

Friendship Formation and Mentalization in Children: A Qualitative Study

Fatemeh-Alsadat. Mohammadi Bajgirani¹, Mohsen. Golparvar², Mansoureh. Bahramipour Isfahani³

1 PhD Student in Psychology, Department of Psychology, Isf.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

2 Professor, Department of Psychology, Isf.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

3. Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Isf.C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

*Correspondence: mgolparvar@iau.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

Stable and supportive friendships are of great importance for children's growth and flourishing. The present study was conducted with the aim of developing a mentalization-based model of friendship formation in children, particularly rejected children. This study employed a qualitative design using a deductive thematic network analysis approach. The research context consisted of 100 scientific sources (including books, articles, and dissertations), and the sample included 33 scientific sources. A thematic analysis results recording form was used to extract the components of mentalization-based friendship formation. The textual data were analyzed through deductive thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001), along with the calculation of the Content Validity Index (CVI) and Content Validity Ratio (CVR). The findings indicated that the mentalization-based friendship formation model comprises four organizing themes: understanding one's own experiences (mental, emotional, and behavioral) in friendship; understanding others' experiences (mental, emotional, and behavioral) in friendship; co-mentalizing one's own experiences (management and regulation of mental, emotional, and behavioral aspects) in friendship; and co-mentalizing others' experiences (management and regulation of mental, emotional, and behavioral aspects) in friendship. Each of these four main themes also included a diverse range of subthemes. Based on the findings of this study on the mentalization-based friendship formation model, it is suggested that these results be utilized for the development and validation of mentalization-based friendship training programs and for constructing assessment tools to measure mentalization-based friendship capacity in children, in order to expand research in this field.

Keywords: friendship, friendship formation, mentalization, children

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Introduction

Friendship is a fundamental developmental context through which children acquire essential socio-emotional competencies, construct interpersonal identities, and regulate affective experiences, making it one of the most critical domains in child development research. Early friendships are not merely social preferences but function as adaptive systems that support emotional security, social learning, and psychological well-being across developmental stages (1, 2). Empirical evidence indicates that high-quality friendships contribute to better adjustment outcomes, whereas deficits in friendship formation are associated with loneliness, emotional dysregulation, and maladaptive social behaviors (3, 4). In particular,

children who experience social rejection or isolation are at heightened risk for internalizing and externalizing difficulties, highlighting the necessity of identifying mechanisms that facilitate effective friendship formation (5, 6).

From a developmental and evolutionary perspective, friendship formation is driven by fundamental human needs for affiliation, belongingness, and mutual support, which are expressed differently across contexts and developmental stages (7). In childhood, these processes are closely intertwined with emerging cognitive and emotional capacities, particularly those related to understanding oneself and others in social interactions. However, despite the recognized importance of friendship, not all children develop the necessary skills to initiate and maintain meaningful peer relationships, especially those with behavioral problems, trauma histories, or deficits in social cognition (8, 9). This discrepancy suggests that friendship formation is not merely a spontaneous process but one that is underpinned by complex psychological mechanisms requiring systematic investigation.

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding interpersonal functioning is mentalization, defined as the capacity to understand one's own and others' behaviors in terms of underlying mental states such as thoughts, emotions, intentions, and desires (10, 11). Mentalization is rooted in attachment theory and developmental psychopathology, and it plays a central role in regulating affect, guiding social interactions, and facilitating adaptive interpersonal relationships (12, 13). The development of mentalizing abilities begins in early childhood and is shaped through caregiver–child interactions, particularly those characterized by reflective functioning and emotional attunement (14, 15). Consequently, deficits in mentalization are associated with a range of psychological difficulties, including emotional disorders, interpersonal conflicts, and maladaptive coping strategies (16, 17).

