

The Importance of Friendships for Children Who are Victimized

Full Reference

Hodges, E. V. E., Boivin, M., Vitaro, F., & Bukowski, W. M. (1999). The power of friendship: Protection against an escalating cycle of peer victimization. *Developmental Psychology, 35*, 94-101.

Keywords

Victimization, friendship, protection, externalizing problems, internalizing problems

Main Questions

Are victimized children who have a close friend spared from developing problems related to internalizing and externalizing problems? Similarly, are children with pre-existing internalizing and/or externalizing problems less likely to be victimized if they have a close friend? Are there particular characteristics of those close friendships that make a difference?

Background

Many of the same children experience verbal and physical victimization from their peers repeatedly over several years. As well, these victimized children are more likely to have higher levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, school avoidance, poor academic functioning, and fewer friends than non-victimized children. For victimized children, friends provide valuable support. Friendships promote the development of social skills, provide information about self-knowledge and self-esteem, and give emotional support. Therefore, it is possible that friends protect victimized children from developing the difficulties discussed above through their positive interactions and support. Previous researchers have found that victimization increased when a child did not have many friends, but decreased when a child did have friends.

Who Was Involved

French-Canadian children in grades four and five filled out surveys and so did their teachers. The following year, when the children were in grades five and six, they and their teachers filled out the same survey. There were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. The children answered questions about their feelings of loneliness and their experiences of victimization. Children also listed their best three friends. The teachers answered questions about each child's tendency to engage in certain types of internalizing (e.g., worrying, looking sad, being afraid of new things, etc.) and externalizing behaviours (e.g., destroying others' belongings, fighting with other children, stealing things, etc.).



What We Found

How did the various problems relate to each other and to friendship? We confirmed that adjustment problems (i.e., internalizing and externalizing behaviours) were higher in children who experience victimization. As well, all problem areas (i.e., internalizing, externalizing, and victimization) were stable across the one year span. Therefore, if a child reported being victimized in Grade 4, he/she also likely reported being victimized in Grade 5. However, the likelihood was not 100%, indicating that something affects the change in status. As hypothesized, children who had a close friend, particularly a protective friend, reported a reduction in victimization in the second year.

The predictors of (or risk factors for) victimization: Both internalizing and externalizing behaviours seen by the teachers in the first year predicted a child's report of being victimized in the second year. In other words, when children have particular behavioural difficulties they are more likely to be victimized in the future. Having a best friend is marginally helpful in reducing the likelihood of experiencing victimization in the future even when problematic behaviours are an issue. More specifically, the friendship characteristic of 'protection' was particularly helpful in protecting children with internalizing difficulties from being victimized in the future. In fact, children with internalizing problems who had a friendship characterized by high protection were not at risk at all for being victimized.

The consequences (or outcomes) of victimization: The study found that when children are victimized, they are more likely to develop internalizing and externalizing behaviours in the future than if they have not been previously victimized. Interestingly, this finding is only true for children who do not have a best friend. Victimized children with a best friend were no more likely to develop internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems than non-victimized children. Having a best friend also helped to reduce (but did not eliminate) the likelihood of a victimized child developing externalizing problems in the future.

Implications

It is important to recognize the value of friendship during childhood. Children's interpersonal relationships are an important context that can determine whether or not aggression is directed toward at-risk children (i.e., children with internalizing and externalizing behaviours). Similarly, friendship can be a powerful buffer against negative adjustment experienced by victimized children. The findings from this research lead us to consider the possibility that victimization is not as stable as once believed. In particular, the stability of victimization may be less for those children who have a best friend. Having a friend can help reduce the likelihood of being victimized in the first





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place, and having a friend can reduce the further strain of behavioural problems due to being victimized. When designing or choosing interventions, it is important to keep in mind that children at risk for victimization need skills to establish friendships with those who can provide a protective role.

