



The protective role of supportive friends against bullying perpetration and victimization

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A B S T R A C T

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A crossed-lagged regression model was tested to investigate relationships between friendship support, bullying involvement, and its consequences during adolescence. Students, 12–16 years ($N = 880$), were administered questionnaires twice, one year apart. Using structural equation modeling, a model was specified and higher levels of support from friends were related to lower levels of bullying and victimization one year later. Additionally, a bidirectional relationship between victimization and depression was found, and greater property crimes commission was related to higher levels of future bullying. These findings support the ‘friendship protection hypothesis’ and suggest the quality of support in friendships can protect against bullying victimization and perpetration. Prior research has shown that friendships can protect against victimization; however this is one of the few longitudinal studies to focus on the quality of friendship, rather than other characteristics of the friends. It is suggested that interventions should focus on increasing perceptions of support within existing friendships.

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Friendships may be able to protect against bullying involvement, a term used in this paper to refer to both perpetration and victimization, because they offer adolescents opportunities to negotiate closeness, achieve acceptance and validation, and contribute to their general well-being (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1993; Sullivan, 1953). In addition to providing opportunities for positive experiences, it has also been theorized that friendships can contribute to resiliency despite negative events during adolescence. The ‘friendship protection hypothesis’ suggests that having friends might help to buffer against negative experiences and their subsequent outcomes (Boulton, Trueman, Chau, Whitehand, & Amatya, 1999).

Both quality and quantity of friendships have been theorized to protect against victimization. Having friends, in itself, is seen as positive as it is an indicator that the adolescent has a social skill set to some degree, and requires that adolescents think of others and can resolve conflict in order to maintain friendships (Hartup, 1996; Sullivan, 1953). The vast majority of both cross-sectional (Beran & Violato, 2004; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009) and longitudinal (Boulton et al., 1999; Fox & Boulton, 2006; Perren & Hornung, 2005) research linking friendship and decreased victimization has focused on the quantity of friends an adolescent has, or characteristics of their friendships (e.g., if they are reciprocal). However, most research does not account for characteristics of the people adolescents befriend, or the quality of the friendship. Antisocial adolescents might be very supportive of each other, but may nonetheless demonstrate aggressive behaviors toward others. Research has shown that deviant youth tend to befriend others who engage in similar levels of antisocial behaviors (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991), and that deviant peers may serve to exacerbate antisocial behaviors in each other (Patterson, Dishion, & Yoerger, 2000; Wissink, Deković, & Meijer, 2009). Despite these reported

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negative influences, Bagwell and Coie (2004) found no differences in adolescents' ratings of friendship quality between aggressive and non-aggressive boys. Alternatively, support of friends may increase psychosocial adjustment of adolescents, which may in turn lead to decreased involvement in bullying and victimization (Boulton et al., 1999). Little research has examined the quality of the friendship, and support within peer relationships in particular, in association with bullying and victimization.

Hartup (1996) suggests that friendship quality might account for individual differences between adolescents more so than quantity of friends, and support within friendships is one of the most commonly examined aspects of the quality of friendships. Adolescents' perceptions about the quality of support received from their friends can buffer the impact of negative experiences in a number of ways (Sandler, Miller, Short, & Wolchik, 1989). Theoretically, perceived friendship quality can protect adolescents from stressful events such as being bullied because high quality friendships can enhance self-esteem, provide assistance in coping, and increase perceived security in social relationships (Sandler et al., 1989). The links between friendship and positive outcomes have received empirical support (Moran & DuBois, 2002; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2010), and support has additionally been linked with such benefits as increases in school achievement (Hogan et al., 2010; Rabaglietti & Ciairano, 2008), acquisition of autonomy (Rabaglietti & Ciairano, 2008), and decreases in such areas as problem behaviors (Moran & DuBois, 2002), and depression (Newman, Newman, Griffen, O'Connor, & Spas, 2007; Rueger et al., 2010). In turn, adolescents displaying these characteristics may be less likely to be targets for bullies (Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2003; Olweus, 1994; Shelley & Craig, 2010; Walden & Beran, 2010).