Recent advances in research have highlighted the critical role of mentalization in friendship processes, suggesting that the ability to accurately interpret and respond to the mental states of peers is a key determinant of successful social interactions (18, 19). Children with higher mentalizing capacities are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors, demonstrate empathy, and navigate interpersonal challenges effectively, whereas those with impairments in mentalization may exhibit aggression, withdrawal, or misunderstanding in peer relationships (2, 20). Moreover, mentalization serves as a protective factor in the context of adversity, enabling children to process traumatic experiences and maintain relational functioning despite psychosocial stressors (21, 22).

The integration of mentalization into intervention frameworks has led to the development of mentalization-based treatments, which aim to enhance individuals' reflective capacities and improve interpersonal functioning. These interventions have demonstrated efficacy across a range of populations, including children with internalizing and externalizing disorders, as well as those exposed to trauma (23–25). In child and family contexts, mentalization-based approaches have been adapted to address parenting practices, family dynamics, and socio-emotional competencies, yielding positive outcomes in relational quality and behavioral regulation (26, 27). Systematic reviews further indicate that mentalization-based interventions in educational and community settings can enhance social competence, emotional regulation, and prosocial behavior among children (28, 29).

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting the relevance of mentalization, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding its explicit integration into models of friendship formation, particularly in

childhood. Existing studies have primarily focused on either general social competence or clinical outcomes, with limited attention to the specific processes through which mentalization facilitates the initiation, maintenance, and repair of friendships. Furthermore, while intervention programs such as the FRIENDS program have demonstrated effectiveness in improving emotional resilience and social skills, they do not explicitly conceptualize friendship formation within a mentalization framework (30). This gap underscores the need for a theoretically grounded and empirically informed model that integrates mentalization processes into the domain of friendship development.

Theoretical models of mentalization emphasize its multidimensional nature, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components that interact dynamically during social interactions (11, 18). These components are particularly relevant in friendship contexts, where individuals must simultaneously interpret internal states, regulate emotional responses, and adjust behaviors in response to social feedback. Mentalization-based frameworks also highlight the importance of both self-oriented and other-oriented processes, suggesting that effective interpersonal functioning requires a balance between understanding one's own experiences and those of others (10, 31). Such perspectives provide a comprehensive foundation for conceptualizing friendship formation as a process that involves not only social skills but also reflective and regulatory capacities.

Methodologically, qualitative approaches such as thematic network analysis offer valuable tools for exploring complex psychological constructs and generating integrative models grounded in empirical data. The approach proposed by Attride-Stirling enables the identification of organizing themes and basic themes that capture the underlying structure of a phenomenon, making it particularly suitable for examining multifaceted constructs such as mentalization and friendship formation (32). By synthesizing findings across diverse scientific sources, this method facilitates the development of comprehensive models that reflect both theoretical and applied dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation.

In light of these considerations, the present study seeks to bridge the gap between mentalization theory and friendship research by developing a mentalization-based model of friendship formation in children, with particular attention to those who experience social rejection or difficulties in peer relationships. This focus is especially important given that rejected children often exhibit deficits in social cognition and emotional regulation, which may hinder their ability to form and sustain meaningful friendships (9, 19). By identifying the core components and processes underlying mentalization-based friendship formation, the study aims to contribute to both theoretical advancement and practical applications in educational and clinical settings.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to develop a comprehensive mentalization-based model of friendship formation in children using a qualitative thematic network analysis approach grounded in theoretical and empirical literature.

Methods and Materials

The present study is a qualitative investigation employing a deductive thematic network analysis approach based on theoretical and empirical literature (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The research corpus consisted of scientific sources (including books, peer-reviewed articles, and accessible dissertations) addressing the principles and foundations of friendship formation and mentalization, published between 2005 and 2025. In the initial stage, 100 scientific sources were retrieved. Inclusion criteria for selecting sources comprised

publication and accessibility in reputable academic databases, adherence to scientific research standards, retrievability, and a specific focus on friendship needs and the theoretical and applied principles of mentalization in interpersonal relationships and friendship. The study sample included 33 reputable scientific sources that met the inclusion criteria. The adequacy of the 33 selected sources was determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation. These sources are presented in Table 1. Ethical considerations included adherence to scientific and ethical standards in accurate citation and referencing, as well as the exclusive use of textual content for extracting themes relevant to mentalization-based friendship formation.

