinese youth indicated that parent management, in general, and disapproval, in particular, were ineffective (and sometimes counterproductive) when it came to friend selection (Qin et al., 2025; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2013), but no studies have examined whether either form of parent involvement undermines ongoing friendships.

Parent disapproval represents a direct form of parent influence, with prohibitions and expressions of concern serving as a proximal cause of friendship dissolution (Mounts, 2001). Several potential scenarios are envisioned. Parents may successfully disrupt friendships by preventing contact, making it difficult or impossible to continue the relationship (Mounts, 2008). Alternatively, children may comply, internalize, or strategically accommodate parental preferences, which can weaken commitment to the disapproved affiliation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2014). Or friends may get wind of parent opinions and decide to abandon the relationship in the face of restrictions and opposition. These scenarios all involve some sort of (forced or voluntary) compliance on the part of children and their friends, acceding to the wishes of parents that the relationship be discontinued (or that contact between parties be discontinued, which also ends the affiliation). Parents exercise more supervision and control over the activities and affiliates of primary school children than of middle school children (Laird et al., 2009), suggesting that the efficacy of direct parent prohibition of peers should decrease across the transition into adolescence.

Direct influence mechanisms are plausible vehicles for successful parent intervention in peer affiliations. But they overlook indirect pathways of influence. Here, we introduce the possibility that parent disapproval undermines friendships by degrading the amount and quality of interactions. Parenting behaviors have demonstrated ties to friendship quality (Ladd & Parke, 2021). Parent–child negativity anticipates friend conflict and diminished support (Cui et al., 2002; Xiang et al., 2023). It is not unreasonable to suspect, therefore, that parent disapproval may have a similarly pernicious impact. Several prospects come to mind. Parent disapproval may prevent interactions between friends, removing opportunities for fun and creating an environment in which it is difficult for the friendship to thrive (Mounts, 2008). Disapproval can restrict opportunities for contact, heighten negative affect surrounding the friendship, and increase dyadic friction. Parents may succeed in changing attitudes toward friends or plant doubts about friend motives, causing children to revise perceptions of the relationship downward. Friends who are less-than-welcome at home may be uncomfortable when visiting, undermining the quality of shared time. Subterfuge may be required to see friends and opportunities for engagement may be limited (Baudat et al., 2022), reducing companionship and shared enjoyment. Restrictions may create conflict, as partners object to parent accusations and express frustrations with cumbersome constraints that interfere with activities previously shared (Kaniušonytė & Laursen, 2024). These instances, and more, describe how parental disapproval has the potential to undermine positive, rewarding features of a friendship. In that youth increasingly view choices about affiliates and activities as personal decisions outside the purview of parent dictates (Smetana & Rote, 2019), prohibitions may be particularly harmful to the quality of friendships during adolescence, when parent interference is both unwelcome and off-putting.

Our indirect effects model encompasses two steps, hinging on friendship social support: Parent disapproval of a friendship undermines positive features of the affiliation, which in turn, starves the relationship of the benefits it needs to survive, precipitating disruption. Social support encompasses intimacy, loyalty, affirmation, instrumental assistance, affection, companionship, self-disclosure, and nurturance. The friendship process model (Fehr, 1996) holds that perceived social support is central to friendship maintenance because the provision of support bind friends together, increasing relationship satisfaction (Oswald, 2017). We do not know whether parent prohibition impacts friendship experiences, but we do know that low quality adolescent friendships are less stable than high quality friendships (Hiatt et al., 2015). The perceived absence of relationship support has been linked prospectively to divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000) and retrospectively to young adult friendship dissolution (Johnson et al., 2004). During the transition into adolescence, close friends are exclusive sources of many interpersonal rewards (Laursen & Hartup, 2002), suggesting that social support may play a greater role in friendship stability during the middle school than during the primary school years.

This study examines the impact of maternal disapproval on the continuity of child and young adolescent friendships. To this end, we examined whether perceived maternal disapproval of friends at the outset of and mid-way through the school year undermines the stability of a friendship across the remainder of the school year and into next. We hypothesized that perceived maternal disapproval directly anticipates friendship dissolution, such that greater disapproval decreases the subsequent likelihood that partners remain friends. We also hypothesized that friend social support is a product of perceived maternal disapproval and a predictor of friendship dissolution: Perceived maternal disapproval was expected to drive down friend social support and low friend social support was expected to increase friendship instability. Finally, we hypothesized an indirect, mediated pathway, with perceived maternal disapproval degrading friend support to the point where dissolution follows. Our longitudinal analyses build

