

Peer Victimization Among Adolescent Females: A Literature Review of the Significant Causes and Consequences Associated with Relational Aggression

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Abstract

Peer victimization is an all too common occurrence in schools throughout the United States, affecting millions of adolescents every year. Involvement in peer victimization carries devastating consequences that can last a lifetime. Recent research indicates males and females engage in different forms of victimization, with males displaying more overt forms of aggression and females participating in relational attacks. The purpose of this review of literature is to explore the factors that may contribute to peer victimization among adolescent females, and to ascertain the psychological and social repercussions of this behavior.

Adolescent youth face a number of trials and tribulations in today's society, including physical, emotional, familial, spiritual, and social challenges. In relation to the challenges a young person encounters, bullying is on the rise in the United States. Studies indicate that up to 75% of all adolescent youth face some sort of bullying, whether ones' involvement is a victim and/or a perpetrator. Bullying seems to peak in early adolescence and decrease with age, although the effects as a perpetrator or a victim are lasting.

Peer victimization, often referred to as bullying, is defined as "an unprovoked attack that causes hurt of a psychological, social or physical nature" (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001, p. 138). Olweus (1994) suggests bullying is just as harmful as other forms of abuse in that it involves deliberate aggression, an imbalance of power and physical or psychological pain (as cited in Miller, Beane, & Kraus, 1998). Since adolescence is characterized as the time in life in which individuals search for the balance between

autonomy and peer acceptance, there is no wonder that this population is significantly effected by bullying behavior (Espelage, 2002). In fact, most adolescents in the United States endure some form of peer abuse every day (Newman-Carlson, & Horne, 2004). Its effects are far-reaching and long lasting as well (Hodges & Perry, 1999). Current studies indicate that one of the best predictors of future adjustment is the adequacy with which children get along with other children (Miller, Beane, & Kraus, 1998). This finding has significant implications for both the adolescent bullies and victims, suggesting that they can feel the negative effects of this behavior well into adulthood (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Unfortunately, though, past research has focused primarily on the effects of bullying among adolescent males, since their aggressive behavior is more easily identified (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). While recent investigations have started to turn their attention toward the gender differences in aggression, there is still much more work that needs to be done in order to adequately educate counselors, parents, teachers and students on the different forms of peer victimization and the potentially harmful effects (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2004). The purpose of this article is to examine some of the contributing factors that perpetuate peer victimization among adolescent females in the United States, and to explore the psychological and social repercussions associated with this behavior.

In recent years, researchers have identified two distinct forms of bullying (Storch, Brassard, & Masia-Warner, 2003). Overt victimization involves physical aggression, such as hitting, kicking, pushing and threatening (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2004). Relational victimization, on the other hand, is an indirect form of aggression that

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involves name-calling and social isolation (Storch, Brassard, & Masia-Warner, 2003). Studies suggest males tend to take part in overt victimization, while girls tend to participate in relational attacks (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Owens et al., 2004; Prinstein et al., 2001; Vail, 2002). The main reason for this difference can be attributed to the importance adolescent girls place on social relationships and social networks, compared to adolescent boys who place value on physical power and dominance (Casey-Cannon et al.; Espelage, 2002; Craig & Pepler, 2003). Since relational victimization is less apparent, it often goes unnoticed or is mistaken as typical adolescent behavior (Casey-Cannon et al.; Vail, 2002). The relational victimization form of bullying however, can be just as painful and damaging as a physical dispute, leaving emotional scars instead of physical ones.

The specific manner in which adolescent females engage in relational aggression can vary, but the overall goal is to harm another person through the hurtful manipulation of relationships and friendships, according to Crick & Bigbee (1998). This can be achieved by spreading rumors, excluding a girl from the group, writing nasty notes, making prank telephone calls and leaving hurtful messages on school property (Owens et al., 2004). One study, which asked a sample of adolescent girls to explain this behavior, found that the two most common reasons were to create excitement and to be part of the in-group by sharing information (Owens et al.). This research possibly indicated relationship victimization may occur for the purpose of peer acceptance.

Research identifies a variety of factors that contribute to whether or not adolescent females engage in this type of relational victimization behavior (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Mosatche, 2004; Owens et al., 2004; Rigby, 2002; Wiseman, 2003). Rigby (2002) suggests there is a link between the adolescent's home environment and the likelihood that they will

become a bully or a victim. Children who come from authoritarian families, overly permissive families, or who are neglected at home are likely to become bullies in their schools (Rigby, 2002). The home is the child's first behavior model, and if it's filled with aggression, it is likely the child will replicate similar behaviors outside of the home (Rigby, 2002). Similarly, if the child is given too much freedom from their parents or is simply ignored by them, they will have a difficult time distinguishing what behavior is appropriate with other people, possibly resulting in disciplinary problems at school (Rigby, 2002). The overall family relationship is a significant predictor of the act of bullying as well. In a study conducted by Bowers, Smith, & Binney (1992), families with a child who was an aggressor displayed very little cohesiveness (as cited in Rigby, 2002). On the other hand, families with a child who was considered a victim of bullying displayed a rather high degree of enmeshment (Rigby, 2002). These findings suggest that the way the total family unit functions may affect the individual members, especially the children.

