



Parents' beliefs about peer victimization and children's socio-emotional development [☆]

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing evidence that interpersonal risks and resources can modulate the impact peer victimization has on children's socio-emotional adjustment. The current study contributes to this research by examining links between parents' victimization-related beliefs and children's psychosocial functioning. Data were collected on 190 3rd- and 4th-grade children (92 boys) and their parents. After controlling for earlier levels of socio-emotional adjustment, parents' normative beliefs predicted greater overt victimization and aggression among boys and, for boys and girls, amplified links between peer victimization and subsequent psychosocial maladjustment. Avoidance beliefs predicted positive behavioral development among low victimized youth, but compromised adjustment among highly victimized youth. Sex-specific findings emerged, and results were stronger for overt than relational victimization. These findings underscore the need for parent education components within anti-bullying interventions.

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Introduction

There is mounting evidence that peer victimization, the experience of repeated harassment from peers (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), is detrimental to children's psychosocial development. A meta-analysis of studies conducted from 1978 to 1997 showed that victimization is associated with depression, loneliness, anxiety, and reduced self-worth (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Other correlates of peer victimization include reactive aggression (Schwartz et al., 1998), social withdrawal (Boivin et al., 2010), and school avoidance (Buhs et al., 2006), and chronic victimization is at least as common as other established disorders (Card & Hodges, 2008).

However, links between peer victimization and maladjustment are modest (see Hawker & Boulton, 2000), spurring researchers to study those factors which mitigate risk to victims' well-being. Much of this work has focused on interpersonal resources. In particular, friendships

with peers have been shown to reduce the risk posed by victimization on youths' socio-emotional adjustment (Lamarche et al., 2007; Schmidt & Bagwell, 2007). Less work has been conducted on victims' relationships with non-peers (e.g., family members, teachers; see Lamarche et al., 2007, for research on sibling relationships). Parents, in particular, are a source of support and guidance for most youth. Moreover, children are often advised to inform their parents about bullying (e.g., Stop Bullying Now!, US Department of Health & Human Services, 2010), and children report often seeking adults' support when coping with peer harassment (Naylor et al., 2001; Paquette & Underwood, 1999).

Whether parents' responses to children's peer harassment amplify or diminish the well-being of victimized youth may depend on their beliefs regarding bullying and its consequences. Adults' views on peer victimization vary significantly, likely impacting how they respond to children's peer harassment (Craig et al., 2000; Troop & Ladd, 2002). Furthermore, it is assumed that parents can best respond to peer victimization if they are aware of the prevalence, nature, and consequences of bullying, as well as strategies that decrease peer harassment and empower victimized youth. To this end, parent education is often incorporated in anti-bullying programs (e.g., Limber et al., 2004) and websites (e.g., Stop Bullying Now!, US Department of Health & Human Services, 2009). However, there has been little research on parents' victimization-related beliefs and whether they prevent or amplify trajectories of increasing socio-emotional maladjustment among victimized youth. The objective of the current study, therefore, was to examine links between parents' victimization-related beliefs and children's psychosocial development.

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Parental beliefs as moderators of victimization-adjustment linkages

Although the study of parents' beliefs predate the advancement of social cognitive theories within developmental and social psychological literatures (Goodnow, 1988), increased emphasis on cognition as a basis for parenting behaviors has resulted in extensive empirical and theoretical works on parents' beliefs over the past 30 years (Bugental & Goodnow, 1998; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). Parental beliefs function as accessible knowledge structures (i.e., mental representations, working models, schemas) which guide attention, organize incoming information, and determine, in part, affective and behavioral responses (Bugental & Goodnow, 1998). The effects of parental beliefs are believed to be multifaceted, influencing parents' goals, attributions, communication patterns, expressed emotions, and socialization practices (Bugental & Goodnow, 1998; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). Although parental beliefs are believed to have primarily an indirect effect on child outcomes (Rubin & Mills, 1992), accumulating evidence points to meaningful relations between parents' beliefs and children's development in such diverse domains as language acquisition, academic achievement, cognitive growth, and socio-emotional development (Miller, 1988; Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002).

However, research on parents' beliefs specific to peer victimization remains limited. Such beliefs may impact parents' ability to provide their children instrumental assistance and emotional comfort (Carver et al., 1989), the amount of concern they express, their attributions for peer harassment, and their socialization of coping strategies (see Abaied & Rudolph, 2010). Consequently, children's behavioral and emotional reactions to peer harassment may vary as a function of their parents' beliefs. Moreover, anti-bullying programs often seek to influence: a) the seriousness with which parents view bullying, and b) the strategies parents believe children should use to prevent peer harassment (e.g., Stop Bullying Now!, US Department of Health & Human Services, 2010). Accordingly, the current study focused on parents' belief that peer harassment is a normative experience and their beliefs regarding two strategies often recommended to victims of bullying – avoidance and assertion. Although such beliefs are likely not mutually exclusive (e.g., one may hold normative and assertion beliefs), each was expected to have unique relations with children's socio-emotional development.

