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Research article

Peer teasing experiences of fathers and their children: Intergenerational associations and transmission mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Being the victim or perpetrator of peer teasing threatens children's immediate and long-term well-being. Given that many individual and contextual risk factors for peer victimization are transmitted within families, we tested whether fathers' childhood victimization experiences were directly or indirectly (via poor parenting and poor child adjustment) associated with their children's increased risk for similar experiences. Generation two (G2) fathers ($n = 130$) who had been assessed since age 9 years participated in an intergenerational study with their 268 G3 children and the 163 G2 mothers of these children. Peer teasing ratings were collected annually from G1 mothers, fathers, and teachers across G2 ages 9–16 years, and from the same three informant types across the same ages for G3 children. Also assessed was G2 fathers' poor parenting of G3 at ages 3–7 years and G3 poor adjustment (externalizing and internalizing behaviors, deviant peer association, low social competence) and body mass index (BMI) at ages 7–16 years. Models supported intergenerational stability in being teased that was partially mediated through G2 fathers' poor parenting and G3 poor adjustment. A direct intergenerational path in being teased remained significant, and G3 BMI uniquely predicted being teased. Childhood peer victimization is perpetuated across generations. Prevention aimed at poor parenting, child poor adjustment, and peer victimization itself may disrupt intergenerational stability in these adverse experiences.

1. Introduction

Victimization by peers during childhood and adolescence has negative—even life-threatening—consequences for longterm physical and psychological health (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; Gibb, Horwood, & Fergusson, 2011; Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Although most research on peer victimization focuses on bullying involving repeated aggression by more powerful peers, bullying is not the only detrimental peer victimization experience children can have (see Finkelhor, Turner, & Hamby, 2012). Indeed, peer teasing in childhood also is associated with concurrent problems and long-term negative outcomes in adulthood (e.g., Kerr, Gini, & Capaldi, 2017). Thus, further research is needed to document both the risk for and long-term consequences of peer victimization involvement in childhood and adolescence.

The present study concerns the intergenerational legacies of peer victimization—used here to encompass being teased, “picked on,” or bullied, and teasing or bullying of peers—by evaluating the extent to which fathers' childhood involvement predicts similar

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involvement for their children. In doing so, we also consider whether fathers who were targets or perpetrators of teasing in childhood more often have offspring with higher levels of socioemotional maladjustment that in turn increases their risk of involvement in peer victimization. Furthermore, we evaluate the extent to which fathers' parenting behaviors may be a mechanism linking fathers' and children's peer victimization experiences. Thus, we review research on risks for peer victimization that may illuminate intergenerational transmission mechanisms.

1.1. Socioemotional risks

Cross-sectional studies have linked peer victimization (usually bullying) with other serious emotional and behavioral problems (e.g., van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014). Anxious, depressed, socially withdrawn, or socially unskilled children are more often targeted by peers, as are children with externalizing behavior problems such as impulsivity, hyperactivity, and general aggression and antisocial behavior (e.g., Kerr et al., 2017; Reijntjes et al., 2011). The stress of being teased, harassed, or bullied by peers also may alter stress reactivity (Ouellet-Morin, Danese, Williams, & Arseneault, 2011) and lead to symptoms and maladjustment. Furthermore, being victimized by peers may lead to emotional and behavioral problems through effects on social status, self-efficacy, and the development of interpersonal skills (e.g., Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Also at risk for maladjustment are children who victimize others. For example, bullies often show higher rates of conduct problems, callous unemotional traits, depression, and social marginalization (e.g., Fanti & Kimonis, 2012; Frick et al., 2003), and their use of manipulative, coercive, and aggressive interpersonal behaviors may lead to weaker or more hostile relationships (Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015).

Poor social adjustment also is related to victimization by and of peers. Peer interactions and friendships serve important and diverse functions in children's social development by facilitating the acquisition of key social skills (e.g., conflict resolution) (Asher & Renshaw, 1981; Boivin, Hymel, & Hodges, 2001). For children who are uninvolved in peer victimization, positive and supportive relationships with peers help promote successful adaptation during adolescence (e.g., Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995; Hartup, 1992). In contrast, children who are bullies or victims of peer teasing may lack social competence, withdraw socially, affiliate with deviant or socially unskilled children who reinforce passive or aggressive behavior with peers, or otherwise develop problematic interpersonal behaviors with long-term negative implications (e.g., Caravita, Gini, & Pozzoli, 2012; Farmer et al., 2010; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003; Vieno, Gini, & Santinello, 2011; Witvliet, Brendgen, van Lier, Koot, & Vitaro, 2010). Thus, it is worthwhile to examine whether children's socioemotional maladjustment may help account for relations between parents' and children's peer victimization experiences.

1.2. Body weight risk

Being overweight is associated with peer victimization. Multiple studies have linked peer teasing and victimization by bullies with childhood obesity (Griffiths, Wolke, Page, Horwood, & The ALSPAC Study Team, 2006; Jansen et al., 2014), and children who are overweight report high rates of weight-related victimization (Puhl, Peterson, & Luedicke, 2013). Given genetic and socioemotional influences on child weight, it may play a role in the intergenerational transmission of peer victimization experiences.

1.3. Risk from the parenting environment

Children with histories of insecure attachment, especially anxious/resistant attachment, are at higher risk for becoming targets of peer aggression than children with prior secure attachment (e.g., Jacobson & Wille, 1986; Troy & Sroufe, 1987). This may be because children who are anxious and develop feelings of helplessness and personal incompetence "attract" victimization (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001). Studies of bullied children also suggest that parents' over-protectiveness and over-involvement increases children's risk for peer victimization (Georgiou, 2008; Ladd & Ladd, 1998), perhaps by undermining their self-confidence and assertiveness in peer relationships (Finnegan, Hodges, & Perry, 1998).

Other parenting behaviors consistently associated with adolescents' peer victimization include aggression, harshness, hostility, and lack of support (Kawabata et al., 2011; Mann, Kristjansson, Sigfusdottir, & Smith, 2015). A meta-analysis showed that bullying victims including those who bully others tend to be exposed to negative parenting behavior, including abuse and neglect and maladaptive parenting (e.g., high levels of hostility, hitting, and shouting). Conversely, positive parenting behavior, characterized by good communication, warm and affectionate relationships, parental involvement and support, and parental supervision, protects against peer victimization (Lereya, Samara, & Wolke, 2013).

Family risks for bullying others include low warmth (Olweus, 1993), positive attitudes towards aggression and the use of violence to solve interpersonal conflicts (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1994; Duncan, 2004; Olweus, 1993), and harsh and inconsistent child-rearing practices (Carney & Merrell, 2001; Olweus, 1993). These family risks suggest social learning mechanisms, whereby aggressive behavior is modeled, reinforcement, and generalized to peer contexts (e.g., Baldry, 2003; Farrington, 1993). Whether these family risks relate to a broader pattern of teasing and other noxious behaviors towards peers deserves study.

1.4. Intergenerational stability in peer victimization

Based on a general model of parent transmission of aggression (e.g., Eron & Huesmann, 1990), some have proposed that bullying is passed across generations (Farrington, 1993). However, we are unaware of prospective research showing that parents' own childhood experiences with bullying or other peer victimization increase risk for these experiences in their children, and if so, why.

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