Cross-sectional research that has examined the relation between the support of peers and bullying involvement has reported conflicting results (Barboza et al., 2009; Bollmer, Milich, Harris, & Maras, 2005; Holt & Espelage, 2007; Woods, Done, & Kalsi, 2009). Two longitudinal studies were located that examined friendship quality as it related to bullying in adolescence (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Malcolm, Jensen-Campbell, Rex-Lear, & Waldrip, 2006). The study by Malcolm et al. (2006) followed 207 fifth and sixth graders across one academic year and found that as the quality of reciprocal friendships increased, peer victimization by both overt and relational aggression decreased. The other study examined individual dimensions of friendship quality and found that perceived protection in best friendships decreased the relationship between teacher-rated internalizing behaviors and later victimization (Hodges et al., 1999). While having a mutual best friend protected against a relationship between victimization and future internalizing and externalizing behaviors, the quality of the friendship did not significantly influence this relationship. The perpetration of bullying was not investigated in relation to friendship quality in either of these two studies.

Boulton et al. (1999) specifically discuss the friendship protection hypothesis as being relevant for helping to guard against victimization; however, it is logical to extend this theory to include protection against becoming involved in bullying perpetration as well. Increases in coping strategies and relationship security are characteristics that might also decrease the likelihood of becoming involved in bullying perpetration (Hampel, Manhal, & Hayer, 2009; Walden & Beran, 2010). Primary Socialization Theory provides further theoretical rationale connecting bullying perpetration with friendship (Higgins, Ricketts, Marcum, & Mahoney, 2010; Oetting & Donnermeyer, 1998). This theory posits that delinquent behavior is socially learned, and that peers play a primary role as socialization agents during adolescence. Peers are thought to influence both prosocial and deviant behavior, and the strength of the bond between peers is a major determinant of the efficacy of norm transmission between peers. Adolescents with weak bonds and emotional connections to peers are thought to be more likely to bond with deviant peers and engage in deviant behaviors, which could include bullying perpetration. This is supported by research that examined close friendships of adolescent boys and determined that relationships between antisocial friends were characterized as somewhat low in quality, were short-lived, and were perceived as only marginally satisfactory (Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995). Other studies have found similar relationships between delinquency and friendship quality (Mcelhaney, Immele, Smith, & Allen, 2006; Poulin, Dishion, & Haas, 1999). Peers who are strongly bonded are thought to develop similar attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviors. As antisocial adolescents seem to have weaker bonds, this influence within friendships may be less likely to occur in friendships of antisocial youth. However, Primary Socialization Theory suggests that adolescents who have peers who are supportive of them are more likely to be supportive of others and less likely to treat them poorly through physical, verbal, or relational aggression. Thus, there are theoretical underpinnings associating supportive friends with a decrease in both bullying and victimization.

Bullying has been defined in a variety of ways (Arora, 1996; Olweus, 1978; Wolke, Woods, & Samara, 2009). For the purposes of this study, bullying is considered aggression between peers that occurs at school. This aggression can consist of physical aggression, verbal aggression, or social exclusion. Despite some disagreement in the literature, research has generally established longitudinal and bidirectional relationships between both bullying (Kaltiala-Heino, Frojd, & Marttunen, 2010; Klomek et al., 2008; Sourander, Helstelä, Helenius, & Piha, 2000) and victimization (Abada, Hou, & Ram, 2008; Fekkes, Pijpers, Fredriks, Vogels, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2006; Gunther, Drukker, Feron, & van Os, 2007; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2010; Klomek et al., 2008; Patton et al., 2008; Sourander et al., 2000; Sweeting, Young, West, & Der, 2006) on the one side and an internalization of difficulties as manifested by depressive symptoms on the other. Research has also repeatedly found relationships across time between bullying/victimization and externalizing problems, and the commission of property crimes in particular, during adolescence (Barker, Arseneault, Brendgen, Fontain, & Maughan, 2008; Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000; Sourander et al., 2007). As it seems that involvement in bullying often leads to problems for adolescents, it is important to investigate what might lead to decreases in bullying.

Few studies have directly linked friendship support with bullying, but those that do report a general consensus that higher levels of support are associated with lower levels of bullying involvement (Holt & Espelage, 2007; Malcolm et al., 2006).

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