Normative beliefs

Despite efforts to dispel commonly held myths regarding bullying, many misconceptions remain prevalent including the belief that peer victimization is a normative and harmless experience (O'Moore, 2000). For this study, we conceptualized *normative beliefs* as the perception that harassment is a natural and common part of growing up, that peer harassment has no significant negative effects on children's development, and that children can learn from their experiences of bullying. Because holding normative beliefs likely reduces empathetic arousal and active coping in the face of children's peer victimization, it was hypothesized that parents' normative beliefs would amplify links between peer victimization and psychosocial maladjustment. Children who are frequently victimized may lack the skills needed to effectively respond to peer harassment (Schwartz et al., 1993). If their parents view bullying as a normative childhood experience, these children may not receive parental assistance, leading to continued victimization from peers. To avoid further harassment, they may withdraw from peers (Boivin et al., 2010) or become increasingly aggressive and less prosocial, particularly if they adopt their parents' normative views on aggression (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). Parents holding normative beliefs also may not provide their children adequate emotional support, resulting in children's heightened negative affect (e.g., depression, anxiety) when coping with peer harassment (Hawker & Boulton, 2000).

Avoidance beliefs

In addition, parents may vary as to how they believe children should respond when victimized by peers. Many adults endorse avoidance (i.e., evading, ignoring, or walking away from aggressors and aggressive situations) as an effective means of coping with bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996), and avoidance is frequently recommended in anti-bullying programs (e.g., Smith & Sharp, 1991; US Department of Health & Human Services, 2009). As a basis for providing instrumental support, parents' avoidance beliefs may be adaptive to the extent that walking away and ignoring aggressors is effective at deterring bullying and maintaining positive peer relationships. However, avoidance beliefs may reduce active intervention by parents, who may simply advise avoidance to their children without taking other steps to end the bullying, and, similar to normative beliefs, may communicate to children that bullying is typical among children and efforts to deter other's aggression are futile.

Although little research has been conducted on behavioral avoidance in response to peer victimization, Visconti and Troop-Gordon (2010) found, using data from the second year of the current longitudinal study, that the efficacy of walking away from aggressors may depend on the child's sex and whether the child is a frequent target of peer harassment (see also Abaied & Rudolph, 2010). For some children, particularly those who are frequently victimized, walking away may signal anger and frustration, increasing the risk that they will continue to engage in more aggressive, less prosocial peer interactions. In addition, children who frequently avoid aggressors due to chronic harassment may become withdrawn and disengaged from peers. Avoidance may also be a maladaptive strategy for girls, who often engage in reparative behaviors during peer conflicts (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). However, for non-victimized youth and boys, walking away from aggressive peers may allow for a de-escalation of the conflict and opportunities to engage with other aggressors, resulting in positive social development (Visconti & Troop-Gordon, 2010).

Parents' avoidance beliefs also were expected to amplify emotional distress among victimized youth. Victims who perceive adults as advocating avoidance may blame themselves for not effectively handling their mistreatment and may expect little intervention on the part of adults. Support for this proposition comes from data collected by Troop-Gordon and Quenette (2010) using a sample of 4th-, 5th-, and 6th-graders. Children were asked what they believed their teacher did in response to students' peer harassment. Results showed that believing one's teacher advises avoidance is associated with heightened internalizing problems among victimized youth. The current study tested the proposition that victims may similarly evidence greater depression and anxiety when their parents endorse avoidance beliefs.

Assertion beliefs

Parents also may hold the belief that children should assert themselves when victimized by peers (i.e., stand up for themselves; make it clear that they will not be picked on). Assertive behavior predicts greater socio-emotional adjustment and reduced victimization (Schwartz et al., 1993; Schwartz et al., 1998), suggesting that children who assert themselves may be seen as socially competent (e.g., less aggressive or withdrawn, more prosocial) by peers. Parents' endorsement of assertion also may communicate to children that they are capable of effectively responding to aggressive peers, increasing children's feelings of competence and decreasing depression and anxiety. Thus, parental assertion beliefs were predicted to be related to diminished links between peer harassment and later psychosocial functioning.

The current study

In summary, the current study examined if parents' normative, avoidance, and assertion beliefs moderate links between peer victimization and children's socio-emotional adjustment. Third- and fourth-graders were recruited for this study. This age group was of interest because children

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