Teacher-child relationships and friendships and peer victimization across the school year☆

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ABSTRACT

Using data from 1700 1st, 3rd, and 5th grade students followed longitudinally across the school year, we tested the extent to which time-specific, within-person shifts in peer victimization and children's overall victimization trajectories were predicted by the quality of their relationships with their teacher and their friendship status. We found that both teacher-child relationships and friendships were uniquely associated with children's levels of victimization over time, but the magnitude (and direction) of the effects varied depending on whether within- or between-person differences in victimization were considered. Children who evinced more positive teacher-child relationships (on average) reported lower levels of victimization. This relation did not vary over time. Similarly, children with a greater number of friends tended to be victimized less–again, irrespective of time. In contrast, within-person increases in teacher-child relationship quality in early fall were associated with contemporaneous increases in victimization. No within-person effects of friendship were evident.

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1. Introduction

It is widely established that peer victimization puts children at risk for various maladjustment problems, such as school avoidance and lower academic achievement, low self-esteem, depression, and aggression (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Khatri, Kupersmidt, & Patterson, 2000; Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003; Rigby, 2001). Although, on average, victimization tends to decline as children move through grade school (Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2010; Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2005), many children continue to suffer from this plight well into high school. Previous studies have identified various factors that may protect children from chronic peer harassment. Two important factors that have received much attention in the literature are school-based friendships and teacher-child relationships (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Reavis et al., 2010; Runions & Shaw, 2013). However, much of the research on victimization has studied teacher-child relationships and friendships in isolation and focused on between-person effects of these variables, discounting important within-person variation. Hence, we know relatively little about within-person changes in victimization and factors that may account for these changes.

To address this gap, in the present study we leverage multi-cohort, prospective longitudinal data to examine the extent to which both between-child differences in children's overall victimization trajectories across the school year, as well as time-specific, within-person shifts in victimization over time around these trajectories are explained by the quality of children's relationships with their teachers and friendships across this span.

1.1. Teacher-student relationships

A long-standing idea in educational psychology is that, teachers, as primary authority figures in the classroom, are in a unique position to shape students' experiences (Gronlund, 1959; Redl & Wattenberg, 1959; Wentzel, 2002). The role of teachers may be particularly crucial in elementary school, when students spend considerable amount of time throughout the day with one teacher and when they face new academic and social tasks, such as mastering reading skills or learning to behave appropriately among peers and teachers (Epstein, Atkins, Cullinan, Kutash, & Weaver, 2008; Troop-Gordon & Kopp, 2011).

Although teachers may contribute to student adjustment in several ways, one aspect that will be the focus of this study is the quality of teacher-student relationships. Drawing from the attachment theory perspective (Bowlby, 1982), some researchers have theorized that, similar to parents, teachers serve as a secure base and a source of support for students at school (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). This may be particularly true for teachers who have close relationships with their students, characterized by warmth, communication, and support (Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Such teachers may be more personally invested in

students' success and, thus, be more attuned to their needs, which puts these teachers in a better position to support their students and intervene when problems arise (Reavis et al., 2010). From the student's perspective, a positive relationship with a teacher provides students with a sense that they can rely on the teacher in times of need and, consequently, they can experience greater confidence in navigating the school social environment (Berry & O'Connor, 2010; Pianta, 1999).

Teacher-child relationships also serve an important regulatory role in the development of students' social competencies. As such, teachers can help children moderate arousal and anxiety, identify and appropriately label emotions, model positive affective and behavioral responses, and teach them coping skills (Pianta, 1999). These experiences allow children to develop and hone their self-regulatory skills, which, in turn, support their abilities to effectively navigate the complex social ecology of their peers (Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001). Children who have difficulties in regulating affect and behaviors tend to be disliked by peers, which puts them at risk for social exclusion and physical or verbal harassment (Asher & McDonald, 2009; Buhs et al., 2006).

Numerous studies have substantiated the importance of teacher-child relationships in students' positive school experiences. Children with close and/or non-conflictual relationships with their teachers tend to perform better academically, be more engaged in school, and experience more positive attitudes toward school (Baker, 2006; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Positive relationships with teachers have been also linked to greater peer acceptance (De Laet et al., 2014; Hughes & Chen, 2011), lower externalizing problems (Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999; Silver, Measelle, Essex, & Armstrong, 2005; Troop-Gordon & Kopp, 2011), and social skills growth across the elementary school years (Berry & O'Connor, 2010).

