



Teacher–child relationship, child withdrawal and aggression in the development of peer victimization



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ABSTRACT

The study examined pre-kindergarten teacher–child relationship as a predictor of peer victimization up to first grade, assessed whether this role moderated risks from children's social withdrawal and/or aggression. Participants were 377 Australian children from 12 schools. Parent ratings of victimization in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade were used, as well as prekindergarten self-ratings of parenting. Teacher-ratings of conflict and closeness, child aggression and social withdrawal were collected in pre-kindergarten. Two-part growth curve analyses conjointly modeled the likelihood of being victimized and severity of victimization. Teacher–child conflict in prekindergarten predicted the likelihood of concurrent and first grade victimization; closeness in prekindergarten was protective of more severe victimization over time. Conflict also moderated the relationship between social withdrawal and growth in severity of victimization. Discussion focuses on elucidating the 'invisible hand' of the teacher in peer dynamics, and on interventions for reducing conflict and promoting closeness in the classroom.

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Children entering primary school are immersed in a novel context involving new figures of authority and a new peer group. Most children adapt well to this new setting (Quinn & Hennessy, 2010), but this new social sphere is not always benign. Some children are victimized by their peers, posing risks for children's adjustment, including peer rejection, loneliness, and school avoidance (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Van Lier & Koot, 2010). Socio-emotional consequences of sustained victimization can include reduced academic achievement (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006), externalizing problems (Leadbeater & Hoglund, 2009) and internalizing problems (e.g., Boivin, Hymel, & Bukowski, 1995; Hanish & Guerra, 2002), and in extreme cases, suicidal ideation (Brunstein Klomek et al., 2008; Kim, Koh, & Leventhal, 2005).

What determines whom peers victimize? Research suggests that this is a function of Child × Environment interactions (Gazelle, 2006). Child × Environment models (Cairns, Elder, & Costello, 1996; Magnusson, 1988; Sameroff, 1993) emphasize that neither child behavior nor social contexts alone are adequate to account for children's developmental outcomes, but that an analysis of specific behaviors in particular contexts is required. For peer victimization, children's own behavior may serve to partly determine whether or not they are targets. Indeed, research has addressed aspects of the child's social behavior that can influence peer status, with social withdrawal (e.g., Gazelle & Ladd, 2003) and physical aggression (e.g., Barker et al., 2008)

particularly important in understanding the development of victimization. But these behaviors may be of greater or lesser risk depending on the social context in which they are experienced. A small body of research has examined how teacher–child (T–C) relationship quality might serve as a risk for peer victimization; another small body of research has examined T–C relationship and/or classroom climate as a moderator of children's behavioral risk (e.g., Arbeau, Coplan, & Weeks, 2010; Gazelle, 2006; Spangler Avant, Gazelle, & Faldowski, 2011). But to date, no longitudinal studies examined whether teacher–child relationship quality moderates children's behavioral risk over time to predict children's risk of peer victimization.

Peer victimization and children's social behavior

On average, peer victimization increases over the early years (Barker et al., 2008) and appears to stabilize thereafter (Snyder et al., 2003). Yet many if not most children experience little or no victimization in the early school years (Løhre, Lydersen, Paulsen, Mæhle, & Vatten, 2011); Barker et al. (2008) note that one in ten young children is a target of victimization. Nevertheless, by late childhood, some children have developed stable reputations as victims (Biggs et al., 2010; Boivin, Petitclerc, Feng, & Barker, 2010). To understand who is targeted, it may be necessary to consider how children's social behaviors may confer risk of peer victimization.

Research on peer victimization has established individual vulnerabilities that increase children's victimization risk (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2010). Children who display physical aggression may themselves become targets of other's aggression (Olweus,

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1978). The evidence for the role of aggression in children's peer victimization, however, is mixed. Externalizing behaviors appear to predict the initial risk that a child will be victimized in kindergarten, but not necessarily subsequent changes in victimization status (Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2010). The role of aggression in predicting victimization is complicated by the potential for aggression to suppress further victimization, at least in the short term (Snyder et al., 2003). In light of this mixed evidence, further research examining the predictive role of early aggression on the likelihood and severity of victimization over time is warranted.

Children who are socially withdrawn in peer contexts are more likely to be excluded by peers in first grade (Arbeau et al., 2010) and to become passive victims (Boulton, 1999; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). Social withdrawal predicts subsequent peer victimization in the middle-school years, accounting for previous levels of peer victimization (Boivin et al., 2010). Given the stability of social inhibition in childhood (Pfeifer, Goldsmith, Davison, & Rickman, 2002), further research examining the role of early social withdrawal on children's victimization is needed. Moreover, Gazelle's (2006) work suggests that the relationship of social withdrawal to peer adversity should be examined in relation to the specific social contexts in which withdrawal occurs.

