Announcer:

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

Emily Yeap:

Positive friendships helps children and youth develop their sense of identity and social skills.

What are some effective ways to cultivate friendships, especially in a school setting? How can cross-race friendships be encouraged? I’m Emily Yeap.

Last week on the Missouri State Journal, psychologist [Dr. Leslie Echols](https://search.missouristate.edu/people/leslieechols) talked about a recent collaborative study she worked on about building friendships among middle school students.

Echols, an associate professor of [psychology](https://psychology.missouristate.edu/) at Missouri State, is back with me again today to highlight what the study revealed.

Dr. Leslie Echols:

The main finding was that the partners felt a lot closer to each other and considered each other more of a friend at the end of the study compared to the beginning of the study. The question and answer tasks seem to increase closeness and friendship more than that last task where they were just working together toward a common goal. That seemed to be more effective, actual interaction where they’re talking about important topics and sharing things about themselves.

But overall, the trend kept increasing over time. So, even at the beginning of the second session, they already reported feeling closer and feeling more like a friend to their partner than they had at the beginning of the first session. So, it kept increasing. That was really positive.

Emily Yeap:

What did the study show about cross-race friendships?

Dr. Leslie Echols:

The most surprising and positive outcome was that cross-race friendships were just as likely to form through those Fast Friends activities as the same race. So, there were no differences in those increases. I actually wasn’t expecting that. I was expecting there to be a positive effect, but I thought that the closeness in friendships would be greater for the same-race pairs, and it wasn’t. It was just as effective for the cross-race pairs, so that was really exciting.

Emily Yeap:

According to Echols, there’s a lot of power in the question and answer activity.

Dr. Leslie Echols:

It’s surprising how few opportunities children and youth have to actually interact with each other if they have not been part of the same friend group for a long time. So, even though these students had been going to school together and knew who the other person was – it wasn’t a really big school – they just really had never interacted personally one-on-one with a lot of these other students.

And then, I think the questions themselves were really key because they did move into some of those more personal topics and the students, I was surprised by how much they really opened up to each other and had really authentic personal conversations. And those are the kinds of conversations that you have with real friends, not just acquaintances. Though providing that opportunity to have those kinds of conversations I think helped them to get to know each other as real people.

Emily Yeap:

Echols will implement this Fast Friends exercise in schools where she’s currently starting interventions aimed at fighting peer victimization.

Dr. Leslie Echols:

I currently am working in a couple of schools going back to my bullying and intervention work. Originally, I wanted to use this methodology to help reduce bullying and victimization, and so now I'm sort of coming around full circle to that.

I have a collaborator at UCLA and we’re working in two schools in Missouri right now running an intervention program and the Fast Friends methodology is one key component of that program, and then there are other components that go along with it as well. But one of the things we are trying to do is as part of that program is build friendships for kids who are victimized, so that they have other people in the school to kind of stick up for them and rally around them. And so, we are using the Fast Friends for that part of the program. So, it’s one of a few components in that larger program.

Emily Yeap:

Echols believes it’s important to provide students with positive social opportunities in schools.

Dr. Leslie Echols:

We often think of middle school as a really difficult time developmentally. Sometimes we call the teenage years the “awkward” years. It's really promising to me that there is an approach that brings kids together who otherwise maybe not have the opportunity to get to know each other and provide that social support during a time that can be challenging.

Emily Yeap:

That was Dr. Leslie Echols, associate professor of psychology at Missouri State.

I’m Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Narrator:

For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.