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on previous findings from this sample that (a) tie maternal disapproval to child conduct problems (Kaniušonytė et al., 2022) and (b) link perceptions of friend social support to relationship stability (Faur et al., 2024). We focus on the late childhood and early adolescent years, a time of rapid social change marked by the growing salience of peer relationships (Veenstra & Laninga-Wijnen, 2023). We examine grade in school as a potential moderator, to explore the possibility that (a) disapproval has less of a direct impact on friendship stability with age, as parent supervision declines (Laird et al., 2009), but (b) disapproval has more of an indirect impact on friendship stability with age, primarily because of increased expectations for social support (Laursen & Hartup, 2002; Veenstra & Laninga-Wijnen, 2023). In this regard, we contrasted primary and middle school students, given the differences in youth autonomy that accompany diminished adult supervision at the transition into middle school.

Method

Participants

Participants included 394 (194 girls and 200 boys) students attending seven public schools in a mid-sized community in Lithuania. The sample included 106 primary school (fourth grade; range = 9–10 years old) students and 288 middle school (fifth to seventh grade; range = 10–14 years old) students. Of this total, 288 lived with two biological parents; the remainder reported other arrangements (56 in single-parent households, 45 in step-parent households, and 5 with grandparents). Nearly all families were ethnic Lithuanian.

Students attended all classes with the same peers. Teachers rotated between classes in middle school. Most (92.9%) remained in the same class with the same peers from one school year to the next; the remainder ($n = 28$) moved to a different class. The same pattern of statistically significant results emerged when the latter were omitted from the analyses.

Procedure

In this community sample, all students enrolled in all classes in all target grades in all schools in town were invited to participate. To this end, invitations were sent to the parents of 1,154 students from 45 classes in 4 primary schools (Grade 4) and 3 middle schools (Grades 5, 6, and 7). Written parent consent and child assent were required for participation. Classroom participation rates averaged 64.8% ($SD = 12.1$).

Trained research assistants administered surveys to students on computer tablets in a quiet school setting. The same surveys were administered three times in three different semesters across two consecutive academic years: (a) Fall (October) 2021; (b) Winter (February) 2022; and (c) Fall (October) 2022.

Measures were translated from English to Lithuanian by a bilingual team of research assistants, then back-translated by a separate team. Differences were resolved by discussion. The study was approved by the university ethics committee (#6/-2020). The study was not preregistered.

Measures

All items for each self-report variable are listed in Table S1.

Friendship

At each time point, participants identified up to five rank-ordered best friends (e.g., Who is your first best friend? Who is your second best friend?) from a class roster. Same- and other-sex nominations were permitted. *Reciprocated friends* were dyads in which both partners concurrently nominated one another as friends. *Reciprocated best friends* were dyads in which at least one partner in a reciprocated friend dyad nominated the other as a first- or second-ranked best friend. *Stable reciprocated best friends* were dyads in which both partners nominated one another as first- or second-ranked best friends at Time 1 (October 2021) and Time 2 (February 2022). We focused on dyads that were stable reciprocated best friends at Times 1 and 2 so we could examine Time 2 social support as a mediator of associations from Time 1 maternal disapproval to Time 3 dissolution. *Best friendship dissolution* occurred when one or both members of a stable reciprocated best friend dyad failed to nominate the other as a friend at Time 3 (October 2022). Time 3 Friendship dissolution was coded 0 = remained reciprocated friends, 1 = no longer reciprocated friends.

Of the 712 students who completed surveys at Time 1 (October 2021), a total of 595 were involved in at least one reciprocated friendship with a study participant at Time 1, resulting in 662 reciprocated friend dyads. To be included in the final model, at least one partner had to be nominated as a first- or second-ranked best friend at Time 1 (October 2021) and Time 2 (February 2022), a prerequisite arising from the fact that friend support data were only collected about two top-ranked best friends. Consequently, 158 friend dyads were omitted because neither partner ranked the other as a first or second best friend at Time 1 (October 2021); an additional 173 dyads were omitted because neither partner ranked the other as a first or second best friend at Time 2 (February 2022). Some students participated in more than one stable friendship ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.22$). To prevent unequal individual contributions to the data, participants were restricted to a single stable reciprocated best friend dyad. Highest-ranked friends were selected. As a result, 67 students in 127 friend dyads were omitted because their best friends participated in other stable reciprocated best friend dyads. Finally, seven stable reciprocated other-sex best friend dyads were omitted from the analyses; the same pattern of statistically significant results emerged when they were included. The final sample involved in 197 stable reciprocated same-sex best friend dyads ($n = 97$ female dyads, $n = 100$ male dyads).

