



## Research Article

# The effectiveness of a group counseling program in enhancing the ability to form friendship among academically talented students

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### Abstract

Adolescence is a very important stage, especially in the life of the talented students. This research aimed at identifying the effect of a group counseling program in enhancing the ability to form friendship among a sample of academically talented students at Halima Al-Saadia Secondary School in Jordan. The researchers used Semi-experimental approach. The study sample consisted of (29) students from seventh to tenth grades, they were randomly distributed into experimental group (n=16), and control group (n=13). And a group counseling program consisted of 9 sessions has been developed and applied among the experimental group. In addition to that forming friendship scale has been developed and administrated among the participants in the two groups, pre, post applying the program, and a three weeks follow up measurement was conducted to the experimental group. Mann-Whitney test was used to examine the hypotheses validity. The results revealed increasing the level of forming friendship among the participants of the experimental group comparing with the control group, with (39.00) Mann-Whitney value, which shows the effectiveness of the training program. Also there were no statistically differences in the experimental group means due to the birth order in the effectiveness of the program, and a persistent effect of the program after –three weeks follow-up. This research sheds light on the talented adolescents in the government schools not a talented school, add to that the research focuses on the social aspect while the studies addressed the academic aspects of gifted and talented students.

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## Introduction

Adolescence is an important topic that psychologists are interested in. This stage is also a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, and a critical phase characterized by rapid growth in various developmental areas such as physical, mental, moral, emotional and social development (Banat, 2015).

Friendship is one of the most important topics in the field of social development of adolescents, which attracted the attention of educators and researchers, especially since the influence of friends at that stage is very important, where the teenager is keen to form a group of friends and seeks to comply with them (Rice, 2000). Perhaps adolescent falls under the peer pressure, which could affect other social relationships. Acceleration in various growth areas may result in some problems and difficulties that may also result in the need for intervention and provide psychological counseling services, either individually or as groups (Ghaith, Banat & Hamad, 2014).

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Group counseling is one of the services offered by the counselor, which targets a group of those seeking help for better growth and mental health (Corey, 2004). Group counseling has been defined by Gazda (2001) as a reciprocal dynamic interaction process based on the verbal sharing of feelings and thoughts. It has common goals towards changing individual's behavior, attitudes and achieving a positive self-concept.

In Jordan, there is a psychological and educational counselor in public schools offering various counseling services. Including Group counseling which targets students of different academic, social and economic levels (Zidane & Shawaqfeh, 2010). The target group in the present study, are considered a great wealth especially in the age of technological development and cognitive openness (Kiburm, 2015).

Friendship is a continuous social relationship between two or more people who are close to one another in interests, ideas and behavior. It can also be considered one of the mechanisms that protect the individual from stress and life difficulties, and the most important sources of social support for the individual (Saber, 2011). Friendship quality has been assumed to have direct effects on social development, including their self-esteem and social adjustment. Friendship quality could also have indirect effects, by magnifying the influence of friends on each other's attitudes and behaviors (Berndt, 2002).

In childhood and adolescence, friendships offer an environment in which children are able to build their self-esteem and develop social competencies (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998). Friendships benefit children by creating a sense of security, belonging, and lessening stress (Geisthardt, Brotherson, & Cook, 2002; Overton & Rausch, 2002). In addition, successful friendships in early childhood contribute to children's quality of life and life adjustment (Overton & Rausch, 2002). Friends can be a source of emotional and instrumental support, and help youth access different types of resources that support well-being (Hartup & Stevens, 1999; Bongers, Koot, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2003; Barber & Wasson, 2015). While adolescents who did not have a mutual friend at baseline were more likely to experience depression and loneliness at 8 years follow-up (Pedersen, Vitaro, Barker, & Borge, 2007; Sakyi, Surkan, Fombonne, Chollet, & Melchior, 2015).

Adolescence marks a critical period in the development of friendships. They begin to seek more support and advice from friends than in early or middle childhood, and they spend more time with friends than in earlier ages. They also begin to develop many friendships that are more specialized in nature (Bukowski, Newcomb & Hartup, 1996).