Table 1. Sample Sources for Extracting Themes Related to Mentalization-Based Friendship Formation

Author(s) and Year	Original Title of Source	Type of Source
Ahmadi et al. (2020)	Mentalization and its multidimensional nature	Article
Seyedmousavi & Naghsh (2020a)	Parental reflective functioning: Introducing a mentalization-based approach in parenting (Part I)	Article
Seyedmousavi & Naghsh (2020b)	Parental reflective functioning: Introducing a mentalization-based approach in parenting (Part II)	Article
Attaran et al. (2024)	The effectiveness of positive parenting training and mentalization-based parenting on improving the mother–child relationship	Article
Mirza Yousofkhani et al. (2024)	The effectiveness of mentalization-based treatment on internalizing and externalizing disorders and altruism in students with bullying behaviors	Article
Andrejevaite Spokaite (2021)	Early childhood psychological development in interacting with new friends	Article
Apostolou et al. (2021)	Why people make friends: The nature of friendship	Article
Asen & Fonagy (2011)	Mentalization-based therapeutic interventions for families	Article
Bateman & Fonagy (2011)	Handbook of mentalizing in mental health practice	Reference Book
Bateman & Fonagy (2013)	Mentalization-based treatment	Article
Bateman & Fonagy (2006)	Mentalization-based treatment: A practical guide	Book
Chelouche-Dwek & Fonagy (2025)	Mentalization-based interventions in schools for enhancing socio-emotional competencies and positive behavior: A systematic review	Article
Fonagy & Allison (2012)	What is mentalization? The concept and its foundations in developmental research	Reference Book
Fonagy et al. (2023)	Attachment, mentalizing and trauma: Then (1992) and now (2022)	Article
Halfon & Bulut (2019)	Mentalization and the growth of symbolic play and affect regulation in psychodynamic therapy for children with behavioral problems	Article
Halfon et al. (2024)	The efficacy of mentalization-based treatment (MBT-C) for children with internalizing and externalizing problems: A randomized controlled trial	Article
Laursen et al. (2007)	Friendship moderates prospective associations between social isolation and adjustment problems in young children	Article
Lavender et al. (2022)	The efficacy of group-delivered mentalization-based parenting interventions: A systematic review of the literature	Article
Lempinen et al. (2018)	Loneliness and friendships among eight-year-old children: Time trends over a 24-year period	Article
Midgley et al. (2017)	Mentalization-based treatment for children: A time-limited approach	Book
Midgley et al. (2021)	Mentalization-based interventions for children aged 6–12 and their carers: A narrative systematic review	Article
Midgley & Vrouva (2012)	Minding the child: Mentalization-based interventions with children, young people and their families	Reference Book
Monks & Rix (2024)	Friendships among young children: Links with social behavior	Article
Nowland et al. (2019)	When friends behave badly: Loneliness and children's expectations of friends and responses to transgressions	Article
Oehlman Forbes et al. (2021)	The role of mentalization in child psychotherapy, interpersonal trauma, and recovery: A scoping review	Article
Ramadas et al. (2024)	Role of emotion regulation and mentalizing in rejection sensitivity: The specific relationship to potentially psychologically traumatic events	Article
Schwartz-Mette et al. (2020)	Relations of friendship experiences with depressive symptoms and loneliness in childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic review	Article

Shabeyk et al. (2023)	Investigating the mediating role of mentalization in the relationship between emotional maltreatment and emotional disorders	Article
Sharp & Venta (2012)	Mentalizing problems in children and adolescents	Reference Book
Shayegh et al. (2025)	The role of mentalization in linking trauma, attachment styles, and rejection sensitivity to interpersonal relationships	Article
Smits et al. (2024)	Breaking the cycle with trauma-focused mentalization-based treatment: Theory and practice of a trauma-focused group intervention	Article
Vellymalay (2013)	A case study on friendship, loneliness and social dissatisfaction among preschool children	Article
Wu et al. (2020)	Mentalizing during social interaction: A four-component model	Article

The following instruments were used in the study.

