

# Peer rejection, negative peer treatment, and school adjustment: Self-concept and classroom engagement as mediating processes<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Data gathered from a short term longitudinal study within fifth grade classrooms ( $n=378$ ) were used to evaluate two process-oriented models linking peer rejection and negative peer treatment to children's self-concept, school engagement and adjustment. Both structural models linked peer rejection, victimization, and exclusion to children's self-concept, classroom engagement, and change in achievement (fall of fifth grade to the spring). The model evaluations indicated that peer rejection predicted both exclusion and victimization and that these forms of peer treatment, in turn, predicted academic self-competence. Academic self-competence, however, only partially mediated linkages to achievement change. Parallel (i.e. direct) linkages from exclusion and victimization to both academic self-competence and engagement were required for adequate model fit, as were direct links from academic self-concept and engagement to achievement change. An alternative model representing the hypothesis that academic self-concept fully mediated the relationships between the forms of negative peer treatment and children's engagement and achievement did not fit the data well.

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Recent peer relations research has expanded our conception of the role children's peer relations play in school adjustment processes. Researchers have linked aspects of peer relationships to subsequent peer treatment, classroom engagement patterns, self-concept, and academic adjustment (e.g. Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Links between children's peer acceptance/rejection and negative peer treatment, in particular, have predicted school adjustment and supported the contention that peer acceptance plays a unique (as opposed to overlapping) role in predicting peer treatment and adjustment (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Coie, 2004; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Parker & Asher, 1987; Vandell & Hembree, 1994; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). This research and the resulting evidence has allowed researchers to move toward developing process-oriented models of relationship effects on adjustment patterns.

As we develop a more thorough understanding of peer rejection and of the experiences of rejected children, child by environment models (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ladd, 2003) provide a framework for constructing models of these processes. One type of child by environment model suggests that, while children's behavioral dispositions may shape peer experiences, it is the nature and quality of the peer experiences that are principally responsible for subsequent adjustment and changes in adjustment. Rejected children are a behaviorally heterogeneous group — some of them tend to be more aggressive, others more socially withdrawn (MacDougall, Hymel, & Vaillancourt, 2001) and it follows that their social experiences may likewise vary. Some rejected children may experience more negative treatment from peers or different forms of treatment, while others may be less likely to experience similar treatment (Buhs & Ladd, 2001). Child by environment models suggest that as children's classroom experiences vary, so too will their behavioral and attitudinal responses and subsequent adjustment. This study examines the types of negative peer treatment that rejected children may experience in the school context and evaluates alternative models linking this treatment to behaviors, attitudes, and adjustment.

### **Children's responses to peer rejection and negative peer treatment: expanding mediating processes**

Consistent with child by environment models, current process-oriented models of peer rejection (e.g. Boivin & Hymel, 1997; Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Coie, 1990; Ladd et al., 1999) indicate that rejected children may experience different forms of negative peer treatment as they adapt to the school environment. Yet empirically evaluated models of peer rejection processes have, to date, examined only a limited range of types of peer treatment that rejected children experience. These studies have also failed to examine important aspects of children's self-system responses to this treatment that conceptual work suggests may play important roles.

First, our conceptions of the social experiences of rejected children have expanded to include a greater range of peer behaviors that may be directed towards such children. Forms of negative peer treatment associated with rejection have been relatively narrowly defined (i.e. including only physical and verbal victimization) and studies have not

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