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Friendship quality and sociometric status: between-group differences and links to loneliness in severely abused and nonabused children☆,☆☆,★

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Abstract

Objective: There were two main aims: first, to illuminate the difference between abused children's general popularity with classmates and success in close friendships; second, to examine the specific interactional qualities of abused children's friendships and their links to loneliness.

Method: Thirty-five severely abused children and 43 matched, nonabused children were compared on peer-rated sociometric status, self-reported loneliness, and observed and self-reported friendship quality.

Results: Abused children were not rated significantly lower sociometrically, nor did they differ significantly from control children on several measures of friendship quality, such as resolving conflicts and helping each other. However, abused children were observed to be more negative and less proactive in their interactions. They also reported their friendships as being more conflictual, and as higher on betrayal and lower on caring. Only *observational* friendship variables predicted loneliness.

Conclusions: The results challenge the assumption that abused children's peer relationships are uniformly more maladaptive than nonabused children's, and point to the possible benefits of structured interventions for "normalizing" their friendship interactions. The pattern of difficulties exhibited by abused children (e.g., conflict) provides foci for more specific interventions.

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Multi-method assessments are necessary and the multi-dimensional nature of children's social adjustment is important to understand. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

Overview

Recently, research attention has turned to the familial determinants of children's peer relationships (Parke & Ladd, 1992). Family environments consisting of positive developmental histories in both parents' families of origin, satisfactory marital relations, and sensitive, stable, and supportive parent-child interactions are conducive to secure parent-child attachments which, in turn, lead to more successful relationships with peers (Cicchetti, Lynch, Shonk, & Manly, 1992). On the other hand, some dysfunctional family environments may lead to maladaptive peer relationships. Investigation of these types of families may provide new insights into the role of family factors in the emergence of peer relationships. The goal of the present study is to determine how children who experience a history of abuse in their families function with their peers and friends. It is important to better understand abused children's friendship interaction styles because many researchers have found that poor social skills in general, and unsuccessful peer relations in particular, put children at risk for later negative developmental outcomes such as drug use, juvenile delinquency, and school drop out (Parker & Asher, 1987). Abused children are especially at risk, then, since their peer relations have been found to be lacking in many respects (George & Main, 1979; Haskett & Kistner, 1991; Howe, Tepper, & Parke, 1998).

Several theoretical perspectives may explain the deficient peer relationships of abused children. According to attachment theory, abused children's working models of other people as frightening, unavailable, and untrustworthy may lead to poor peer relationships (Dean, Malik, Richards, & Stringer, 1986; Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996; McCrone, Egeland, Kalkoske, & Carlson, 1994). Similarly, the social information processing perspective (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey, & Brown, 1986) suggests that a history of abusive treatment may lead to hostile attribution biases, as well as a preference for violent problem solving strategies in social conflict situations with peers (Mueller & Silverman, 1989; Price, 1996). Finally, social network theorists (Lewis & Schaeffer, 1981; Parke & Bhavnagri, 1989) suggest that abused children may have fewer opportunities to acquire and maintain social skills due to parental isolation and restrictions on social contact with other children (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1991). Although not mutually exclusive, these theoretical perspectives all suggest processes that may underlie abused children's risk status for peer relationship problems.

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