NEWS | POSTED OCTOBER 6, 2016

Peer Victimization in Schools: Two Studies Explore Types and Repercussions, Suggest Early Intervention

PRESS RELEASE / CHILD DEVELOPMENT: Embargoed for Release on October 6, 2016

PRESS RELEASE

Published

Thursday, October 6, 2016 12:01am

Overt and Relational Victimization: A Meta-Analytic Review of Their Overlap and Associations with Social-Psychological Adjustment

Read the Child Development article:

WILEY ONLINE LIBRARY

Contact:

Jessica Efstathiou, Senior Media Relations and Communications

Associate

E-MAIL

Researchers estimate that as many as 75% of children and adolescents report experiencing some sort of peer victimization, with 10 to 15% experiencing more severe and prolonged victimization. Two new studies explore victimization by peers to shed light on who is victimized and the repercussions of such actions. The studies are particularly pertinent with increased attention on bullying; this includes mandates to report instances of bullying as well as efforts to develop prevention programs and interventions that are effective and developmentally appropriate. Both studies suggest that earlier interventions are more likely to be successful in helping address peer victimization and its outcomes.

Peer victimization is defined as being on the receiving end of an intentional act of aggression by a peer of a similar age that is perceived by the victim as harmful. *Overt victimization* involves behavior such has hitting, pushing, and kicking, while *relational victimization* is more covert, for example, being the subject of a vicious rumor or being excluded intentionally from an activity.

The first study, which analyzed research on peer victimization in 17 countries, found that both girls and boys experience *relational* peer victimization, but boys experience more *overt* victimization. The study was conducted at the University of Alabama and the University of Connecticut.

The second study, which looked at second- to sixth-grade students in the United States, found that being victimized by peers alters the development of children's stress responses. That research was carried out at North Dakota State University, the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In the first study, researchers examined the degree to which these two forms of victimization (*relational* and *overt*) represent separate phenomena; this included the degree to which each form is uniquely related to symptoms such as depression and anxiety, as well as to aggressive behavior and receiving support from

other peers. The study, a meta-analysis, looked at 135 studies on victimization involving 190,052 children and adolescents (ages 4 to 17) in 17 countries over 20 years.

Researchers found a large degree of overlap between the two forms of victimization (i.e., victims of one form are likely to experience the other form), which the study's authors suggest means the two forms should be considered in relation to one another. "Because resources are limited, it's important for policymakers and practitioners who create and implement interventions to understand the differences across forms of victimization as well as the ways they are related," notes Deborah Casper, assistant professor of human development and family studies at the University of Alabama, who was the lead author of the meta-analysis.

"We see an increase in relational forms of victimization as children age, so it's important for interventions to address both forms. Because relational victimization is aimed at damaging another's relations with peers and social status, it would be beneficial for interventions to include relationship skills such as communication and problem-solving skills."

Yet the researchers found differences when they examined the relation between each form of victimization and various indicators of adjustment. *Relational victimization*, experienced by boys and girls at similar levels, was related to higher levels of relational aggression and internalizing problems such as symptoms of depression and of anxiety, as well as lower levels of received prosocial behavior like peer support and help (called *prosocial support*). The older the student, the more being the target of rumors and exclusion was related to an increase in symptoms of depression and of anxiety, the study found. Casper explains: "Adolescence is a time when friendships become particularly important. As such, victimization that's intended to damage relationships is especially painful and associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety."

The study also found that children and adolescents who experience higher levels of *overt* victimization report higher levels of *overt* aggression and lower levels of *prosocial support*, and exhibit more externalizing behavior such as delinquency, impulsivity, and conduct problems. The link between overt victimization and behavior such as impulsivity and delinquency also increases as children get older. "Although we cannot say that one causes the other, the links among *overt victimization*, overt aggression, and externalizing problems may lead to more serious risk-taking behaviors and delinquency," Casper notes. "For this reason, the earlier we intervene in incidents of overt aggression and other externalizing behavior, the better." In fact, some researchers conceptualize peer aggression as a group phenomenon, which means intervention efforts

should include not only victims but perpetrators and bystanders, too.