Friend social support

At Time 1 (October 2021) and Time 2 (February 2022), participants completed 5 items from the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) describing perceptions of *friend social support*. Relationships with first and second ranked friends, listed by name, were assessed with separate items, rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*never true*) to 5 (*always true*). For each friend, item scores were averaged. Internal reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.85$–0.86).

Perceived maternal disapproval of friends

At Time 1 (October 2021) and Time 2 (February 2022), participants completed five items from the Parental Management of Peers Inventory (Mounts, 2001), which assessed perceptions of maternal disapproval and prohibition of peer relationships. Items were

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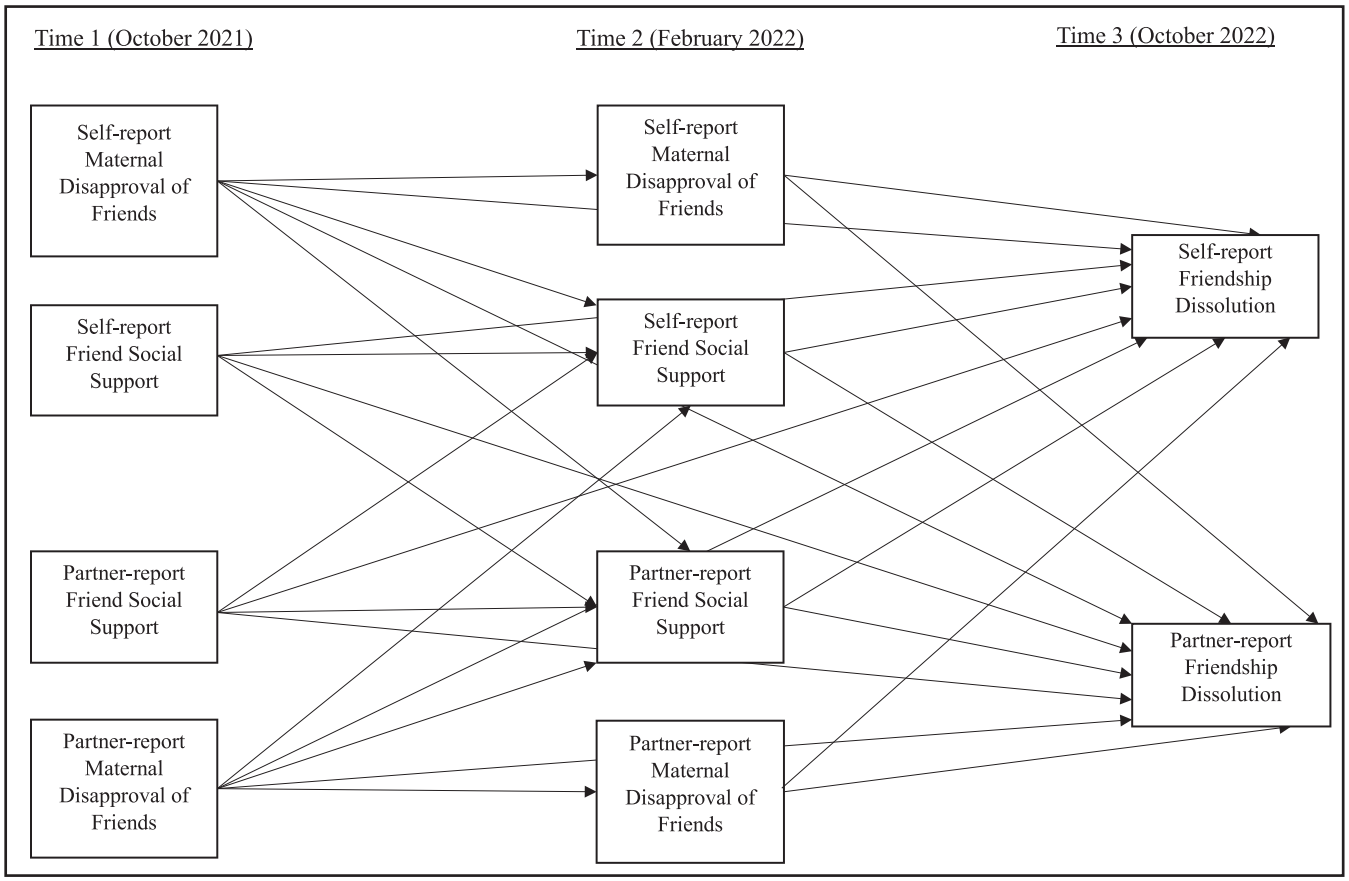