Checklist for Inclusion of Studies in the Final Analysis

This checklist was used to assess the eligibility of retrieved studies and texts for inclusion in the study during the initial phase of the research. The criteria included publication and accessibility in valid academic databases, adherence to scientific research standards, coverage of the principles and foundations of mentalization and friendship formation, particularly for children, the presence of valid and necessary citations, and retrievability and accessibility.

Deductive Thematic Analysis Results Recording Form

This form was used to extract organizing themes, basic themes, and descriptive indicators for each basic theme based on the thematic network analysis approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001) and subsequent conventional thematic analysis to identify the principles and foundations of mentalization and friendship formation, particularly for children. The form was applied during the extraction of results from scientific texts, and its content validity was fully aligned with the thematic network analysis approach.

Data collection was conducted through systematic searches in databases including PubMed, Frontiers, Google Scholar, Scopus, the Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research (ACECR) database of the University of Tehran, Magiran, ISC, the Comprehensive Portal of Humanities, and NoorMags, with a focus on the principles and foundations of mentalization and friendship formation, particularly for children. In the first stage, sources that met the initial inclusion criteria were selected. Subsequently, through detailed content analysis, sources that comprehensively covered the principles and foundations of mentalization and friendship formation for children, while demonstrating scientific clarity and valid citations, were identified and selected. Finally, based on the thematic network analysis approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001) followed by conventional thematic analysis, organizing themes, basic themes, and descriptive indicators were extracted for the mentalization-based friendship formation model. At this stage, six independent coders carefully reviewed the data extraction process. In addition to deductive thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001), thematic analysis was conducted to determine content validity, using the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI).

Findings and Results

The thematic network of mentalization-based friendship formation, along with its subthemes and basic themes under the organizing themes, is presented in Figure 1 and Table 2, respectively. Due to the large number of detailed indicators associated with the basic themes, these indicators are not presented in Table 2.