The ambitions to prepare students face many obstacles, the most important of which are psychological stress that negatively affect talented students' characteristics, especially cognitive abilities. They may have problems such as social anxiety, and this problem usually begins in pre-school stage as a result of the rejection from others because of their superiority (Bahram, 2014). They may suffer from internal problems such as poor balance in mental and emotional development, high sensitivity and the pursuit of perfection. And external problems related to high expectations of the family and teachers (Webb, 1984; Silverman, 2002; Papadopoulos, 2020). In addition to the relationship with peers that may appear in the form of jealousy of their superiority or teachers' interaction with them. As well as their peers leave them to avoid the gap in the academic achievement. They also suffer from the difficulty of finding a real friend who is not just looking for interest (Sabrina, 2014; Alsour, 2001). Most of their friendships are based on academic interest (Webb, 1984; Hebert, 2000). They may experience many social difficulties and feel pressured by their society to get rid of the characteristics of difference, because during the childhood years they learned that any distant or different behavior keeps them away from familiar behavioral norms. Despite the ability of academically talented students to form social relations and feel that they are distinct in social and academic skills, they always feel less happy of other students who do not assess themselves socially and academically. Also competing among those academically talented students for better results, may lead to social problems (Masden, Leung, Shore, Schneider & Udvari, 2015).

Academically talented students may experience adaptive problems both in their intra- personal or interpersonal relationships (Al-Saqour, 2019). One of the social adjustment problems is the difficulty of making friends with peers, the abilities of the academically talented may be an obstacle to form relationships and friendships with peers, due to differences between them in mental, interests and hobbies. The jealousy and envy of peers lead them to avoid the academically talented, which leads him to either keep up with them to be accepted by peers, or isolation (Al-Sorour, 2001, Attara, 2012).

Due to the importance of building social relations and forming friendships in shaping and forming the personality of the academically talented student, and as a result of exposure to anxiety and psychological pressures that affect the personality of the academically talented student (Abu Asaad, 2011), school counseling has a great role in helping the

talented student to form social relations with peers and the surrounding environment, facilitating the process of personal growth, learning, and achieving goals.

The topic of friendships has recurred across decades in the giftedness and talents literature. True friendship provide immunity from loneliness with sacrifice of self, and finding a friend is often a gifted child priority. The literature provides a positive view of the psychosocial adjustment of gifted adolescents. While adjustment problems seem to exist specially in friendship (Mönks & Ferguson, 1983; Seki & Tortop, 2018). Gifted adolescents have fewer friends and sometimes none. And the best way to support gifted and talented students, is help assemble a gifted cohort group (Wallace, Sisk & Senior, 2018; Turkman, 2020).

Although there are many studies that have considered the academically talented students, most were surveys or correlations. While this research used semi-experimental design through the application of a group counseling program to help adolescent girls to improve their ability to form friends. This is due to the need to provide counseling services to academically talented students especially in relations with friendships. Several studies have confirmed that the academically talented students have difficulties in forming friends and finding loyal friends without a personal interest or benefit. This is confirmed by Chan (2009) that the talented people suffer from lack of understanding by their parents, teachers and peers, especially if they are attending ordinary schools. Another study Chan (2005) emphasized that the academically talented exposure to pressures associated with the formation of friendships and high expectations from others.

The importance of the research can be determined in two aspects: The theoretical significance lies in the importance of its subject, which is to improve the ability to form friendship among the academically talented adolescent girls. And Applied importance: That the designed counseling program can be used to improve the ability to form friendship among the academically talented adolescent girls, and for better mental health, in addition to developing a scale on the formation of friendships that can be used by researchers and those interested in studying the category of adolescents and counselors. The results of the study may contribute to the development of some solutions and suggestions for counselors and staff in the field of education.