Figure 1 Analytic model depicting maternal disapproval of friends and perceived friend social support as predictors of friendship dissolution. *Notes.* Concurrent correlations were included in the model but are not depicted. Four indirect effect paths were also included in the model but are not depicted: 1) Time 1 (October 2021) self-report maternal disapproval of friends→Time 2 (February 2022) self-report friend social support→Time 3 (October 2022) self-report friendship dissolution, 2) Time 1 (October 2021) self-report maternal disapproval of friends→Time 2 (February 2022) self-report friend social support→Time 3 (October 2022) partner-report friendship dissolution, 3) Time 1 (October 2021) self-report maternal disapproval of friends→Time 2 (February 2022) partner-report friend social support→Time 3 (October 2022) self-report friendship dissolution, and 4) Time 1 (October 2021) self-report maternal disapproval of friends→Time 2 (February 2022) partner-report friend social support→Time 3 (October 2022) partner-report friendship dissolution. *Friend social support* describes the individual's rating of the quality of the relationship with the partner. *Maternal disapproval of friends* describes the individual's rating of the behavior of their own mother.

rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Item scores were averaged. Internal reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.85–0.87$).

Potentially confounding variables

Supplemental analyses included variables known to correlate with friend social support and perceived maternal disapproval of friends, to isolate the effects of the constructs of interest. Participants completed four items from the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) describing perceptions of *friend negativity* and four items describing perceptions of *maternal negativity*. Internal reliabilities were acceptable ($\alpha = 0.82–0.92$).

Plan of analysis

Primary analyses

An Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006) for indistinguishable dyads, modified for longitudinal data (Laursen et al., 2008) and dichotomous outcomes (Spain et al., 2012) was conducted in Mplus v8.6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) using a Bayesian structural equation modeling framework with two-chain Markov Monte Carlo algorithms. Significant paths are identified when $p < .05$ and the 95% credible interval does not cross 0. Effects are considered marginally significant when $p < .05$ but the 95% credible interval crosses 0 (Gelman et al., 2013). Hypothesized direct and indirect effects were examined in the same model (Figure 1).

The APIM partitions the variance shared across partners on the same variables from variance that describes associations within and between partners. Within-dyad equality constraints, reflecting the interchangeable nature of partners, were imposed on within-individual predictive paths (i.e., self→self paths were fixed to be equal to commensurate partner→partner paths), between-individual predictive paths (i.e., self→partner paths were fixed to be equal to commensurate partner→self paths), within- and between-individual correlations, as well as on the means, intercepts, variances, and residual variances of friend social support scores. Additional stability constraints were included (i.e., Time 1 self→Time 3 self and Time 2 self→Time 3 self, Time 1 self→Time 3 partner and Time 2 self→Time 3 partner). The addition of constraints improved model fit, $\chi^2(17) = 29.85$, $p = .03$. A posterior predictive *p*-value (PPP) above.05 and a posterior predictive checking

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credible interval (CI) that includes a negative lower limit and a positive upper limit indicates acceptable model fit (Muthén & Asparouhov, 2012). Visual inspection of trace plots and statistical tests of the potential scale reduction factor (PSR < 1.05) were utilized to assess model convergence.

Two sets of analyses were conducted. The first model tested hypothesized direct effects. In the second model, a full longitudinal mediation design was employed to test hypothesized indirect effects (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2012). Figure 1 depicts the analytic model. We focus first on three sets of hypothesized direct effects: (a) Time 1 (October 2021) and Time 2 (February 2022) perceived maternal friend disapproval→Time 3 (October 2022) friendship dissolution; (b) Time 1 (October 2021) perceived maternal friend disapproval→Time 2 (February 2022) friend social support; and (c) Time 1 (October 2021) and Time 2 (February 2022) friend social support→Time 3 (October 2022) friendship dissolution.

Hypothesized indirect effects described longitudinal associations from self- and partner-reported maternal disapproval of friends to self- and partner-reported friendship dissolution through self- and partner-reported friend social support. One set of indirect paths predicted friendship dissolution: Time 1 (October 2021) perceived maternal disapproval of friends→Time 2 (February 2022) friend social support→Time 3 (October 2022) friendship dissolution. All indirect effects were tested simultaneously.

Intraclass correlations (ρ) identified the proportion of variance in predictor and outcome variables that could be attributed to the grouping structure (i.e., classrooms). Low within classroom ICCs (ρ = 0.07–0.08) indicated minimal variation between classrooms (Hox, 1998), suggesting that nestedness did not bias results.

Supplemental analyses

Two sets of supplemental analyses were conducted. First, multiple group contrasts examined whether direct and indirect paths differed as a function of school grade (primary school [fourth grade] vs. middle school [fifth to seventh grade]). Next, to rule out the possibility that associations were driven by unobserved variables friend negativity and maternal negativity were separately included as Time 1 (October 2021) and Time 2 (February 2022) concurrent covariates.