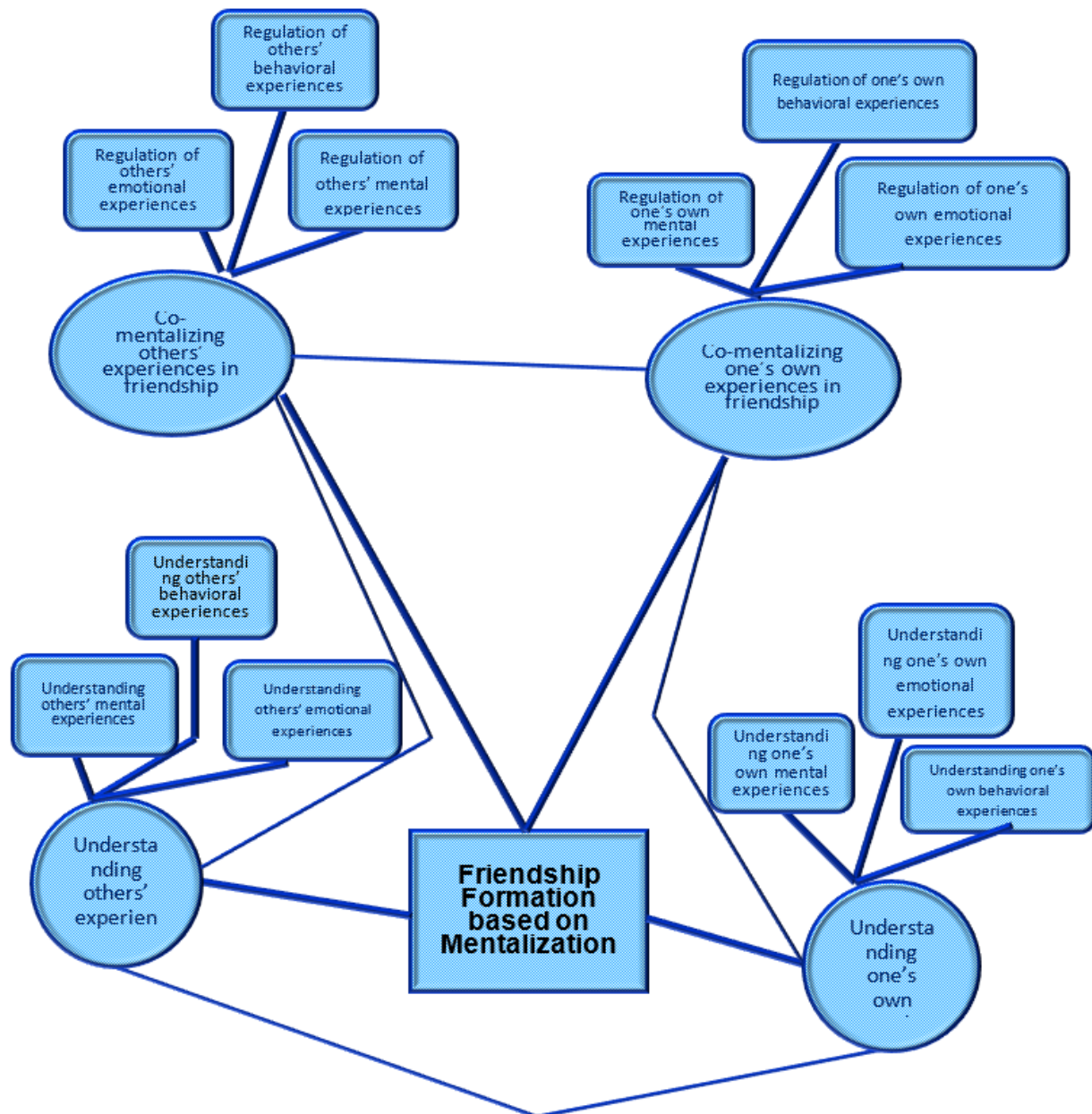


Figure 1. Final Conceptual Model

Table 2. Results of Deductive Thematic Analysis of Mentalization-Based Friendship Formation

Organizing Theme	First-Order Basic Theme	Second-Order Basic Theme
Understanding one's own experiences in friendship	Understanding one's own mental experiences	Understanding one's positive cognitions in friendship; understanding one's negative cognitions in friendship
	Understanding one's own emotional experiences	Understanding negative emotions in friendship; understanding positive emotions in friendship
	Understanding one's own behavioral experiences	Understanding one's positive behaviors in friendship; understanding one's negative behaviors in friendship
Understanding others' experiences in friendship	Understanding others' mental experiences	Understanding others' positive cognitions in friendship; understanding others' negative cognitions in friendship
	Understanding others' emotional experiences	Understanding others' positive emotions in friendship; understanding others' negative emotions in friendship
	Understanding others' behavioral experiences	Understanding others' positive behaviors in friendship; understanding others' negative behaviors in friendship

Co-mentalizing one's own experiences in friendship	Regulation of one's own mental experiences Regulation of one's own emotional experiences Regulation of one's own behavioral experiences	Regulation of one's positive cognitions in friendship; regulation of one's negative cognitions in friendship Regulation of one's positive emotions in friendship; regulation of one's negative emotions in friendship Regulation of one's positive behaviors in friendship; regulation of one's negative behaviors in friendship
Co-mentalizing others' experiences in friendship	Regulation of others' mental experiences Regulation of others' emotional experiences Regulation of others' behavioral experiences	Regulation of others' positive cognitions in friendship; regulation of others' negative cognitions in friendship Regulation of others' positive emotions in friendship; regulation of others' negative emotions in friendship Regulation of others' positive behaviors in friendship; regulation of others' negative behaviors in friendship

As shown in Table 2, the organizing themes consist of four main categories, each encompassing its own related basic and subthemes.

