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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Prospective associations between peer teasing in childhood and young men's obesity

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Summary
Objective: Being teased and otherwise victimised by peers during childhood increases risk for obesity. However, few prospective studies have considered whether risk extends to adulthood. We tested whether being teased in childhood predicted higher body mass index (BMI) and increased odds of obesity in early adulthood in a community sample of American males.
Method: Boys ($n = 206$) were classified as victims of peer teasing or non-victims ($n = 55$ and 151, respectively) based on mother, father, and teacher reports at ages 10—12 years. BMI was assessed at ages 24 or 32 years for 203 of the participants. Family income, parent and child depressive symptoms, child antisocial behaviour, and childhood BMI were assessed at ages 10—13 years and served as control variables.
Results: In unadjusted comparisons, childhood victims did not differ significantly from non-victims on BMI (mean [*SD*] = 27.49 [4.53] and 26.97 [4.60], respectively) or rates of obesity (42% and 31%, respectively) in early adulthood. In adjusted models, no group differences emerged for BMI (β [95% confidence interval (*CI*)] = .02 [—.09 to .13], $p = .77$) or obesity (odds ratio [95% CI] = 1.58 [.67—3.71], $p = .30$).
Conclusions: Peer victimization has been associated with immediate and long-term maladjustment outcomes that are in some cases life threatening. However, our null results do not support that peer victimization significantly increases long-term risk for obesity, and findings are consistent with two other long-term prospective studies of this issue.
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Introduction

Bullying includes physical assaults and threats, verbal harassment, and psychological and social exclusion that is repeated over time and perpetrated by those with greater social power than their victims [1,2]. Approximately 10—20% of school-age youth have been bullied [3], and victimization can have serious immediate and long-term psychological and physical health consequences [4—7]. Although being bullied is clearly a toxic experience, the prevailing strict operational definitions of bullying may lead researchers and preventionists to ignore the general class of peer victimization experiences children have [8]. For example, teasing may be experienced frequently and for long periods, but may not be classified as bullying if it is enacted by equal-status peers or not perpetrated often enough by a given individual.

Multiple cross-sectional and short-term longitudinal studies have linked peer teasing and victimization by bullies with childhood obesity [9,10]. High levels of weight-related victimization are reported by children who are overweight [11], and there are theoretical reasons to expect that victimization may relate to long-term obesity risk. This may occur directly or indirectly by causing other emotional problems (e.g., depression) that may, in turn, increase obesity risk (see Blaine [12] and Faith et al. [13] for mixed evidence). Indeed, several studies of cohorts followed prospectively to early adulthood support that peer victimization in childhood predicts higher rates of depression, suicide attempt, and suicide [14—18]. Whether such experiences have effects on obesity has rarely been examined.

In parallel to theories of how childhood maltreatment is linked to obesity [19], peer victimization may act as a significant stressor that induces changes in endocrine and metabolic functioning and leads to the development of emotional problems and eating disorder symptoms [20]. The stress of being victimised also may interact with genetic vulnerability for a mood disorder [21] or alter stress reactivity [22], both of which are implicated in eating and weight gain. Additionally, peer victimization may set the stage for emotional disorders and obesity in later life by undermining social status, self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, and connection to other [23].

In line with these views, prevention scholars recently have called for further consideration of childhood bullying as an obesity risk factor and potential prevention target [20]. To date, only three long-term prospective studies have addressed whether childhood bullying experiences predict weight-related outcomes in adulthood. Takizawa et al. [24] found that childhood victimization predicted higher body mass index (BMI) and rates of obesity in a British cohort followed to age 45 years; however, the effects were only significant for women. Conversely, Mamun et al. [25] found that victimization at age 14 years predicted BMI and obesity at age 21 years in an Australian cohort; adjusting for confounds significantly reduced the effects for women but not men. Finally, Wolke et al. [26] did not find support for higher rates of obesity at ages 19—26 years among American victims of bullying (either pure victims or bully-victims at ages 9—16 years) relative to individuals who were not bullies or victims. Given the mixed and still very limited evidence regarding the potential impact of peer victimization on this important health risk, further examination of this issue is needed.

The present study contributes to this small literature by using different methods (measures, informants, and developmental timespan) and extending the focus to American boys from at-risk circumstances. Victims of peer teasing were identified at ages 10—12 and followed to age 32 years. We tested whether peer victimization in childhood would predict higher BMI to age 32 years, after adjusting for childhood BMI, family income, and parent and child depressive symptoms—given the associations of these variables with childhood victimization [23] and obesity risk. We then examined the same model for obesity as a dichotomous outcome based on the BMI cut-point described by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Method

Participants

During two school years (1983—1985), 206 boys were recruited to the Oregon Youth Study (OYS), a study of risks for delinquency. Schools with the highest rates in their neighbourhood of police-reported delinquent episodes by juveniles in a medium-sized metropolitan region were targeted for recruitment. Then entire fourth-grade classes of boys in these schools were invited to participate; 74% enrolled [27]. Most families reported low socioeconomic status; for example, the mean (SD) annual family income was $17,209 (10,689), more than 20% of parents were unemployed at the time of recruitment and 20% of the families received some form of financial assistance. Most (90%) of the boys were White. Boys were assessed repeatedly from age 10 years to

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