The stages of friendship development

William Damon (1977; 1983) proposed that children’s friendships develop in stages. These stages become more sophisticated as children grow up:

- Level 1: Friendship as a ‘handy playmate’ (4–7 years)
- Level 2: Friendship as mutual trust and assistance (8–10 years)
- Level 3: Friendship as intimacy and loyalty (11–15 years+)

Damon asked children specific interview questions such as, “Tell me about your best friend” or “Tell me a story about two children who are friends” (Damon, 1977). The following stories are typical of the responses from children, which illustrate each of Damon’s stages:

**Jonathon, 5 years old:** Thomas is my friend ’cause he plays with me. He likes Lego and so do I. Me and Thomas share Lego.

**Katey, 9 years old:** Ella is my best friend and I am her best friend. We are going to be friends forever. If I ever have a sleepover, Ella is the first person I invite and if Ella ever has a sleepover I am the first person she invites. If I can’t go to the movies or something, ’cause I am sick or something, then Ella won’t go either, she will stay with me and play at my house.

**Kayla, 13 years old:** If I ever get hassled [at school], my friends comfort and support me. Shelly will go up and ask them “Why did you say that to her?” She sticks up and defends me. Shelley understands me better than anyone else I know.

**Activities**

1. Do you think children’s perceptions of friendship are the same today as they were when Damon did his study?

2. Try conducting a small research study of your own. Choose two or three children or young people of different stages of development. Make sure you choose young people whom you know pretty well so they will be comfortable answering your question. Ask them Damon’s question: “Tell me about your best friend”. Compare and contrast their answers and see if they reflect the different qualities highlighted by Damon above.
References