Many studies tried to discuss the subject of talented students from several aspects, perhaps the most prominent, especially in adolescence, the issue of forming friendships, and some of these studies: Foubister (2017) tried to understand how peer groups influence the social and emotional wellbeing of ability among eight adolescents attending two academically selective high schools in New South Wales. 3 scales were used to measure participants' self-reported psychological wellbeing. Individual semi-structured interviews explored the factors that contributed to the formation and maintenance of secure peer relationships, and a school's role in this. The findings from this study suggest that secure peer groups have a positive influence on the social and emotional outcomes of students who attend academically selective high schools.

Foley-Nicpon, et al. (2017) study highlighted the need to cultivate cognitive and psychosocial factors in developing domain-specific talent. (n = 28, 12 with a coexisting disability) participated in a social skills and talent development intervention over the course of a two-week summer enrichment program. Compared to high ability youth not in the social skills intervention (n = 9), participants reported positive changes in friendship qualities (help), indicating a treatment effect. Among all participants, positive changes were reported in friendship companionship and security, suggesting the talent development program alone had significant impact on psychosocial factors (friendship qualities). For those in the social skills group, higher scores on performance approach goal orientations were related to lower change scores in friendship closeness, suggesting if one is driven academically to outperform peers, this may negatively affect their ability to form close ties with peers.

Masden et al. (2015) research examined the links among academic ability, social-perspective coordination, and friendship quality, within the context of gifted adolescents' friendships. The sample consisted of 120 early adolescents (59 girls, 61 boys), 81 of whom were identified as gifted. Academic ability, sex, and grade significantly predicted social-perspective coordination (an indicator of psychosocial maturity) in multiple regression analyses. Social-perspective coordination, perceptions (self-concept) of ability to make and keep friends, academic ability, sex, and grade predicted perceptions of the overall quality of friendships. Being a female, seventh grader, or adolescent not identified as gifted, significantly predicted higher friendship quality. Social-perspective coordination and self-concept based on having a close friend predicted higher levels of friendship quality for the gifted participants.

The purpose of Al Shubaki, Al Saaiedeh & Badah (2013) study was to investigate the effect of a group counseling program in reducing stress and improving self-esteem of gifted students. The sample of this study consists of (40)

students from the Jubilee school were chosen randomly from the students who achieve high score in stress scale and low score in self-esteem scale. The experimental group consisted of (20) students who received a group counseling program of (8) sessions. The results of (ANCOVA) showed significant differences in reducing psychological stress and improving self-esteem among the experimental group students compared to the control group.

Al-Dhaen (2013) conducted a study investigated the effectiveness of a counseling program for some emotional problems (perfectionism, hypersensitivity, relationships with peers) for gifted female students, and verifying its effectiveness in reducing the level of anxiety they suffer from. Distributed into two groups, a control group (10) students, and the experimental group (10) students, and a counseling program has been implemented on emotional problems experienced by those gifted students. Anxiety scale was administrated. The results showed that the counseling program contributed to reducing the level of anxiety among female students in the experimental group.

Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius & Thomson (2012) investigated the Perceptions of the interpersonal competence and peer relationships of 1,526 gifted adolescents who had previously participated in academic gifted programs at the Center for Talent Development were examined, using an online survey. Major findings included that the gifted students had generally positive perceptions of their abilities to initiate, form, and maintain relationships with other people, including same-age non gifted peers, and demonstrated levels of interpersonal ability and peer relationships, comparable to that of grade equivalent students in the norming group. The students did not perceive their giftedness as a negative factor affecting their peer relationships but rated their academic self-concept more positively than their social self-concept. The results also suggested that gifted students whose academic strength was in the verbal area over other areas were more likely to face difficulties with peer relationships.

The study of Abu-Moghli (2005) aimed to identify the development of friendship among Jordanian students in three age groups (10-16) in terms of the number of friends, close friends and the functions of friendship. The sample consisted of (498) student, (257) male students and (241) female students in late childhood and early and middle adolescence from Amman Second Directorate schools, UNRWA and private schools. Two scales of friendship were used, and psychosocial adjustment. The results indicated that the number of friends and close friends of males is greater than females. There were differences between ages, as early adolescents appeared to make larger friendships than children in late childhood and middle adolescence. For the number of close friends there were no differences across ages. Male and female perception of friendship functions was very close.

