



Resilience to bullying victimization: The role of individual, family and peer characteristics



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ABSTRACT

Little research attention has been paid to bullied students who function better than expected and are therefore defined as “resilient”. The present longitudinal study aimed to identify individual, family and peer factors that predict fewer than expected levels of depression and delinquency following experiences of bullying victimization. The sample consisted 3,136 adolescents. Self-report data were used to measure bullying victimization at age 13 and 14 and depression and delinquency at age 14. We examined the effects of gender, self-esteem, social alienation, parental conflict, sibling victimization and number of close friends on levels of emotional and behavioral resilience following bullying victimization. The resilience measures were derived by regressing depression and delinquency scores at age 14 on levels of bullying victimization at age 13 and 14, respectively. The adolescents who reported low depression despite frequently experiencing bullying tended to be male, had higher self-esteem, were feeling less socially alienated, were experiencing low levels of conflict with parents and were not victimized by siblings. On the other hand, the adolescents who reported low delinquency despite frequently experiencing bullying tended to be female, had higher self-esteem, were experiencing low levels of conflict with parents, were not victimized by siblings and had less close friends. Relationships with parents and siblings continue to play some role in promoting emotional and behavioral adjustment among victims of bullying and, therefore, interventions are more likely to be successful if they target both the psychosocial skills of adolescents and their relationships with their family.

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Introduction

Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior that is repeated over time against a person who feels powerless to defend him or herself (Monks, Smith, Naylor, Barter, Ireland, & Coyne, 2009). It can take many forms such as hitting, name calling, social exclusion, spreading nasty rumors and sending insulting messages by phone. A recent comparison of bullying prevalence across 40 countries revealed that, on average, 26% of adolescents are involved in bullying: 12.6% as victims, 10.7% as bullies and 3.6% as bully victims (Craig et al., 2009). Bullying increases steadily in primary school, peaks during the first years of secondary school (ages 12–14) as students re-negotiate their position in the new peer group and tapers off in late adolescence. The consequences of bullying can be severe and long-lasting, including low self-esteem, depression, academic failure, conduct problems, psychosis and increased risk of suicide (Arseneault, Bowes, & Shakoor, 2009; Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontaine, & Maughan, 2008; Brunstein-Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Schreier et al., 2009).

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Although bullied students are clearly at risk of the problems mentioned above, not all of them will experience such difficulties. Those individuals who show positive developmental outcomes despite facing stressors such as bullying are referred to as “resilient” (Rutter, 2006). Resilience has been neglected in bullying research (Rothson, Head, Klineberg, & Stansfeld, 2011), and, as a result, it is not currently known how some bullied students manage to bounce back and function well over time despite their negative experience. Studies that have investigated resilience to child maltreatment find that 12–22% of children or adults who were abused as children manifest better outcomes than expected given their experiences of abuse (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Polo-Tomás, & Taylor, 2007). However, even in this field, longitudinal studies are relatively few and often limited to small samples (Cicchetti, 2010; Werner, 2013). Identifying the factors that promote positive outcomes in young people who have experienced negative events such as bullying could steer the development of successful interventions for victims. The present study attempts to address this by investigating individual, family and peer predictors of resilience to bullying using a large cohort of adolescents in Scotland.

Defining resilience

Although definitions of resilience vary among studies, a consensus view is emerging that resilient individuals are those who manifest positive outcomes over time despite facing significant adversities (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). In adolescence, not being depressed is an indicator of emotional adjustment, performing well at school is an indicator of academic adjustment and not being delinquent is an indicator of behavioral adjustment (Jaffee et al., 2007; Luthar et al., 2000). Most authors are also in agreement that resilience is not a personality trait but rather a capacity that develops over time in the context of positive relationships with family members and peers (Egeland, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1993; Luthar, 2003; Rutter, 1999). Garmezy (1985) was one of the first researchers in this field to recognize the importance of positive relationships within and outside the family in fostering resilience. He distinguished between three basic sources of protection: individual characteristics (including high self-esteem and autonomy), family environment (defined as positive relationships with parents characterized by warmth, harmony and absence of neglect and conflict) and community (including positive peer interactions characterized by trust, support and absence of conflict, quality neighborhoods and schools). Garmezy's theoretical framework influenced much subsequent theorizing and research on resilience (Luthar et al., 2000). For example, life-course theories of resilience also place emphasis on positive relationships with family members and peers as determinants of resilience (Rutter, 1999). According to this perspective, relationships within and outside the family serve either to increase or decrease the risk of negative outcomes following adversity depending on their quality. Rutter (1999) has argued that negative relationships with family and peers may be genetically mediated in the sense that the child's characteristics and behavior shapes the type of relationship they develop with other people.

Resilience against bullying

Although central in Garmezy's and others' theoretical frameworks, family and peer predictors of positive adjustment among victims of bullying have been largely overlooked in the literature. Rather, the literature has primarily explored how individual characteristics influence the outcomes that bullied children and young people will experience. For example, research has identified that cognitive interpretations of events (e.g. how great the threat is perceived to be) partially mediate the extent to which bullied children will report feeling lonely (Catterson & Hunter, 2010). However, other individual characteristics remain under-investigated. For example, although there is evidence that adolescents who are resilient to sexual abuse are characterized by high levels of self-esteem (i.e. have a positive view of themselves; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2010), the possible mediating role of self-esteem in the association between bullying and positive adjustment remains under-investigated. It is also not clear how gender may affect adolescents' adjustment to bullying. Some studies suggest that females are more vulnerable to the effects of bullying than males (Barker et al., 2008; Klomek et al., 2009; Perren, Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2010) while others have found that bullying affects both genders equally (Bakker, Ormel, Verhulst, & Oldehinkel, 2010; Turner, Exum, Brame, & Holt, 2013).

Only recently have studies begun to examine how family relationships influence longer-term developmental outcomes for bullied students. Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt and Arseneault (2010) investigated predictors of positive adjustment following experiences of bullying victimization in primary school in a sample of 1,116 pairs of twins aged 10–12. The study found that maternal warmth, sibling warmth and a positive atmosphere at home were associated with fewer than expected emotional and behavioral problems such as depression and aggression over a two-year period following bullying victimization. Maternal warmth, in particular, exerted a protective effect independent of genetic factors such that the bullied twin who received more maternal warmth had fewer behavioral problems than the twin who received less maternal warmth. This study provides strong evidence of an environmental effect of families in protecting children aged 10–12 years from negative outcomes associated with being bullied. However, it is not known whether family relationships are equally important for older age groups that tend to spend less time at home.

The importance of positive relationships with siblings has been further highlighted in a recent review of sibling bullying (Wolke & Skew, 2012). Although based on a small number of cross-sectional studies, the review suggests that those bullied at home and at school show increased odds of emotional and behavioral problems compared to those victimized in only one context or not at all. This is not surprising given emerging evidence that sibling relationships have a significant bearing on a range of developmental outcomes including self-esteem and social competence in peer relationships. Adolescents who report

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