

A friend who's more boss than BFF may be harmful for teens' mental health

March 22 2023, by Hannah L. Schacter, Adam Hoffman and Alexandra Ehrhardt



If one friend is always the boss, the other friend may suffer. [Priscilla Du Preez/Unsplash](#), [CC BY](#)

Teens with domineering friends are at heightened risk for mental health problems, according to our new research published in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

Dominant friends often harness decision-making power—for instance,

dictating which classmates their friends should follow on Instagram. They can also exert behavioral control, like by making the subordinate friend go to a party they don't want to attend.

Friendships are extremely [important relationships](#) for [teens](#), but are they always a positive influence? [We are psychology researchers](#) interested in the potential psychological consequences of having dominant friends. We suspected that being part of this kind of friendship with a peer might make adolescents feel worthless or distressed.

To investigate, we surveyed 388 adolescents at U.S. high schools five times across one year. Each time, we asked our teen participants to answer questions about their close friends' dominating behaviors: Do they make all the decisions? Do they always get their way?

Consistent with our predictions, we found that when adolescents felt powerless in their [close friendships](#)—like their friends always "called the shots"—they experienced lower self-esteem and more symptoms of depression or anxiety.

Adolescence is a [high-risk time](#) for the onset of psychological disorders; rates of depression and anxiety tend to rise during the teenage years. Supportive and equitable [friendships](#) can [positively affect teen mental health](#), but our new research reveals a potential dark side to some close friendships.

Although some teens might be OK going with the flow and letting their friends take the reins, our study found some of the first evidence that this kind of [unequal relationship can be psychologically harmful](#). Healthy friendships should offer both partners opportunities to have a say and make decisions.

Our findings suggest that it's important to teach teens how to establish

healthy, equitable friendships. One friend shouldn't consistently feel bossed around or powerless. Also, [adolescents](#) may benefit from receiving help in developing effective communication tools for asserting their wants and needs to their close friends.

There is still a lot to learn about how power dynamics in friendships affect teen mental health. For example, is it better to have dominant friends than no friends at all? Does having several supportive [friends](#) negate the harm of having one dominant friend? And are there reasons some teens might be more likely than others to end up in these lopsided friendships? For example, it's possible that personality plays a role, with more introverted teens gravitating toward more assertive peers, and vice versa.

We also need to learn more about the best ways to effectively intervene. Many programs are designed to promote [healthy teen romantic relationships](#), but far fewer address healthy teen friendships. Recognizing that friendships are not unequivocally protective is an important first step in helping teens reap their benefits and avoid their costs.

More information: Hannah L. Schacter et al, The Power Dynamics of Friendship: Between- and Within- Person Associations among Friend Dominance, Self-Esteem, and Adolescent Internalizing Symptoms, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10964-023-01763-0](#)

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