The first organizing theme is understanding one's own experiences (mental, emotional, and behavioral) in friendship, which includes understanding one's positive and negative mental experiences, positive and negative emotional experiences, and positive and negative behavioral experiences in friendship.

The second organizing theme is understanding others' experiences (mental, emotional, and behavioral) in friendship, which includes understanding others' positive and negative mental experiences, positive and negative emotional experiences, and positive and negative behavioral experiences in friendship.

The third organizing theme is co-mentalizing one's own experiences in friendship, which involves regulating one's own mental experiences (including positive and negative cognitions), emotional experiences (including positive and negative emotions), and behavioral experiences (including positive and negative behaviors) in friendship.

The fourth organizing theme is co-mentalizing others' experiences in friendship, which involves regulating others' mental experiences (including positive and negative cognitions), emotional experiences (including positive and negative emotions), and behavioral experiences (including positive and negative behaviors) in friendship.

The results of the thematic analysis were validated by comparing them with scientific texts using five independent coders. After revisions, the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and Content Validity Index (CVI) for the six independent coders were both equal to 1.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study led to the development of a comprehensive mentalization-based model of friendship formation in children, structured around four overarching organizing themes: understanding one's own experiences, understanding others' experiences, co-mentalizing one's own experiences, and co-mentalizing others' experiences in the context of friendship. Each of these domains encompassed cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, reflecting the multidimensional nature of mentalization and its application within interpersonal relationships. The identification of these themes indicates that effective friendship formation is not solely dependent on observable social behaviors but is deeply rooted in the capacity to interpret, regulate, and integrate internal experiences in both the self and others. This result is consistent with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize mentalization as a core mechanism underlying adaptive interpersonal functioning (10, 11).

The first organizing theme, understanding one's own experiences in friendship, underscores the importance of self-awareness in the development of social relationships. The findings suggest that children who are capable of identifying and differentiating their own mental states, emotional responses, and behavioral tendencies are better equipped to engage in meaningful and stable friendships. This aligns with previous research demonstrating that reflective functioning and self-mentalization are foundational to emotional regulation and adaptive social behavior (14, 15). Moreover, studies have shown that deficits in self-understanding are associated with increased vulnerability to emotional dysregulation and maladaptive interpersonal patterns, particularly in children with histories of trauma or emotional maltreatment (13, 16). Therefore, the present findings reinforce the notion that fostering children's awareness of their internal experiences is a critical component of friendship development.

The second organizing theme, understanding others' experiences in friendship, highlights the role of other-oriented mentalization in facilitating social interaction. The ability to infer and interpret the thoughts, emotions, and intentions of peers enables children to respond appropriately in social contexts, thereby enhancing the quality and stability of friendships. This finding is consistent with the four-component model of mentalizing during social interaction, which emphasizes the integration of cognitive and affective processes in understanding others (18). Additionally, empirical studies have demonstrated that children who exhibit higher levels of empathy and perspective-taking are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors and form supportive peer relationships (1, 2). Conversely, impairments in understanding others' experiences are linked to social withdrawal, peer rejection, and interpersonal conflict (3, 6). The present study extends these findings by illustrating how other-oriented mentalization operates as a central mechanism in friendship formation.

The third organizing theme, co-mentalizing one's own experiences, reflects the regulatory dimension of mentalization, wherein individuals actively manage their internal states in response to social interactions. The results indicate that effective friendship formation requires not only awareness of one's experiences but also the ability to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in a manner that is congruent with interpersonal demands. This is consistent with the broader literature on mentalization-based treatment, which emphasizes the role of reflective functioning in enhancing emotional regulation and reducing maladaptive behaviors (23, 24). Furthermore, research on children with behavioral problems has shown that improvements in mentalization are associated with increased affect regulation and more adaptive social functioning (20, 25). The present findings suggest that co-mentalizing one's own experiences is a key process through which children translate internal awareness into socially appropriate actions.