Teacher–child relationships and children's peer victimization

Recently, Farmer, McAuliffe Lines, and Hamm (2011) discussed the potent role for teachers in shaping children's peer contexts, both directly via the quality of T–C relationship and indirectly via the classroom climate and organization. Teachers are called upon to serve as authorities on social rules, to help arbitrate students' conflicts, and to facilitate children's peer interactions (Farmer et al., 2011). When these roles are working well, a good teacher can be a powerful positive agent in children's social lives (Kindermann, 2011; Werner, 1993). Given that peer networks are nascent at school entry, this facilitation role may be particularly important in the first year of schooling.

Teacher–child relationship quality, in particular, may influence children's social development. The T–C relationship can be characterized by positive dimensions of warmth and closeness, and negative dimensions, such as conflict and power struggles (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Both dimensions have been implicated in children's social development, including externalizing and internalizing problems and school adjustment (Baker, 2006; Brendgen, Wanner, & Vitaro, 2006; Doumen et al., 2008; Ladd & Burgess, 1999; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2010; Runions et al., in press; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005). This body of research makes clear that T–C relationship quality makes a difference for children's lives and social development.

Much less research has examined how T–C relationships may influence peer dynamics and risk for victimization, despite multiple mechanisms that may be at play. Children who are unable to form a strong relationship with teachers may miss out on an important protective figure in their lives, one which can provide counsel about peer problems. Alternately, if the T–C relationship is marked by conflict, the child's peers may come to believe that the child is not in the teacher's "good books", and this may motivate some peers to choose the child as a target of victimization. The stigma of teacher–child conflict, then, may place children at risk for peer victimization.

Recent evidence suggests that the T–C relationship can influence peer status (e.g., Hughes, Cavell, & Wilson, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2006). Shin and Kim (2008) found that teacher-reported conflict concurrently predicted victimization amongst preschoolers after accounting for children's withdrawal and aggression. However, Shin and Kim's study variables were all derived from teacher report, creating shared-source variance concerns. Reavis et al. (2010) examined victimization between kindergarten and grade five as a function of teacher–

child, mother–child and peer relationships. They found a significant relationship between teacher–child conflict and children's victimization status in kindergarten, but not with rates of change. Finally, Troop-Gordon and Kopp (2011) examined peer victimization between fall and spring of a single school year amongst fourth- and fifth-grade children. They found that teacher–child conflict and closeness played little role in predicting peer victimization. But for younger children, conflict and closeness may be more salient processes that present risk, or protect against it, than for the older sample in Troop-Gordon and Kopp's study. Further research, especially longitudinal research, on T–C relationship and peer victimization is warranted.

Child × environment interactions in children's victimization risk

The teacher–child relationship may differentially impact children who are already vulnerable to peer victimization due to their own social behavioral risk. Children's social withdrawal and poor self-control, which is common in children with externalizing problems, are both implicated in the early development of teacher–child conflict and closeness (Rudasill, 2010), and are thus salient characteristics in the establishment of classroom relationships. In a cross-sectional study, Arbeau et al. (2010) found that children's social withdrawal can interact with teacher–child relationship quality to predict peer status, including peer exclusion. In related research, Gazelle (2006) examined the interactive role of anxious solitude and first-grade classroom climate, which reflects in part the collective quality of teacher–child relationship (Howes, 2000). Gazelle found that peer rejection was highest, and peer acceptance lowest, for anxious children who were in classes marked by poor emotional climate. A follow-up longitudinal study (Spangler Avant et al., 2011) found that positive emotional classroom climate may protect children who have problems with anxious solitude, but also found that, in classes with poor emotional climate, anxious-solitary children were less excluded than more sociable peers. A focus on teacher–child relationship may provide a clearer picture of Child × Environment interactions. To date, however, no longitudinal studies have examined whether teacher–child relationship moderates the relationship of aggression and withdrawal to peer victimization.

The present study

The present study examined whether children's behavioral risks and children's relationship with their teacher in the first year of schooling predict peer victimization concurrently and longitudinally. Based on prior research, our first hypothesis was that early signs of social withdrawal and physical aggression would place children at risk for victimization (e.g., Arbeau et al., 2010; Boivin et al., 2010; Gazelle, 2006), although we note in advance that the role of physical aggression is more ambiguous (e.g., Snyder et al., 2003), and aggression may not serve as a main effect on victimization risk.

Our second hypothesis addressed the role of teacher–child relationship. As the first year of schooling is important in establishing children's reputations, we hypothesized that teacher–child conflict and closeness in pre-kindergarten would predict not only concurrent but also subsequent victimization (Reavis et al., 2010; Shin & Kim, 2008). To provide a conservative test of the relationship of teacher–child conflict and closeness to peer victimization, we used parent-ratings of victimization, and controlled for parenting warmth, authoritarian control and psychological control.

Finally, we hypothesized that teacher–child relationship quality would moderate the relationship between children's social behaviors and peer victimization. Motivated by research and theory on Child × Environment models of development, we hypothesized that for children who were already at-risk due to their social behaviors, conflict with the teacher might strengthen the signal to a child's peers that targeting the child is acceptable (hypothesis 3). Hypothesis

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