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Bullying of youth with autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, or typical development: Victim and parent perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In-depth interviews conducted separately with 13-year-olds with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), intellectual disability (ID), or typical development (TD) and their mothers investigated the experiences of victimization in the form of bullying. Coded constructs from the interviews were utilized to compare groups on the frequency, type, and impact of victimization. Youth with ASD were victimized more frequently than their ID or TD peers, and the groups differed with regard to the type of bullying and the impact it had, with ASD youth faring the worst. Higher internalizing problems and conflict in friendships were found to be significant predictors of victimization, according to both youth- and mother-reports. These predictors were found to be more salient than ASD status alone. Implications for practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Victims of bullying often endure repeated exposure to intentional negative actions on the part of one or more individuals, especially if there is an imbalance of power in their relationship (Olweus, 1994). This problematic behavior is prevalent among all adolescents in the U.S., with 28–30% of students reported to be involved in bullying behaviors (Carlyle & Stenman, 2007; Nansel et al., 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Sadly, there is reason to believe that youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or intellectual disability (ID) experience even more bullying than their typically developing (TD) peers. This study addressed the need for research on the frequency, type, and impact of victimization by incorporating the perspectives of three groups of youth—ASD, ID and TD—and their mothers.

1.1. Victimization of ASD and ID youth

Nearly seven decades ago, Hans Asperger wrote about the tendency of children with autism to be tormented and rejected by their classmates (Asperger, 1944). This situation has not changed much today, with high rates of victimization reported for children and youth with ASD at school. For example, Cappadocia, Weiss, and Pepler (2012) found that 77% of 192 parents

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reported that their child with ASD, aged 5–21 years, had been bullied at school within the last month, with 46% reporting even more frequent victimization (i.e., “once per week” or “several times per week”).

Studies involving comparison groups are useful for understanding whether youth with ASD experience more frequent bullying than other disability groups or their TD peers. Research has indicated that youth with ASD experience more social exclusion (Locke, Ishjima, Kasari, & London, 2010), are more likely to be verbally and physically bullied, and, relative to TD youth, are more likely to have peers in their class “who do not like them” (Wainscot, Naylor, Sutcliffe, & Williams, 2008). Research has also shown that repeated victimization is significantly higher for elementary and middle school students with ASD than for other disability groups, as reported from a longitudinal dataset (Blake, Lund, Zhou, Kwok, & Benz, 2012) as well as in ratings by parents (Rowley et al., 2012).

Christensen, Fryant, Neece, and Baker (2012) compared the prevalence, chronicity, and severity of bullying between 13-year-old adolescents with ID ($N = 46$) and TD youth ($N = 91$). Adolescents with ID experienced significantly higher rates of victimization (62%) compared to their TD peers (41%). Yet, the chronicity and severity was not found to differ between groups. This study also reported the agreement between mother and youth accounts of victimization, which was low. Although mothers and adolescents agreed fairly well about whether victimization occurred, they did not agree about the severity or frequency of bullying or whether the adolescent had bullied others. In a study of 186 adolescents with mild ID aged 12–21, 83% of the sample reported having been bullied physically, emotionally, and/or verbally (Reiter & Lapidot-Leflet, 2007). In the present study, we explored the similarities and differences between ASD and ID youth, relative to TD youth.

1.2. The role of friendships in adolescence

Friendships are important in adolescence, possibly providing some protection against bullying, as friends serve a variety of functions, including emotional security, advice, validation, and opportunities for intimate disclosure. Potentially, they also can increase self-esteem and social skills and provide a context for continued exploration of the impact of an adolescent's personal actions on himself and others (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006; Rubin, Fredstrom, & Bowker, 2008). Friendships, theoretically, are reciprocal and voluntary, and presumably acknowledged by both parties (Rubin et al., 2008; Rubin, Wojslawowicz, Rose-Krasnor, Booth-LaForce, & Burgess, 2006).

1.2.1. Friendships of adolescents with ASD and ID

The friendships of those with ASD or ID are characterized differently than those of TD adolescents. Due to the nature of their disability (i.e., impairments in social-communication and restricted interests), individuals with ASD have been found to have significantly fewer reciprocal relationships than their TD peers (Howlin, 2000; Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004; Orsmond, Krauss, & Seltzer, 2004). Wainscot et al. (2008) found that while adolescents with ASD reported significantly fewer friendships than TD controls, they were just as likely to report having a “best” friend.

Similar to youth with ASD, adolescents with ID have experienced reduced participation in social activities, fewer friendships, and higher levels of loneliness (Heiman, 2000; McVilly, Stancliffe, Parmenter, & Burton-Smith, 2006; Solish, Perry, & Minnes, 2010). They have been reported to exhibit reduced social competence and conflict resolution skills and to engage in friendships that would be considered less sophisticated than those of TD adolescents (Larkin, Jahoda, MacMahon, & Pert, 2012; Matheson, Olsen, & Weisner, 2007). In a study comparing youth with ASD, ID, and TD youth, ages 5–17, Solish et al. (2010) found both disability groups to have significantly fewer mutual friendships than TD youth, but those with ID had significantly more friends than those with ASD (i.e., 20% of youth with ID versus 50% of youth with ASD were reported to have no friends). These deficits in friendships may contribute to the increased victimization rates seen in bullying studies, among other problems (e.g., depression, anxiety). In this study, we attempted to understand the extent to which friendships play a role in victimization.

1.3. Risk factors for victimization

Though relatively little research has been conducted to identify bullying risk factors for those with developmental disabilities, some studies specifically with youth with ID have found the strongest predictors for bullying risk to be poor social skills (i.e., social problems and social withdrawal) and behavior problems (Christensen et al., 2012). Emotional and interpersonal problems have also been linked to victimization in this population (Reiter & Lapidot-Leflet, 2007). Because social skills and interpersonal communication deficits are also central features of ASD, we would expect the variables that are predictive of bullying and friendships of youth with ID to be similar for those with ASD. Yet, this is not always what has been reported. For example, Rowley et al. (2012) found that youth with ASD with the fewest social and communication impairments actually experienced the highest rates of victimization; however, the authors did not explore the relationship between behavior problems and bullying. In contrast, Cappadocia et al. (2012) reported that communication difficulty was a significant predictor of greater victimization for those with ASD, controlling for age and gender. One reason for this discrepancy could be the difference in measurement of communication impairment or deficit. Importantly, both groups of researchers found that fewer friendships at school and more internalizing behavior problems were each predictive of victimization. They also found younger children more likely to be bullied than older children.

In addition to the ambiguity surrounding the identification of risk factors, using self-reported measures confounds the research in this field. Youth with ASD often misperceive and inaccurately report on their friendships (Rotheram-Fuller,

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