

# Developmental Section Annual Conference

13–15 September 2017, Crowne Plaza, Stratford-upon-Avon



The British  
Psychological Society  
Developmental Psychology Section

## Children's friendships: Open sesame to possible worlds

### Professor Judy Dunn

*Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London*



Professor Judy Dunn is a developmental psychologist at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London. She began her research at the MRC Unit in the Department of Animal Behaviour, University of Cambridge. Her longitudinal studies have been notable for their use of a variety of methods, especially naturalistic observation of children in the emotional world of the family and the world of their friends. The development of children's understanding of emotions, and their language and communicative skills revealed in their close relationships has transformed our picture of the subtlety of their social understanding. She has conducted longitudinal research in Cambridge and Bristol, in the US in Colorado, Stanford and Pennsylvania, in Israel and Italy. She has published extensively on

children's sibling relationships from infancy through adolescence, on step-family relationships, and also written widely for parents.

#### Abstract

It is unquestionable that friendship matters to children by middle childhood, but what do we know of its beginnings? I draw on a series of longitudinal studies of children growing up in Pennsylvania, in Cambridge and in London. Important relationships with other children emerge at the end of the first year. A close look at these children in the context of their friendships gives us a new window on their social understanding and on how their friendship experiences influence the development of their understanding. We carried out unstructured observations of pairs of friends playing alone, and a broad range of assessments of 'Theory of mind', emotion understanding and moral views. We interviewed the children about hypothetical transgressions (name-calling, excluding a friend from play, taking a toy from a friend etc.), and the children gave their views on these actions, if they themselves were victims or if they were the transgressors. A central theme from the earliest friendships was that friends shared pretend adventures, games, stories, heroes and villains. The answer to the question, 'what lies behind differences in friendship quality in the early school years' is a complicated one, but the shared experiences of joint pretend in the preschool years is linked to the experiences of shared cooperative play as preschoolers. The evidence that sharing and negotiating an imaginary world in pretend play provides a potent context for talking and learning about why other people behave the way they do. What's important is not just the individual characteristics of friends, but the relationship they create together.