

CHILDREN'S FRIENDSHIP PROJECT

Educator Newsletter

Fall 2003

Special points of interest:

- Children's Friendships
- Peer Victimization
- What you can do

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Studying Children's Friendships

Two hundred and six children (108 girls and 98 boys), ages 8-13 attending schools in Champaign, Urbana, and surrounding areas completed a variety of questionnaires examining their treatment by peers, emotional well-being, cognition, and behaviors. They also had the opportunity to interact with another child while working on a puzzle.

In our study, children generally reported experiencing positive interactions with their peers at school. This finding has also been replicated in other similar studies. However, a number of children still reported significant victimization experiences with peers.

What is Peer Victimization?

When a child commits an act that has the potential to damage another child's physical, emotional, behavioral, and/or relational well-being, it is classified as peer victimization.

categorized in many ways. **Overt** harm is where a child is threatened physically or verbally and **Relational** harm is where relationships are threatened to be damaged. Examples of overt harm are hitting, shoving, and calling mean names. Examples of relational harm are spreading rumors and telling lies about another child.

Most of us tend to think of victimization as one child pushing another child. Many people also assume that peer victimization is just a normal part of a child's life. However, it can become a big problem, and parents must recognize its signs and consequences.

Peer victimization extends beyond hitting and teasing. It can come in less obvious or readily observable forms. Aggressive behaviors can include children telling lies about other children and children telling their peers that they will exclude them if they do not do what they ask (e.g. "If you don't do this, I won't be your friend"). Simply because we cannot easily

see these victimizing acts does not mean we should not pay attention to them. They can prove to be damaging to a child's well-being.



How Common is Peer Victimization?

Have you ever been hit by another child?



no
 yes

Have you ever been teased by another child?



no
 yes

Have you ever been left out on purpose during activities?



no
 yes

Have you ever had lies told about you to make other children not like you?



no
 yes

People often believe that peer victimization among children is rare or harmless. Through our study, we have obtained evidence that this is actually not the case. In fact, many children in our study reported experiencing victimization at school to some degree. For example, we found the following:

- 52.7% were hit
- 75.4% were teased

- 68.1% were left out on purpose during activities
- 55.4% had lies told about them to make other children not like them.

On a positive note, children do display supportive behaviors toward one another. Many children reported being treated nicely by their peers. However, only 25% of children said this occurs all the time. These findings

prove that children do have the ability to enhance one another's lives, and that such positive behaviors should be encouraged more frequently.

Why is Studying Peer Victimization Important?

Our study has shown that children who have been victimized tend to exhibit maladjustment in multiple aspects of their lives.

Victimization was found to be adversely related to the emotional and cognitive well-being of children.

These children for example:

- Experienced more anxiety and depression
- Experienced having difficulty dealing with negative emotions when facing conflict with peers
- Have lower self-esteem
- Feel less control in social situations
- Have negative expectations when meeting

new children

- Blame themselves for negative situations

In addition, other studies have shown that victimized children feel less control over their academic performance and sometimes have a decrease in overall academic performance. Sometimes victimization at an early age can have effects when children are older. A longitudinal study has shown that some victimized children still exhibited lower self-esteem and more depressive symptoms years later even though they were no longer victimized. This highlights the need to understand and prevent victimization as well as to assess and address the consequences of such acts.



"Kids who have been victimized have lower self-esteem and a decrease in academic performance"

What Can be Done About Peer Victimization?

There are many different ways that parents and schools can help to reduce the problem of victimization. It is easier to understand when broken down into the three S's: School, Students, and Self.

- Encourage children to stick up for their classmates if they are being victimized or report victimization if they do not feel comfortable taking a stand.

- Keep open lines of communication at home and at school. Ask children what happened at school and do not settle for one word answers. Encourage them to share their experiences and feelings.

School

- Monitor places where there is no supervision, such as bathrooms, hallways, and playgrounds because this is where a majority of peer victimization occurs.
- Get involved with your child's school and volunteer to help regulate problems such as bullying.

Self

- Make sure children know that bullying and teasing happens to many kids, and experiencing this does not make them a bad person.
- Tell children that they can control how they feel if victimization is happening to them.
- Do not let children give up on maintaining current friendships or initiating future friendships. Good quality friendships can help prevent victimization.
- If you observe that a child is upset as a result of negative peer acts, let them know their options, such as school counselors or peer mediation, and help to facilitate such services.

Most importantly, talk to children about peer victimization, whether they are a victim or a witness. Victims should know that they are not alone and that there are a number of options to help them overcome the victimization. Witnesses should be aware that the best thing they can do is to simply be a friend with a victimized child...having a confidant goes a long way.

Students

- Encourage children to make new friends and meet new children.
- Encourage children to give compliments to their peers and siblings in order to promote a positive self-image as well as a positive peer image.



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