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The effect of parental style on bullying and cyber bullying behaviors and the mediating role of peer attachment relationships: A longitudinal study



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was the examination of the longitudinal effect of parental style on short-term changes in conventional and cyber forms of bullying/victimization, and the investigation of the mediating role of peer attachment relationships on this effect. The participants were 861 children and adolescents (52% girls, $M_{age} = 11.72$ years) attending Cyprus public institutions. Students provided information during three measurement points. There was a six and a 12 week interval among the three measurement points, respectively. The findings of the study indicated that parenting seems to be a significant predictor of all forms of bullying/victimization, conventional and cyber, in early adolescents, even when accounting for bullying/victimization levels eighteen weeks back. More importantly, results showed that the effect of parental style on bullying forms was mediated by peer attachment relationships. Results are discussed in the light of theoretical and practical implications.

Earlier studies have documented the effect of parental style on early adolescents' involvement in various bullying/victimization behaviors including both conventional and cyber forms (Chen, Ho, & Lwin, 2016; Lereya, Samara, & Wolke, 2013). However, adolescence is a period where friendships and peer support are essential, and in which youths seek autonomy from their caregivers and turn to their friends and peers for social support (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Wilkinson, 2004). A number of studies have supported that peer attachment relationships are both affected by parental style and in return play a significant part in youths' engagement in bullying/victimization. However, no study has investigated a model featuring the potential mediational role of peer attachment relationships regarding the effect of parental style on youths' engagement in conventional and cyber forms of bullying and victimization. Such a model would allow us to gain a better understanding of the pathways through which different parental styles affect adolescents' engagement in various forms of bullying/victimization, and would assist in delineating the potential significance of the peer attachment relationships, as the major path through which parental styles actually affect youths' engagement in bullying/victimization behaviors.

1. Bullying/victimization and cyber bullying/victimization

Olweus (1993) defined bullying as an intentional, systematic and aggressive behavior that is characterized by an imbalance of

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power between bullies and victims. Bullying has been identified widely in school settings, causing externalizing problems, such as aggressive and antisocial behavior and internalizing ones, such as depression, anxiety and poorer self-esteem to perpetrators and victims, alike (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Rantanen, & Rimpelä, 2000; Olweus, 1993; Sourander, Helstela, Helenius, & Piha, 2000).

Cyberbullying can be seen as an extension of conventional bullying, which involves the use of electronic devices, such as computers and mobile phones, in order to carry out bullying (Smith et al., 2008). Cyber bullying manifests as a series of repeated hostile behaviors by an individual or a group aiming to harm others, e.g., harassment, denigration, outing and exclusion (Li, 2007; Riebel, Jager, & Fischer, 2009). In some instances, cyber bullying may be more hurtful than conventional bullying due to greater public exposure via social media and humiliating websites or deliberate derogatory instant messaging, especially since youths use cyber space to improve social standing and to gain acceptance (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Mark & Ratliffe, 2011).

1.1. Parental styles

Parental style plays a crucial role in determining children's and adolescents' behavior, since the extent to which children are endorsed to negotiate within the family boundaries along with parental support and involvement, strongly influences their development (Wilmshurst, 2008). Parental style (Baumrind, 1991; Maccoby & Martin, 1983) describes how children perceive their parents' socialization practices such as the way they respond to their needs (responsiveness) and the way they use control (demandingness). These two dimensions are still used in classifying parents in either of the four distinct parental styles, each one revealing different attitudes, values, practices and behaviours: (1) The authoritative style where parents set clear rules and boundaries, but in a democratic environment open to discussion (high demandingness and high responsiveness), (2) the authoritarian style where parents, similarly to authoritative, have high expectations of their children but at the same time expect the child to follow the rules uncritically and they are trying to control child's behavior even through punishment (high demandingness and low responsiveness), (3) the permissive style, in which parents tend to be more responsive towards the child than demanding (low demandingness and high responsiveness) and (4) the neglectful style, in which parents show little or no responsiveness towards their children (low demandingness and low responsiveness).

1.2. Parental style and bullying/victimization

Research concerning parental styles has indicated the presence of strong associations between parental style and various forms of bullying/victimization in children and adolescents (Dehue, Bolman, Vollink, & Pouwelse, 2012; Georgiou, 2008; Rajendran, Kruszewski, & Halperin, 2016). For example, in two recent meta-analysis studies (Chen et al., 2016; Lereya et al., 2013) the findings supported that specific parental styles and practices act either as protective or as risk factors concerning both conventional and cyber forms of bullying and victimization.

According to previous findings, the permissive parental style best predicts bullying and victimization (Gomez-Ortiz, Del Rey, Casas, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2014), yet such a style seems to relate more strongly with victimization than bullying (Baldry & Farrington, 2007; Kaufmann et al., 2000). In addition, children of permissive parents are vulnerable to cyberbullying involvement, as they are exposed to cyber space without supervision (Dehue et al., 2012). According to Georgiou (2008), permissive parents may be over-protective and as a consequence, they do not let their children to develop basic social skills. As a result, children might become dependent on their parents and they cannot defend themselves in peer victimization instances.

Engagement in bullying and victimization, also seems to be affected by authoritarian parenting. Bullying seems to have a stronger relation with authoritarian parenting than victimization (Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Bowes et al., 2009; Ok & Aslan, 2010; Stavrinides, Nikiforou, & Georgiou, 2015). Furthermore, authoritarian parental style is also closely related to both cyberbullying and cybervictimization (Dilmac & Aydogan, 2010; Floros et al., 2013; Makri-Botsari & Karagianni, 2014; Valcke, Bonte, De Wever, & Rots, 2010). According to Patterson (1982, 1986) the daily interactions in the family environment are very important for children, who learn to be aggressive towards less powerful others, by watching these interactions of their family members. In the case of authoritarian parents, punitive and harsh practices are applied to their children, whereas they are not responsive to their children's needs. On the other hand, research has consistently indicated that authoritative/flexible parenting is a protective factor for both conventional and cyber forms of bullying/victimization (Baldry & Farrington, 2005; Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012; Kokkinos, Antoniadou, Asdre & Voulgaridou, 2016; Rajendran et al., 2016; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009).

1.3. Peer attachment

Attachment was originally defined as the strong affective bond established between the infant and the primary caregiver (generally the mother) (Bowlby, 1973; 1982). However, over the years, the term has broaden to include other significant relationships, such as those with peers (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000). Nickerson and Nagle (2005) suggest that peer attachment is a deep bond, which occurs when children internalize the knowledge that a peer will be available and responsive during times of distress.

The attachment relationship can be conceptualised in the form of a continuum of emotional regulation for managing affect, events and relationships (Jacobite & Hazen, 1999). At the one end of the continuum is the anxious-avoidant attachment relationship, for which over-emphasis is placed on controlling and minimising affect whereas, at the opposite end, there lies the anxious-resistant style which is characterized by relatively uncontrolled, poorly-managed affect. Secure attachment constitutes the equilibrium between the two extremes of emotional regulation.

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