### **Problem of Study**

Is there any effect of a group counseling program in enhancing the ability to form friendship among academically talented students? The first hypothesis: There are statistically significant differences between the performance of the experimental group and the performance of the control group on the friendship formation scale due to the effect of the group counseling program. The second hypothesis: There are statistically significant differences between the means of the experimental group on the scale of friendship formation due to the birth order. The third hypothesis: There are statistically significant differences between the means of the experimental group performance on the post and follow-up measurement on the friendship formation scale due to the persistent of the effect of the group counseling program.

## **Method**

### **Research Model**

The researchers used semi-experimental approach. Quasi-experimental research designs, like experimental designs, test causal hypotheses. Quasi-experimental designs identify a comparison group that is as similar as possible to the intervention group in terms of baseline (pre-intervention) characteristics. The comparison group captures what would have been the outcomes if the programme/policy had not been implemented (i.e., the counterfactual). The key difference between an experimental and quasi-experimental design is that the latter lacks random assignment (White & Sabarwal, 2014).

### **Participants**

The study consisted of (29) academically talented adolescents girls, in grades 7 to 10 at Halima Al-Saadia Secondary School for Girls in Ajloun. Whom gained an average of 90 and above, in the academic year 2019/2020. All of them expressed their approval to participate in the research, and were randomly divided into two groups, one experimental group of (16) received the counseling program, and another control group of (13). Received no treatment.



## Procedure

*The group counseling program:* the researchers considered the previous studies and relevant literature to construct the group counseling program (Vernon, 1998; Banat et al. 2014). The program consists of nine 60-minute sessions covering adolescent social development. The sessions included the following: *The first session:* the counselor introduced himself, then he got to know the members of the group and then talked about the counseling program and discuss the expectations and objectives of participants from the program and determine the rules of the sessions. *The second session* troubled relations between friends, aimed at identifying the causes of disagreement between friends, and help participants develop skills to deal with these problems. *Session 3: Logical Relationships*, it aimed to provide participants with rational thinking skills, and apply rational thinking skills to problems related to their relationships. *Session 4: Friends' comments*, it aimed to identify the different ways to make and receive comments from friends and give participants ways to develop their skills. *Session 5: My friends and I*, aimed to identify feelings associated with rejection from others, teach participants not to underestimate themselves and teach them effective ways of dealing with rejection. *Session 6: Why I am sad*. It aimed to identify the feelings of the adolescent when a strong friendship ends, find effective ways to deal with the end of a friendship relationship, and help the adolescent to understand the fact that the end of a friendship does not indicate a low self-worth. *Session 7: How do I choose my friends?* It aimed to increase the awareness of participants that friendship may change during the developmental stages, and to recognize the importance of friendship in individual's life. *Session 8: Spreading the rumor*. It aimed to identify the negative effects of gossip and rumor in social relationships and learn ways to stop spreading rumors about others. *The ninth session: Closing and reviewing* what has been learned during the sessions, providing feedback about them by the participants, then evaluate the program and its effectiveness. After that celebrate the end of the program also enhance participants to continue communication and tell them about a follow-up session after 3 weeks.

*Validity of the program:* The researchers ensured of the counseling program validity by content validity, through 5 experts judgment, whom presented feedback about the content of the sessions and the activities to achieve the purpose of the study.

## Data Collection Tools

**Friendship Formation Scale (FFS):** The researchers developed the friendship formation scale by referring to several references (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996; Abu Mughli, 2005; Masden, Leung, Shore, Schneider, & Udvari, 2015; Foubister, 2017). Consisted of 36 items distributed on the following dimensions: Support exchange (9 items: 1,2,10,12,16,19,21,28,30). Exchange of belonging (13 items: 3,4,5,15,18,20,22,24,25,31,32,34,36). Exchange of affection (14 items: 6,7,8,9,11,13,14,17,23,26,27,29,33,35).

