Announcer:

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program, keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap:

One of the most important relationships in the life of tweens and teens is friendship. Having good friends and feeling a sense of belonging are crucial for a child’s development and identity formation.

How can tweens and teens foster positive friendships? Is there a way to encourage friendships across ethnic differences? I’m Emily Yeap.

To find out, [Dr. Leslie Echols](https://search.missouristate.edu/people/leslieechols) of Missouri State University and Dr. Jerreed Ivanich of the University of Colorado conducted a study with middle school students. They used the 36 questions activity known as Fast Friends.

Echols, an associate professor of [psychology](https://psychology.missouristate.edu/) who researches peer relations particularly in the school setting, joins me today to share more about the study.

Dr. Leslie Echols:

I attended a conference several years ago where I heard a researcher talk about this Fast Friends approach with a college sample. They had grouped college students together and had them participate in these question and answer tasks where the questions became increasingly personal, and the students got to know each other really well and I was fascinated by this idea that you could experimentally induce friendships.

At the time, I was doing bullying and victimization research and so I wanted to use that methodology to see if I could actually reduce bullying and victimization by pairing students together and trying to promote or induce these friendships. So, I did a pilot study, and nothing really came of it, so I thought, “Well maybe I should take a step back and actually use it for what it was designed to do, and then from there maybe make some modifications.” And so, the Fast Friends study that I did, was actually closer to the original study that had been done by these other researchers with a college sample. But I adapted the questions to be appropriate for middle school students, still try to make the questions personal and relevant.

Emily Yeap:

Echols conducted this study in a local middle school.

Dr. Leslie Echols:

There were about 150 7th graders and 150 8th graders. I worked with one classroom at a time. So, I would spend a whole day at a school and students in the same – it happened to be their science class – would work together on this activity once a month for three months.

There were 18 questions that each student asked their partner, so altogether there were 36 questions. They were paired with a particular partner for each of those three sessions. Their partners stayed the same. And so, they would take turns and there were two of these question and answer sessions. So, in each session, the questions became more personal. In the second session, they started out a little more personal than they started in the first session. And then, the third session they actually did tower building task together so that they would be working toward a common goal competing against other groups.

Emily Yeap:

What types of questions did the students ask each other?

Dr. Leslie Echols:

The questions started with some basic facts. Simple things like favorite foods or favorite dessert, favorite places to eat in town, favorite present that you had ever received, worst haircut ever … just kind of silly but fun questions. And the more personal questions included things like what is something you might do differently than your parents did, or personal things about the way they were raised that maybe they didn’t necessarily agree with.

The conversations were very interesting. As I moved around the room, most of the students really shared a lot of personal details about their lives and found out a lot of things that they had in common that they didn’t realize before.

An important aspect of this study is that most of these kids had gone to school together since kindergarten, but they were partnered with someone who was the same gender but who they didn’t know very well and didn’t currently consider a friend. And then, half of the participants were paired up with a same-race partner and the other, approximately half, were paired up with a cross-race partner because one of the purposes of the study was to see if cross-race friendships could be induced as easily as same-race friendships because the literature suggested cross-race friendships are a little more difficult to form. And so, I wanted to test out that question experimentally.

Emily Yeap:

That was Dr. Leslie Echols, associate professor of psychology at Missouri State. Tune in next Tuesday for the second in a two-part series about this study to discover its findings.

I’m Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer:

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