Missing data

Little's MCAR test indicated that social support and perceived maternal friend disapproval data were missing completely at random at Time 1 (October 2021), $\chi^2(201) = 212.83$, $p = .270$ and Time 2 (February 2022), $\chi^2(255) = 273.12$, $p = .208$. Missing item level data (range = 2.1–20.5%) were imputed with an EM (expectation-maximization) algorithm with 25 iterations. Participants completed friend social support for two top-ranked best friends only. A total of 64 participants at Time 1 (October 2021) and 52 at Time 2 (February 2022) had wave-level missing data on friend social support because they were paired with lower ranked friends. Finally, 28 students moved classes between Time 2 (February 2022) and Time 3 (October 2022), resulting in wave-level missingness on friend nominations. FIML (full information maximum-likelihood estimation) was applied to wave-level missing data.

Power

Power analyses were conducted using Monte Carlo simulations with 1,000 replications (Muthén & Muthén, 2002). There was adequate (80%) power to detect large (β = 0.50) and medium (β = 0.30) but not small (β = 0.10) direct and indirect effects and multiple group contrast differences on direct and indirect effects (see Table S2).

Results

Preliminary analyses

Nonindependence, a precondition for dyadic analyses, was identified with concurrent intraclass correlations (ICC). There were statistically significant ($p < .01$) positive within-dyad ICC (interpreted as r^2) for perceived friend social support (Time 1 [October 2021] ICC = .27, Time 2 [February 2022] ICC = .15) and perceived maternal disapproval of friends (Time 1 [October 2021] ICC = .41, Time 2 [February 2022] ICC = .35).

Table 1 presents concurrent (i.e., within Time 1 [October 2021] and within Time 2 [February 2022]) interclass correlations for the main study variables. Autocorrelations were statistically significant ($p < .01$); self-reported maternal disapproval of friendships and self-reported friend social support were not significantly correlated.

Intraclass correlations (ρ) identified the proportion of variance in predictor and outcome variables that could be attributed to the grouping structure (i.e., classrooms). Low within classroom ICCs (ρ = 0.07–0.08) indicated minimal variation between classrooms (Hox, 1998), suggesting that nestedness did not bias results.

To identify age-group differences on study variables, we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA, with one randomly selected member of each best friend dyad. Perceived friend social support and perceived maternal disapproval of friends were the dependent variables. Time was the repeated measure. Grade (primary school [fourth grade], middle school (fifth to seventh grade]) was the between-subjects variable. There was a statistically significant main effect of time for friend social support, $F(1, 66) = 8.49$, $p < .01$, which was qualified with a time × grade interaction, $F(1, 66) = 4.38$, $p = .04$. Primary school students reported significantly more friend social support at Time 1 (October 2021) than at Time 2 (February 2022) ($d = 1.03$), whereas the decline in social support for middle school students failed to reach statistical significance ($d = 0.20$). There was also a statistically significant main effect of grade for perceived maternal disapproval of friends, $F(1, 66) = 4.92$, $p = .03$, such that middle school students reported more perceived maternal disapproval of friends than primary school students ($d = 0.62$).

Table 1 Interclass correlations, means, and standard deviations.

Variable	1	2	Mean (*SD*)
1. Perceived maternal friend disapproval	.43** [.36, .51]	−.02 [−.08, .05]	2.16 (1.19)
2. Friend social support	−.06 [−.14, .01]	.43** [.33, .53]	4.08 (0.97)
Mean (*SD*)	2.16 (1.16)	4.30 (0.74)	

Note. $N = 394$. Time 1 (October 2021) results presented below the diagonal; Time 2 (February 2022) results presented above the diagonal. Autocorrelations presented on the diagonal. **$p < .01$

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Table 2 Direct and indirect associations from perceived maternal disapproval of friends and friend support to friendship dissolution.