FFS' validity, reliability and correction; the validity of the content was extracted by presenting the scale to 10 experts. Then the scale was modified in light of their feedback. And to ensure the reliability of the scale, the researchers used Cronbach alpha to achieve internal consistency and Pearson correlation equation for stability reliability. Cronbach alfa values varied between (0.81 and 0.86). The scale was corrected by giving the answers: (always happens, often, sometimes, rarely, never happens) scores (1,2,3,4,5) are given respectively and the higher score indicates a higher level in forming friendship, the score ranged from (36-180)

After reviewing the studies on the subject, a nine-session sixty-minute Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) group counseling program was built and validated. The 36-paragraph friendship scale has been developed in three dimensions, and the validity and reliability have been extracted. The research sample of adolescent female students in the seventh to tenth grades was then identified, these students hold a mark of 90% and above at Halima Al-Saadia Secondary School in Ajloun, Jordan. The number of students is (29), after obtaining their approval to participate in the program, they were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental group of (16), and a control group of (13). The pre applying of the Friendship formation Scale was carried out on both groups, then the experimental group underwent a group counseling program by two sessions on Sunday and Wednesday of each week from 6/10 - 6/11 / 2019, while the control group was not exposed to any treatment. A post -applying of the scale for the two groups administrated after the end of the program, and after 3 weeks the follow-up measurement was applied to the experimental group only.

## Data Analysis

Mann-Whitney test was used to find an indication of differences in the performance of the experimental and control groups on the friendship formation scale in the dimensional measurement. And Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was

used to find the significance of the differences between the means of the experimental group members in the post and follow-up measurement of the friendship formation scale

## Results

**The first hypothesis:** There are statistically significant differences between the performance of the experimental group and the performance of the control group on the friendship formation scale due to the effect of the group counseling program

To verify the effectiveness of this program, the Mann-Whitney test was used to find an indication of differences in the performance of the control and experimental groups on the friendship formation scale and Table.1 illustrates this.

**Table 1.**

*Results of the Mann-Whitney Test of Differences in the Performance of the Control and Experimental Groups*

Dimensions	Group	N	Average rank	Total ranks	Average	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z Value	P
Exchange of Support	Exp. Grp	16	18.56	297.00	4.24	47.000	138.000	-2.507	.012
	Cont. Grp	13	10.62	138.00	3.69				
Exchange of belonging	Exp. Grp	16	18.34	293.50	3.99	50.500	141.500	-2.350	.019
	Cont. Grp	13	10.88	141.50	3.34				
Affection exchange	Exp. Grp	16	19.22	307.50	4.30	63.500	127.500	-2.967	.003
	Cont. Grp	13	9.81	127.50	3.65				
Total	Exp. Grp	16	19.06	305.00	4.17	39.000	130.000	-2.852	.004
	Cont. Grp	13	10.00	130.00	3.55				

Table 1 shows that there are statistically significant differences. ( $\alpha < 0.05$ ) due to the group variable in all dimensions and in the total degree, and the differences came in favor of the experimental group.

**The second hypothesis:** There are statistically significant differences between the means of the experimental group on the scale of friendship formation due to the birth order

To validate this hypothesis, the Mann-Whitney test was used to find an indication of differences in the performance of the experimental group on the friendship formation scale according to the birth order, and Table.2 illustrates this.

**Table 2.**

*Results of the Mann-Whitney Test of Differences between the Means of the Experimental Group on the Scale of Friendship Formation Due to the Birth Order*

Dimensions	Group	N	Average rank	Total ranks	Average	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z Value	P
Exchange of Support	First	7	7.14	50.00	4.05	22.000	50.000	-1.013	.311
	Other	9	9.56	86.00	4.40				
Exchange of belonging	First	7	7.29	51.00	3.88	23.000	51.000	-.902	.367
	Other	9	9.44	85.00	4.07				
Affection exchange	First	7	6.50	45.50	4.15	17.500	45.500	-1.492	.136
	Other	9	10.06	90.50	4.41				
Total	First	7	6.79	47.50	4.03	19.500	47.500	-1.272	.203
	Other	9	9.83	88.50	4.28				

From Table 2 it is clear that there are no statistically significant differences. ( $\alpha < 0.05$ ) due to the experimental group in all dimensions and in the overall degree.