The fourth organizing theme, co-mentalizing others' experiences, represents the interactive and relational aspect of mentalization, involving the regulation of responses to others' mental states. This theme highlights the dynamic interplay between self and other in the context of friendship, where individuals must continuously adjust their behavior based on their understanding of others' experiences. This finding is supported by studies indicating that successful interpersonal functioning depends on the ability to integrate self- and other-oriented mentalization processes (12, 21). In addition, trauma-focused mentalization-based interventions have demonstrated that enhancing individuals' capacity to mentalize others' experiences can improve relational functioning and reduce interpersonal difficulties (22). The present study contributes to

this body of research by identifying co-mentalizing others' experiences as a distinct and essential component of friendship formation.

Taken together, the four organizing themes identified in this study provide a comprehensive framework for understanding friendship formation as a mentalization-based process. This integrative model aligns with developmental and clinical perspectives that emphasize the centrality of mentalization in social functioning and psychological well-being (17, 31). Moreover, the findings extend existing models by explicitly linking mentalization processes to the specific context of friendship, thereby addressing a notable gap in the literature. The inclusion of both self- and other-oriented processes, as well as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, reflects the complexity of interpersonal interactions and highlights the multifaceted nature of friendship formation.

The results of the present study are also consistent with empirical evidence on the role of friendships in promoting psychological adjustment and resilience. High-quality friendships have been shown to buffer against the negative effects of social isolation and contribute to positive developmental outcomes (4, 5). By identifying the mentalization-based mechanisms underlying friendship formation, the current study provides a theoretical basis for understanding how these protective effects are achieved. Furthermore, the findings have important implications for intervention and prevention efforts, particularly for children at risk of social difficulties.

In line with previous research, the present study suggests that mentalization-based interventions can be effectively applied to enhance children's social competencies and interpersonal relationships. For example, parenting programs that focus on improving caregivers' reflective functioning have been shown to positively influence parent-child relationships and children's socio-emotional development (27, 33). Similarly, school-based mentalization interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in promoting prosocial behavior and emotional regulation among children (29). The integration of mentalization principles into friendship training programs may therefore represent a promising approach for improving children's social functioning.

Additionally, the findings highlight the relevance of mentalization in clinical contexts, particularly for children with internalizing and externalizing disorders. Research has shown that mentalization-based therapy can lead to significant improvements in emotional regulation, social functioning, and overall psychological well-being in this population (9, 34). By incorporating a focus on friendship formation, such interventions may further enhance their effectiveness and contribute to more comprehensive treatment outcomes.

Overall, the present study advances the understanding of friendship formation by conceptualizing it as a process grounded in mentalization. This perspective not only integrates existing theoretical and empirical findings but also provides a foundation for future research and practical applications. By emphasizing the role of internal processes in shaping interpersonal relationships, the study offers a nuanced and comprehensive approach to understanding how children develop and maintain friendships.

One limitation of the present study is that it relied exclusively on qualitative analysis of existing scientific literature, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to diverse cultural and contextual settings. Additionally, the use of secondary data sources may have constrained the ability to capture the lived experiences of children and the dynamic nature of friendship formation. Another limitation is the potential

for subjective bias in the coding and interpretation of themes, despite the use of multiple coders and validity indices.

Future research should employ mixed-methods and longitudinal designs to empirically test the proposed mentalization-based model of friendship formation and examine its applicability across different populations and cultural contexts. It is also recommended that future studies investigate the developmental trajectories of mentalization and friendship processes, as well as the potential moderating and mediating variables influencing these relationships. Furthermore, experimental studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of mentalization-based interventions specifically targeting friendship skills in children.

In terms of practical implications, the findings suggest that educators, clinicians, and parents should prioritize the development of mentalization capacities in children as a means of enhancing friendship formation and social competence. Designing and implementing structured training programs focused on improving self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation may contribute to more adaptive interpersonal relationships. Additionally, integrating mentalization principles into school curricula and therapeutic interventions can support children in developing the skills necessary for forming and maintaining meaningful and supportive friendships.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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