	Outcome variables				
	Time 2			Time 3	Time 3
Time 1/Time 2 Predictor variables	Self-report maternal friend disapproval	Time 2 Self-report social support	Time 2 Partner-report social support	Self-report friendship dissolution	Partner-report friendship dissolution
Direct effects					
Time 1 Self-report maternal friend disapproval	.49*** [.42, .56]	.04 [−.03, .11]	−.09** [.−.16, −.03]	.04* [<.01, .08]	.02 [−.02, .06]
Time 1 Self-report social support	—	.50*** [.43, .56]	.01 [−.08, .08]	−.05** [−.09, −.01]	−.04* [−.08, −.01]
Time 2 Self-report maternal friend disapproval				.04* [<.01, .08]	.02 [−.02, .06]
Time 2 Self-report social support				−.05** [−.09, −.02]	−.05** [−.09, −.01]
R^2	.23** [.19, .30]	.25** [.20, .31]	.26** [.20, .31]	.03** [.01, .05]	.03** [.01, .05]
Indirect effects					
T1 Self-report maternal friend disapproval → T2 Self-report Social Support				−.002 [−.007, .001]	−.002 [−.007, .001]
T1 Self-report maternal friend disapproval → T2 Partner-report social support				.004* [.001, .011]	.005* [.001, .011]

Note. $N = 197$ reciprocated same-sex best friend dyads. Standardized beta weights presented with 95% credible intervals in brackets. Time 1 = October 2021, Time 2 = February 2022, Time 3 = October 2022. Self-reports of friend social support and maternal disapproval of friends were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). Friend dissolution was coded as: 0 = remained friends, 1 = friendship dissolved. Constraints were included within-individual predictive paths (i.e., self→self paths were fixed to be equal to commensurate partner→partner paths) and between-individual predictive paths (i.e., self→partner paths were fixed to be equal to commensurate partner→self paths). *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

Of the initial 197 reciprocated best friend dyads that were stable from Time 1 (October 2021) to Time 2 (February 2022), (74.1%) remained reciprocated friends at Time 3 (October 2022). A one-way chi-square test indicated that rates of best friendship dissolution did not differ as a function of grade (primary [fourth grade] vs. middle [fifth to seventh grade]), $\chi^2(1) = 2.29$, $p = .13$.

Direct longitudinal associations from perceived maternal disapproval of friends to friend social support and friendship dissolution

Model fit for the direct effects model was adequate: PPP = .89, 95% CI [−47.21, 11.33], PSR < 1.05. The top half of Table 2 presents results for the hypothesized direct effects.

There were statistically significant associations from Time 1 (October 2021) and Time 2 (February 2022) self-reported maternal disapproval of friends to Time 3 (October 2022) self-reported friendship dissolution (β = .04). Thus, within partners, greater initial perceived maternal disapproval of friends predicted higher rates of subsequent friendship dissolution. Between-partner associations (Time 1 [October 2021] and Time 2 [February 2022] self-reported maternal disapproval of friends to Time 3 [October 2022] partner-reported friendship dissolution) were not statistically significant.

There were statistically significant associations from Time 1 (October 2021) self-reported maternal disapproval of friends to Time 2 (February 2022) partner-reported friend social support (β = −.09). Thus, between partners, one friend's greater initial perceived maternal friend disapproval of friends predicted decreases in the other friend's perceptions of friend social support. Within-partner associations (Time 1 [October 2021] self-reported maternal disapproval of friends to Time 2 [February 2022] self-reported friend social support) were not statistically significant.

Finally, there were statistically significant associations from Time 1 (October 2021) and Time 2 (February 2022) self-reported friend social support to Time 3 (October 2022) self- and partner reported friendship dissolution (β = −.04 to −.05). Thus, between and within partners, lower initial perceived friend social support predicted higher rates of subsequent friendship dissolution.

Indirect longitudinal associations from perceived maternal disapproval of friends to friendship dissolution via friend social support

Model fit for the indirect effects model was adequate: PPP = .92, 95% CI [−49.16, 9.27], PSR < 1.05. The bottom half of Table 2 presents the results for the hypothesized indirect effects.

There was a statistically significant indirect effect for Time 1 (October 2021) self-reported maternal disapproval of friends to Time 3 (October 2022) self-reported friendship dissolution through Time 2 (February 2022) partner-reported friend social support (β = .004). There was also a statistically significant

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indirect effect for Time 1 (October 2021) self-reported maternal disapproval of friends to Time 3 (October 2022) partner-reported dissolution through Time 2 (February 2022) partner-reported friend social support (β = .005). Thus, partner perceptions of social support mediated the longitudinal association from initial self-reported maternal disapproval of friends and subsequent self- and partner-reported friendship dissolution. The indirect effect for fully within-partner associations (Time 1 [October 2021] self-reported maternal disapproval of friends to Time 3 [October 2022] self-reported friendship dissolution through Time 2 [February 2022] self-reported friend social support) were not statistically significant. Additionally, the indirect effect for Time 1 (October 2021) self-reported maternal disapproval of friends to Time 3 (October 2022) partner-reported friendship dissolution through Time 2 (February 2022) self-reported friend social support was not statistically significant.