**The third hypothesis:** There are statistically significant differences between the means of the experimental group performance on the post and follow-up measurement on the friendship formation scale due to the persistent of the effect of the group counseling program.

To answer this hypothesis, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was used to find the significance of the differences between the means of the experimental group members in the post and follow-up measurement of the friendship formation scale, and the table below shows that.

**Table 3.**

*The Results of the Wilcoxon of the Differences between Post and Follow-up Measurement of the Friendship Formation Scale of the Friendship*

Dimensions	Group	N	Average	Total Ranks	Z Value	p
<b>Support exchange Consecutive Support exchange post</b>	Negative ranks	5	8.00	40.00	-1.144	.253
	Positive ranks	10	8.00	80.00		
	Equal ranks	1				
	Total	16				
<b>Exchange of belonging Consecutive Exchange of belonging post</b>	Negative ranks	7	9.00	63.00	-.259	.796
	Positive ranks	9	8.11	73.00		
	Equal ranks	0				
	Total	16				
<b>Affection exchange Consecutive Affection exchange post</b>	Negative ranks	7	8.79	61.50	-.336	.737
	Positive ranks	9	8.28	74.50		
	Equal ranks	0				
	Total	16				
<b>Total Consecutive Total post</b>	Negative ranks	7	8.00	56.00	-.621	.535
	Positive ranks	9	8.89	80.00		
	Equal ranks	0				
	Total	16				

From Table 3, it is clear that there are no statistically significant differences ( $\alpha < 0.05$ ) between the post and follow-up measurement of the friendship formation scale in all dimensions and in the total degree of the friendship formation scale.

### Discussion and Conclusion

With regard to the first hypothesis, the researchers attribute the differences in favor of the experimental group in friendship formation to the methods and skills included in the program that the participants were trained in. It also provides them with the opportunity to implement practical exercises and homework that support their acquisition of these skills that is social development provides individuals with the skills to experience, cope with, and manage personal and social challenges (Papadopoulos, 2020). The nature of group counseling sessions also provides a safe environment in which participants can express their feelings and obtain group support, as well as exchange interactions with other participants, and sympathy between them, which enhances their self-confidence and their tendency to form successful friendships, which was emphasized by Corey (2004). When he talks about the importance of group counseling for teenagers, especially when we consider the developmental tasks. And this results agree with Foley-Nicpon, et al. (2017) and Foubister (2017) which indicated a positive influence of peer groups on the social and emotional outcomes of students

The researchers attribute the result of the second hypothesis related to the absence of differences due to the variable of birth order in the ability to form friendship, to the fact that academically talented adolescents, regardless of its birth order, is passing through an age characterized by the adolescent's tendency to peers, and his quest to make friends. This was confirmed by Rice (2001) when he referred to the social development of the adolescents, and the concept of friendship and its role in the life of the teenager who seeks to gain love, satisfaction and interest from their friends. This is confirmed by the result of this study, that all adolescent girls who participated in the study increased

their ability to form friendship, they underwent the same sessions, including the methods, techniques, skills, activities and exercises, and therefore they were exposed to the same experience, and this means that the benefit of the program has included everyone regardless of the order of birth.

The researchers explain the persistent of the impact of the group counseling program that the participants acquired skills and information that benefited them in their relationships with their friends, as well as they maintained what they were trained in the program and were keen to implement it in their daily lives after the sessions ended. It also involved the counseling program that included activities and practical exercises from the real life, which may be one of the factors that contributed to the persistent of that effect.

### Recommendations

Applying a group counseling program to improve forming friendship among adolescent girls is very important. And that needs to develop and provide counseling services to academically talented students. Several studies have confirmed that the academically talented students have difficulties in forming friends (Chan, 2005, 2009). Also In light of the current research results, the researchers recommended conducting more qualitative and experimental surveys on the academically talented and at different ages and additional variables.

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All authors in this study have the same contribution.

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