Similarly, the links among *relational victimization*, internalizing problems, and a lack of social support also raise concerns and warrant focused intervention. The authors note that it is particularly troubling that across development, the relation between lower levels of *prosocial support* and both forms of victimization becomes stronger. That is, older adolescents who report victimization are more likely to also report lower levels of prosocial support.

In the second study, researchers looked at how the development of children's stress responses is affected when they are the targets of peer victimization. How children respond to stress in their social relationships has been shown to play an important role in the development of mental health problems such as depression. Children fare better when they can control their reactions (e.g., thoughts, feelings, actions) and actively address problems—responses that are referred to as *effortful engagement*. These include strategies such as finding solutions to problems, ways to think about problems in a positive light, and adaptive ways to regulate emotions. In contrast, when children avoid stressors or when their reactions are largely out of their control, the risk of emotional problems increases.

As children grow older, their adaptive responses to stress rise and their maladaptive responses decline, suggesting maturation in their ability to manage social stressors. However, this study of 636 American second to sixth graders from a variety of backgrounds found that early and continuing exposure to peer victimization disrupted the development of healthy stress response systems in children.

"Early peer victimization sensitizes youth to stress by interfering with the development of effective coping and fostering maladaptive responses to stress," notes Wendy Troop-Gordon, associate professor of psychology at North Dakota State University, who was the lead author of the study.

Specifically, the study found that *effortful engagement* responses to stress typically increased steadily between third and sixth grades. *Effortful disengagement* and *involuntary responses* typically decreased between second and sixth grades, although the rate of decline slowed around fourth or fifth grade. Effortful disengagement responses are controlled responses that are directed away from a problem and include avoiding the stressful situation or denying that there's a problem; involuntary responses can include uncontrollable engagement with a problem (e.g., ruminating) or uncontrollable disengagement from a problem (e.g., feeling numb and unable to think about it). However, this pattern of adaptive stress response

development was significantly less pronounced when children experienced relatively high levels of peer victimization in the second grade. Furthermore, although children generally experienced less victimization with age, for those children whose were steadily victimized or who were victimized more frequently, adaptive stress response development was hindered. Further highlighting the relationships between peer victimization and children's developing stress responses, the study found that when peer victimization decreased during elementary school, girls' *effortful engagement* rose significantly and their involuntary disengagement fell.

"These findings point to the need for effective interventions during the elementary school years to combat peer victimization, as well as programs designed to help children who have experienced repeated peer victimization learn how to effectively cope with stress," Troop-Gordon explains. "They also point to middle childhood and early adolescence as a critical period for implementing programs that foster socio-emotional learning skills before long-term trajectories of peer victimization or maladaptive stress responses have been established."

For adolescents with a history of early and prolonged adversity from peers, programs should be implemented that bolster the development of adaptive stress responses, the authors suggest. In particular, programs that teach adolescents to regulate their emotions and solve problems may help them cope with stress more effectively. Being victimized by peers may be particularly damaging to adolescents' ability to cope with stress in their interpersonal relations. Therefore, teens with a history of peer victimization may benefit from learning how to cope with victimization and other stressors that arise in their relationships with peers.

For the study, children completed a measure of their responses to social stress and a measure of peer victimization each year between second and sixth grades. The children's teachers also provided ratings of children's victimization by peers. Using these data, the researchers estimated changes in the children's effortful engagement, effortful disengagement, involuntary engagement, and involuntary disengagement responses to stress. They also examined whether experiencing peer victimization in second grade or changes in peer victimization over time predicted children's responses to stress.

Funding for this study was provided by a University of Illinois Arnold O. Beckman grant and a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health.

Together, the two studies raise concerns about the prevalence of peer victimization and provide important information for better understanding its effects and intervening to diminish it.

###

Summarized from *Child Development*, Overt and Relational Victimization: A Meta-Analytic Review of Their Overlap and Associations with Social-Psychological Adjustment by Casper, DM (University of Alabama) and Card, NA (University of Connecticut), and from Responses to Interpersonal Stress: Normative Changes Across Childhood and the Impact of Peer Victimization by Troop-Gordon, W (North Dakota State University), Sugimura, N (University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse), and Rudolph, KD (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). Copyright 2016 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.