Supplemental analyses

Multiple group contrasts examined whether direct and indirect effect paths differed as a function of grade (primary school [fourth grade] vs. middle school [fifth to seventh grades]). There were no statistically significant grade differences on direct effect paths [*Wald*(1) = .05–3.64, $p = .06–.83$], with two exceptions. First, the Time 1 (October 2021) self-reported maternal disapproval of friends→Time 2 (February 2022) partner-reported friend social support path was stronger for primary school dyads (β = −.16, $p = .001$) than middle school dyads (β = −.08, $p = .008$), *Wald*(1) = 5.16, $p = .02$; and 2). Second, the Time 2 (February 2022) self-reported friend social support→Time 3 (October 2022) partner-reported dissolution path was stronger for middle school dyads (β = −.15, $p = .004$) than primary school dyads (β = −.03, $p = .34$), *Wald*(1) = 4.43, $p = .04$. There were no statistically significant grade differences on any indirect effect paths, *Wald*(1) = .20–2.97, $p = .09–.66$. In additional analyses, friend negativity and maternal negativity were separately included as concurrent covariates. The same pattern of statistically significant results emerged when each was included as a concurrent covariate, with one exception: Time 1 (October 2021) and Time 2 (February 2022) self-reported maternal disapproval of friends to Time 3 (October 2022) self-reported friendship dissolution became marginally significant, $p = .02$, 95% CI [−.01, .07] when maternal negativity was the covariate.

Discussion

Our inquiry starts from the assumption that parents express disapproval of friends with the goal of disrupting the affiliation. Herein we examine whether this assumption is warranted and, if so, how disapproval might effectuate relationship disintegration. We found that forbidden friends often become former friends. Specifically, longitudinal dyadic analyses revealed that perceived maternal disapproval of friendships that were stable across the first half of the school year directly predicted subsequent self- (but not friend) reports of friendship dissolution eight months later. Further, perceived maternal disapproval at the outset of the school year precipitated later friendship dissolution indirectly, by driving down partner perceptions of support within the friendship, which undercut the foundations of the affiliation. Taken together, the results indicate that maternal friendship disapproval is an effective means of intervening against unwelcome peer affiliates.

The present study is the first to explore the efficacy of parent disapproval as a relationship disruptor. The direct paths suggest that children discontinue friendships in response to the opinions, expressed or intuited, of mothers. We can only speculate as to how this might unfold. Youth might be persuaded by parental arguments, voluntarily quitting the affiliation and (perhaps) replacing it with another (Mounts, 2001). Equally likely, the affiliation may conclude involuntarily, suffocated by parental restrictions. Either way, the findings suggest that parents successfully disrupt censured affiliations. It is worth noting that partners were not similarly responsive to disapproval from the parents of friends. The absence of statistically significant findings from parent disapproval to partner reports of friendship dissolution suggests that friends do not retreat from the affiliation in response to a hostile or frosty reception from parents. Perhaps instead children respond to maternal disapproval by mentally downgrading the affiliation, a message that some friends may be slow to receive. Alternatively, partners may cling to the affiliation as a means of defying or pushing back against rejection by a friend's parent.

This study is also the first to identify an interpersonal mechanism through which parent disapproval disrupts child friendships. The indirect paths suggest that partners may detect shifts in relationship quality that follow disapproval by a friend's mothers. Maternal opinions may make friends feel unwelcome and restrictions may interfere with shared activities (Cook et al., 2012); both limit positive features of the affiliation which, in turn, increase the likelihood of friendship dissolution. Even in circumstances where disapproval does not increase restrictions, maternal attitudes may result in hurt feelings that impact a friend more than the child (who may be accustomed to unwelcome parent opinions). Alternatively, youth may unconsciously withdraw and disengage from friends in response to maternal disapproval; when friends detect these subtle shifts in engagement, they report declining support (Madsen & Collins, 2018). Youth with disapproving mothers may engage in social shopping, seeking alternative interaction partners who could potentially replace existing friends (Tilton-Weaver et al., 2013). This too would be off-putting. Finally, some youth may resist parent demands to discontinue an affiliation, potentially precipitating conflict discernable by partners. In so doing, they may refuse (or be unable) to recognize the damage that parent disapproval inflicts upon the friendship. Interestingly (and unexpectedly), children did not report declining friend social support in response to their own mother's perceived disapproval. Mothers are successful at effecting friendship change, but not by changing the child's views about the friendship. Taken together, the findings suggest that maternal disapproval makes the affiliation increasingly unpalatable for the child's friend, which eventually precipitates its demise.