Only a handful of studies have examined the link between teacher-child relationships and peer victimization. Cross-sectional studies have found that students' perceived teacher support (Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, & Sink, 2009) and positive teacher-student relationships (Raskauskas, Gregory, Harvey, Rifshana, & Evans, 2010) are related to lower concurrent victimization. The findings of longitudinal studies have been rather mixed. Runions and Shaw (2013) found that teacher-child closeness predicted decreases in the severity of victimization from prekindergarten to first grade. In contrast, teacher-child conflict in prekindergarten predicted greater likelihood of concurrent and first grade victimization. Similarly, Reavis et al. (2010) found that conflict with teachers (but not closeness) in kindergarten predicted greater concurrent victimization, but not increases in victimization from kindergarten to fifth grade. Yet, other work has shown that neither teacher-child conflict nor closeness in fall predicted victimization levels in the spring, after adjusting for rank-order stability in victimization across this span (Troop-Gordon & Kopp, 2011). Thus, these rather equivocal findings corroborate the need for further longitudinal research on this topic and highlight the possibility that accounting for stable aspects of teacher-child relationships may be critical to clarifying these relations.

1.2. Friendships

Another factor that may have important implications for peer victimization is children's friendship status. Friendships are highly valued and sought after relationships from early childhood through old age, characterized by mutual liking and a strong affective bond between two persons (Bukowski, Motzoi, & Meyer, 2009; Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Friendships have been theorized to serve a number of important functions, and much of the support for the importance of friendships comes from Sullivan's theory of interpersonal relationships (Sullivan, 1953). Sullivan ascribed a unique role to friendships, or chumships, which he believed developed during preadolescence and represented "the beginning of something very like full-blown, psychiatrically defined *love*" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 245). He claimed that reciprocity in friendships fulfilled a basic human need for interpersonal intimacy and provided a setting for validation of one's self-worth and development

of social competencies (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). Drawing on Sullivan's ideas, it is possible that, similar to positive teacher-child relationships, friendships may serve as a secure base for children in the school setting, protecting them against adverse peer experiences and facilitating their positive adjustment (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

One way friendships may buffer against peer victimization is through providing opportunities to hone one's interpersonal skills. Because friendships are based on mutual affection and involve frequent egalitarian interactions (Bukowski et al., 2009; Hartup & Stevens, 1997), they provide a safe context for acquiring and practicing important social and conflict resolution skills, which may be also crucial for repelling bullies' attacks. For example, through interactions with friends, children can learn to read emotions and intentions of others, communicate their own desires and feelings, as well as negotiate and effectively resolve conflicts with peers. Children without friends miss out on this opportunity, which may increase their susceptibility to peer victimization.

In addition, friends may provide instrumental and emotional support to bullied children. They may offer advice on how to deal with bully's attacks (Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997) and console children with sympathy and words of encouragement. Having a friend's shoulder to lean on during stressful times can confer psychological benefits for the victimized child (e.g., reduced anxiety), which may translate into better coping and, perhaps, less victimization over time (Bukowski, Laursen, & Hoza, 2010; Hodges et al., 1999; Laursen, Bukowski, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007).

Finally, the mere existence of friends can help minimize risk of victimization (Boulton, Trueman, Chau, Whitehand, & Amatya, 1999; Bowker, Rubin, Burgess, Booth-LaForce, & Rose-Krasnor, 2006; Hodges et al., 1999; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Reavis et al., 2010). Children with no or few friends may appear as easy targets for bullies because they may be alone more often (Hodges et al., 1997). Further, bullies may be less likely to harass peers who have a large support network in fear of friends' retaliation (Hodges et al., 1999).

1.3. Joint role of teacher-student relationships and friendships

Because both teacher-child relationships and friendships may be implicated in peer victimization (Boulton et al., 1999; Hodges et al., 1999; Runions & Shaw, 2013), it is of great interest to consider whether both types of relationships uniquely and jointly predict victimization. Friendships and teacher-child relationships may have unique contribution because, these relationships, by nature, are very distinct. Friendships seem to have direct relevance to victimization because they are embedded within a peer network (Reavis et al., 2010), and victimization is often a peer group process (Bukowski & Sippola, 2001; Salmivalli, 2010). In addition, unlike teachers, who are often not aware of bullying and victimization (Ahn, Rodkin, & Gest, 2013; Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Craig & Pepler, 1997; Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005; Norwalk, Hamm, Farmer, & Barnes, 2015), friends are likely to know about it, and, thus, they may be in a better position to intervene. It is also plausible that teacher-child relationships, with friendships, can make an interactive contribution to victimization. For example, positive teacher-student relationships may be particularly important for students who have few or no friends because they may compensate for the missing peer support.

To our knowledge, only one study has examined the unique and interactive role of teacher-child relationships and friendships in victimization. Reavis et al. (2010) found that children who had at least one friend in kindergarten showed decreases in victimization from kindergarten through fifth grade, regardless of the teacher-child relationship quality. Neither teacher-child conflict nor closeness in kindergarten predicted changes in victimization. One limitation of this study is that friendships and teacher-child relationship quality were assessed only in kindergarten. However, teacher-child relationships and friendships are not static and are likely to undergo changes, especially over such a