



Preliminary investigation of the relation between lunchroom peer acceptance and peer victimization



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ABSTRACT

Less structured school settings such as lunchrooms and playgrounds occasion more frequent instances of peer victimization than structured classroom settings (Fite et al., 2013; Vaillancourt et al., 2010) but, also provide students with the opportunity for social exchanges that can further their social development (Boulton, 1999; Low et al., 2010). We hypothesized that lunchroom-specific peer acceptance would predict children's level of peer victimization even when controlling for classroom-based social preference scores. Peers completed measures of acceptance, and children, teachers, and peers completed measures assessing peer victimization. As expected, lunchroom-specific peer acceptance differed significantly for rejected versus preferred/average children and for victims versus non-victims. Results also revealed that lunchroom-specific acceptance predicted concurrent levels of peer victimization when controlling for class-wide social preference scores. Findings suggest that children's acceptance by lunch mates is a potentially important parameter to consider when assessing or intervening with children who experience difficulties with peer relationships.

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Children's likelihood of being bullied or victimized by peers is known to vary across settings within schools: On the one hand, settings with less adult supervision and little or no academic instruction (e.g., playgrounds, cafeterias, hallways, school busses) occasion more instances of peer victimization than structured classroom settings (Fite et al., 2013; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). On the other hand, less structured school settings provide children with opportunities to engage in positive social exchanges that can advance their interpersonal skills, enrich friendships, and boost levels of peer acceptance (e.g., Boulton, 1999; Low, Frey, & Brockman, 2010; Pellegrini, Blatchford, Kato, & Baines, 2004). In this study, we assessed children's peer acceptance in a specific, less structured school setting—the school lunchroom. We hypothesized that lunchroom-specific peer acceptance would (a) differ among children known to have divergent peer experiences (e.g., rejected vs. preferred [sociometrically popular]; peer victims vs. non-victims), and (b) predict children's level of peer victimization beyond that accounted for by social preference scores derived from a class-wide sociometric assessment.

Peer victimization and peer acceptance

Bullying refers to behavior that (a) is aggressive or intentionally harmful, (b) is done repeatedly over time, (c) occurs in the context

of an interpersonal relationship marked by an actual or perceived imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993, 2013). A related construct is *peer victimization*, generally defined as repeated exposure to peer interactions that (a) convey harmful intent, (b) produce harmful effects, (c) are sanctioned (often implicitly) by peer groups (Elledge, Cavell, Ogle, & Newgent, 2010; Juvonen & Graham, 2001). The latter term places greater emphasis on the plight of the victim and emphasizes that power differences often extend beyond bully–victim dyads to include bystanders, supporters, and others who witness but do not intervene in instances of peer victimization (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Olweus, 1993; Rodkin & Hodges, 2003).

The experience of peer victimization has been linked to a range of concurrent and long-term negative outcomes including school absenteeism, behavior problems, anxiety, depression, and suicide risk (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen, & Rimpela, 2000; Kim, Leventhal, Koh, & Boyce, 2009; Nansel, Haynie, & Simons-Morton, 2003; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011; Zwierzyńska, Wolke, & Lereya, 2013). Extant research suggests that 20–30% of children are identified as victims of bullying at some point during an academic year (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Nansel et al., 2001; Nicolaidis, Toda, & Smith, 2002). Most children manage to escape a chronic pattern of victimization and its harmful consequences (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Nansel et al., 2001; Nicolaidis et al., 2002; Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001). However, a smaller number of children, estimated at about 10%, persist as victims (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010). Children who are

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chronically victimized have been shown to have an increased risk for the negative sequelae of peer victimization (Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2003; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001).

Researchers have long recognized that peer victimization is not limited to antagonistic relationships between two peers; rather, it typically occurs within the broader context of children's peer relationships, which involves a combination of individual and peer group processes (e.g., Saarento, Karna, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2013; Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). A number of child-specific factors have been identified that could heighten the risk for peer victimization and future social maladjustment (Card, Isaacs, & Hodges, 2007; Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Reijntjes et al., 2010, 2011). Much of the extant research examining peer relationships and victimization has focused on upper elementary school grades (e.g., Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). The link between peer acceptance and victimization is especially strong during these school years. For example, children who are not well liked or actively rejected by peers experience higher levels of peer victimization when compared to peers who are well liked (Buhs, 2005; Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Card et al., 2007; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997; Pellegrini et al., 1999). Moreover, social risk factors such as peer rejection or a lack of friends have been found to reliably predict peer victimization and contribute to a pattern of stable victimization even when accounting for other known risk factors such as small physical size and internalizing symptoms (Card et al., 2007; Hodges et al., 1997; Hodges & Perry, 1999).

Although the relationship between poor peer relations and future peer victimization has been established in prospective studies (e.g., Schwartz, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1999; Wolke, Woods, & Samara, 2009), it would seem that this relationship also involves reciprocal processes. For example, Boulton (2013) found that peers were unlikely to affiliate with or befriend children known to experience peer victimization due to fears that associating with bullied children would increase their own risk for becoming a target of peer harassment. This circumstance of escalating victimization and rejection has been described as a "vicious cycle" capable of producing a host of social and psychological repercussions (Pellegrini & Van Ryzin, 2011, p. 94; Schwartz et al., 1999).