Parents who view these results as good news should be alert to the possible untoward consequences of their well-intended intervention. Longitudinal findings tie parent friend disapproval and prohibition to increasing involvement with deviant peers (Keijsers et al., 2012), mounting defiance against parental rules (Vansteenkiste et al., 2014), and rising levels of delinquency (Mounts, 2001; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2013) and conduct problems (Kaniušonytė et al., 2022). In part, this happens because intervention by parents in the peer relations of children leads to peer rejection and alienation, which exacerbates adjustment difficulties (Kaniušonytė & Laursen, 2024). The dissolution of a friendship can put a child in a precarious position; there is no guarantee that

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children who lose friends will gain new or better ones. Youth with few friends are more susceptible to peer influence than those with several friends (Faur et al., 2023). Friendless children are particularly vulnerable. Some who seek new friends may have little choice but to select from a troubled pool of agemates, raising the prospect that the replacements may be more objectionable than the original.

Some may be unfamiliar with Lithuania and hesitant to generalize from this sample. Adjacent to Poland and across the Baltic Sea from Sweden, Lithuania has been a member of NATO and the European Union for more than two decades. Economic prosperity followed liberation from the Soviet Union. Over time, peer culture, values, and experiences have become aligned with those of youth in other Western European nations (Kaniušonytė & Žukauskienė, 2018). Like their Northern European counterparts, young adolescents in Lithuania enjoy considerable freedom of movement (Žukauskienė, 2016), and like their Eastern European counterparts, the parents of Lithuanian children prefer traditional parenting practices (Maslauskaitė & Steinbach, 2020, pp. 215–234). Numerous studies from this dataset have failed to identify meaningful differences between U.S. students and Lithuanian students in peer status, adjustment outcomes, classroom norms, and associations between them (Katulis et al., 2025; Leggett-James et al., 2023), bolstering confidence in the generalizability of our conclusions. Friend selection effects are an exception (Selover et al., 2025), stronger in middle school in the United States than in Lithuania, probably because U.S. youth, with different peers in different classes, have more options for friends than Lithuanian youth, who keep the same peers across the school day. The implications of this difference for the findings from the present study are far from clear.

Several limitations that warrant mention. First, participants could only nominate classmates as friends. Out-of-class friends were not included, which may have diminished the magnitude of the effects given that delinquent adolescents tend to affiliate with delinquent (and likely disapproved) mates in nonclass settings (Persson et al., 2007). Second, some might argue that our exclusive reliance on child reports to measure friend disapproval is a limitation, although a case can be made that the impact of parenting depends more on how the child perceives and interprets the actions of the parent than on how the parent reports them (Stattin & Kerr, 2000), particularly given that child and mother reports of friend management are, at best, only weakly correlated (Mounts, 2007). Third, relatedly, child reports of maternal disapproval were not relationship specific. Almost certainly this added error, because some mothers may only disapprove of some friends, who may or may not have been included in the study. Fourth, our sample encompassed 9- to 13-year olds. Concerns about expanding autonomy and the right to make independent decisions about friends grow across the second decade of life (Smetana & Rote, 2019), suggesting that our results may underestimate the adverse impact of perceived maternal friend disapproval during the mid- and late adolescent years. Finally, power to detect small effects was limited, suggesting that the analyses may have failed to capture some hypothesized direct and indirect effects.

Maternal friend disapproval is an effective strategy for disrupting friendships, but we emphasize that this perceived short-term gain may be outweighed by long-term costs. Alternative strategies for countering negative peer influence should be considered. First and foremost, parents should avoid behaviors that risk estrangement from children, because poor quality relationships are rarely influential. It is hard to imagine circumstances in which conflict over peer affiliates does not interfere with the maintenance of warm, supportive parent-child relationships. Furthermore, parents should recognize that warmth and support can be effective buffers against untoward peer pressure in academic (e.g., Marion et al., 2013) and behavioral arenas (e.g., Havewala et al., 2021), potentially disrupting the downward spiral of peer problems and adjustment difficulties (e.g., Rudolph et al., 2020). Seen in this light, parents may wish to refrain from heavy-handed interventions in the friendships of their children, opting instead for creating conditions that encourage the formation of healthy peer relationships.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Child Development* online.

Data availability

The data necessary to reproduce the analyses presented here are not publicly accessible. The analytic code necessary to reproduce the analyses presented in this paper is not publicly accessible. The materials necessary to attempt to replicate the findings presented here are publicly accessible in the Supplementary Material. The analyses presented here were not preregistered.

Author contributions

Goda Kaniušonyte (Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing—original draft [equal]), Mary Page Leggett-James (Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing [equal]), and Brett Laursen (Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing—review & editing [equal])

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare none.

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