The personal characteristics of the adolescent also play an important role in their social development (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Miller et al., 1998). Bullies typically display a need to exert control or dominance (Mosatche, 2004). They may also be suffering from low self-esteem or they may have been bullied themselves in the past (Mosatche, 2004). Adolescent female bullies will tend to single out those girls that appear vulnerable in some way. Girls who have a difficult time controlling their emotions, appear overly anxious, who are withdrawn, lack confidence and/or who appear to have relatively few friends are likely to become the targets of relational victimization (Hodges & Perry, 1999).

Adolescent females often place a high value on the peer group and fitting into that group's established norms (Owens et al., 2004). As such, physical appearance becomes a crucial

component in determining whether or not a girl "fits in" (Espelage, 2002). Being too tall, too short, overweight, underweight, or not wearing certain name brand clothes can affect how a young girl is accepted among her peers. For most young women, being popular and attaining social status among group members is of the utmost importance (Espelage, 2002). These factors make the peer group a powerful determining force in the occurrence of bullying behavior.

Likewise, cultural expectations for young girls in the United States play an important role in the occurrence of bullying in schools. Wiseman (2003) notes the "root causes of bullying are found by how people -children and adults alike -define who has power, privilege and respect in our culture" (p.5). Wiseman points out how one of the main ways Americans define power is through the definitions of masculinity and femininity, the latter being characterized by attractiveness, confidence, hanging out with the right people, wealth and popularity (Wiseman, 2003). Society encourages female youth to suppress their aggression and anger, and to refrain from competition and conflict (Ryan, 2002). Aggression, however, is a natural impulse, so young girls simply learn how to be discrete and manipulative when using it (Ryan, 2002). This often leads to young girls using words and manipulation of friendships to hurt other girls (Mosatche, 2004).

Numerous studies indicate relational victimization can have a significant impact on the academic, social and psychological functioning of the adolescent females involved (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997; Owens et al., 2004). For example, when abusive interactions occur in the school setting, adolescents tend to develop negative attitudes toward that environment, which can result in excessive absenteeism (Ladd et al., 1997). Literature also confirms victims of bullying can

become so preoccupied with worry that their school performance begins to decline (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Ladd et al.). Victims of bullying might transfer to another school to try to avoid the constant harassment, or sometimes even drop out of school all together (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Owens et al., 2004). Another negative consequence of bullying involves poor socialization skills. Some victims isolate themselves completely or limit their friends to include only other girls who have been victimized and who share similar behavioral difficulties (Hodges & Perry, 1999). They may internalize their negative experiences with their peers by blaming themselves and becoming submissive and non-assertive (Crick & Bigbee, 1998). In contrast, some may externalize these experiences and develop problems with self-control, anger or participate in retaliatory behaviors (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Prinstein et al., 2001). Research also indicates excessive harassment by peers at school can lead to depression, adjustment difficulties, poor self-image and low self-esteem for all parties involved (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Prinstein et al., 2001). In one study, the majority of adolescent girls interviewed reported feeling "sad, unhappy, hurt, or rejected as a reaction to peer victimization" (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001, p.141). Researchers have suggested girls tend to report higher levels of social anxiety and loneliness compared to boys, based on differences in gender role socialization and expectations (Grills & Ollendick, 2002; Prinstein et al., 2001; Storch et al., 2003). Regardless, it is apparent that both the adolescent female bullies and victims run the risk of present and future emotional difficulties and psychological distress (Prinstein et al. 2001).

Peer victimization is a pervasive topic that affects millions of adolescents in the United States every year (Casey-Cannon et al., 2001; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Miller et al., 1998). Only recently have gender differences in

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bullying been examined by researchers, with the female form involving relational aggression (Mosatche, 2004). The consequences of this behavior can be disturbing. Overall, the information gathered for this review of literature demonstrates that family life, individual characteristics, the peer group and societal expectations significantly contribute to the frequent occurrence of peer victimization among adolescent females in the United States, resulting in negative psychological and social consequences for both the bully and the victim. The well known nursery rhyme states, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me". However, in recent years, because of the increased awareness of the ill-treatment of adolescent peers, counselors are now better prepared to deal with the bully and the victim of peer victimization. ♦

AUTHOR NOTE

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