Protective factors within the context of peer relationships can also play an important role in children's social development. Older elementary school age students are frequently practicing important social skills, seeking acceptance from peers, and making friends while they are embedded in the relatively small, interconnected social network that is their school (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998; Boivin, Petitclerc, Feng, & Barker, 2010; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Forming positive peer relationships during elementary school years can serve a number of social and psychological functions, one of which is protection against the harmful actions of malicious peers (e.g., Boulton, 1999; Fox & Boulton, 2006; Hanish & Guerra, 2000). Further, longitudinal research has revealed that children who are bullied but generally liked by peers are unlikely to persist as victims when compared to victims not accepted by peers (Wolke et al., 2009).

Differences across contexts within schools

Just as certain child characteristics have been identified as risk factors for peer victimization, specific settings within schools have been identified as "hot spots" or high-risk settings for antagonistic or bullying behavior (Dodge, Coie, & Brakke, 1982; Fite et al., 2013; Parault, Davis, & Pellegrini, 2007; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). Typical hot spots are the school cafeteria, hallways (Parault et al., 2007), and the playground (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; Pepler & Craig, 1995). Each of these settings is less structured than the typical classroom, with little or no emphasis on academic instruction and greater opportunities for children to interact with peers (Boulton, 1999; Low et al., 2010). Because less structured school

settings carry greater risk for bullying behavior, anti-bullying programs typically call for increased adult supervision in these areas as a way to reduce the opportunity for bullying that occurs without detection or consequence (Farrington & Ttofi, 2010; Olweus, 1993).

Less structured school settings have also been recognized as contexts in which children can engage in positive social exchanges, form adaptive friendships, and bolster important social skills (Blatchford, 1998; Blatchford, Baines, & Pellegrini, 2003; Boulton, 1999; Coie, Dodge, & Copotelli, 1982; Low et al., 2010; Parault et al., 2007). The same contextual features that give rise to bullying behavior (e.g., focus away from academic instruction, limited adult supervision, opportunities to interact freely with peers) also provide children with opportunities to pursue positive social goals that are less readily available in the classroom setting. Observational studies reveal that when children are on the playground or in the school cafeteria, they engage in conversation, games, and group activities (Blatchford et al., 2003; Boulton, 1999; Ladd, Price, & Hart, 1988; Parault et al., 2007), all of which can set the stage for prosocial skill development and friendship enrichment.

It would seem, therefore, that playgrounds, lunchrooms, and other less structured school settings are potentially high-risk, high-reward social contexts in which children's peer interactions carry developmental significance (Boulton, 1999; Boulton, Chau, Whitehand, Amataya, & Murray, 2009; Low et al., 2010). Presumably, most children use these settings to advance their social skills, further their friendships, and enhance their peer acceptance; for other children, these contexts are potentially perilous and represent recurring opportunities to be victimized or rejected by peers (Boulton, 1999; Dodge et al., 1982; Ladd et al., 1988; Price & Dodge, 1989). The social opportunities and challenges that occur in less structured school settings could have implications for assessing children's peer acceptance (Martín, 2011). It should be noted, however, that instruments vary in the extent to which a specific school context or setting is made explicit (e.g., Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985), and few make explicit reference to the classroom context, suggesting perhaps that children are to make judgments about peers in their class based on information gleaned from multiple settings (Asher & Coie, 1990; Bukowski, Sippolla, Hoza, & Newcomb, 2000; Martín, 2011). One useful distinction that past sociometric work has explored is the difference in children's level of acceptance or social status across academic and leisure contexts (see Oden & Asher, 1977; Martín, 2011). In these more contextualized assessments, children are asked to rate "how much [they] like to play with this person at school" and "how much [they] like to work with this person at school" (Oden & Asher, 1977, p. 497). This work has shown how subtle changes in the context of assessment (e.g., academic vs. leisure) can yield important differences when estimating children's social status. For example, Martín and colleagues found that children's sociometric status often changed depending on whether the context for assessment was academic or free time (Martín, 2011; Martín & Bustillo, 2009; Martín, Bustillo, Rodríguez, & Pérez, 2008). In one study, Martín (2011) found that roughly half the sample (54.2%) maintained the same sociometric status in both academic and leisure contexts, whereas the other half (45.8%) changed status based on the context of assessment. Only about 40% of children who were "preferred" in academic settings were also preferred in the context of non-academic activities.

Depending on how such assessments are conducted, it is possible that peer appraisals conducted within specific, less structured school settings could add to the prediction of children's peer-related experiences. Class-wide sociometric measures are thought to reflect the quality (e.g., cooperative vs. aggressive) of target children's direct social exchanges with nominating peers (Dodge, 1983). However, peers' sociometric appraisals are also influenced by children's broader social reputation (Cillessen, Bukowski, & Haselager, 2000; Hymel, 1986) and by the nature of their relationship with the teacher (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001). These same factors are likely part of the social mix that occurs in the elementary school lunchroom, though the lunchroom is less regulated by teachers and more open to social interactions among

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