

Associations Between Bullying and Social Anxiety in Adolescence and Beyond

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Abstract

In a time period of comparison to others and an emphasis on social status, peer's opinions can have a major influence on an adolescent's mental health and formation of self-esteem. The period of adolescence involves major changes in the body, shifting peer relations, along with it being an emotionally charged time for individuals. It can be a difficult time for most, but it can be particularly difficult if a child is experiencing peer victimization and bullying. This literature review uncovers findings about the correlation between peer victimization in adolescence and the development of social anxiety later in the lifespan. The consistent findings within this research of bullying being correlated to a greater likelihood of social anxiety issues show that the outcomes related to bullying last longer than just throughout adolescence-- they last and can even increase as age increases. These findings also uncovered potential bidirectional associations between social anxiety and peer victimization. The implications for this research are major, and the consistent, significant associations between peer victimization and social

anxiety show how much these things can influence an individual's well-being and how necessary interventions that decrease bullying are.

Keywords: Peer Victimization, Social Loneliness, Self-esteem, Adolescence, Social Anxiety, Social Skills

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Peer victimization can be defined as being the target or recipient of aggressive behaviors exhibited by one's peers (La Greca, 2016). The prevalence of children being victimized by their peers is high, and one study found that 22.3-26% of early adolescents are bullied, which is consistent with reported rates in both the US and Canada (Acquah et al., 2015). Adolescence is a time of instability, and insecurity is common within these individuals due to body changes such as puberty. It is a frequent occurrence for adolescents to project their insecurity and anxiety regarding this time of change onto their peers. These young individuals are hyper-aware of their social status, and this status is a big contributor to their self-esteem, which can make

peer victimization feel even more detrimental (Kaeppler et al., 2017). Since this issue is so prevalent, diving deeper into the outcomes correlated to peer victimization is very necessary, and this importance is growing with the influx of technology and availability to communicate with peers 24 hours of the day. Kids aren't just being bullied at school anymore; they can be bullied at midnight through social media when their families or other support networks are fast asleep. As one might imagine, the feelings of isolation can be intense. Although the negative outcomes associated with bullying vary and are numerous throughout all age groups, this research analysis focuses on its associations with adolescent social anxiety.

Trends in this body of research have shown that a major risk factor for social anxiety disorder is peer victimization (La Greca et al., 2016). One definition of social anxiety is an individual experiencing consistent, intense feelings of fear and nervousness regarding social situations due to the idea that they may be judged, receive a negative evaluation, or be rejected totally by others (Barzeva et al., 2020). Because of the importance that adolescents place on peer evaluations at this age, feelings of social anxiety can be very hard to deal with for adolescents, and can in turn play a role in the quality of friendships an adolescent is able to maintain (Crawford & Manassis, 2011). It is commonly understood that peer victimization may be associated with negative emotional outcomes such as social anxiety, but little research has studied how social anxiety may be influential on an adolescents' likelihood of being bullied, as well. This is important because if peer victimization is bidirectionally associated with social anxiety, as the research below may suggest, this can create a detrimental feedback loop that victimized adolescents may get trapped in. Without support, adolescents that get trapped in this loop may then be unable to escape the many negative outcomes associated with social

anxiety such as decreased performance in school and work throughout the lifespan, lower quality and number of friendships, and increased difficulty doing everyday social tasks such as ordering at a restaurant or talking on the phone (G. Blood & I. Blood, 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand this bidirectionality in order to find ways to protect socially anxious adolescents from being victimized by peers and suffering from these potential outcomes.

Discussion

Risk Factors for Peer Victimization

In discussing the potential associations between social anxiety and peer victimization, it is important to understand how different risk factors of peer victimization may influence these associations. One of the most common risk factors discussed across this body of literature is self-esteem. Self-esteem is an individual's attitudes and beliefs about their own abilities and sense of worth (Wu et al., 2020). In adolescence, one's self-esteem is constructed largely based on how they think their peers perceive them. Naturally, an adolescent who is being bullied is constantly receiving harmful messages from the perpetrator, and these negative messages can lead to feeling excluded, unwanted, and unworthy, creating a low sense of self-esteem (G. Blood & I. Blood, 2016). One study conducted in 2020 found that adolescents being victimized by their peers tend to think that the bullying is their fault. This study also found that self-esteem mediated the relationship between peer victimization and social anxiety, with their results showing that peer conflicts lowered adolescents' self-esteem, and low self-esteem further predicted a high level of social anxiety (Wu et al., 2020).

Another risk factor commonly seen across the literature is loneliness. Loneliness is generally understood to have two dimensions: emotional loneliness and social loneliness. Emotional

loneliness refers to the lack of close, intimate attachments to another person, while social loneliness refers to the lack of social networks or affiliations with a peer group (Acquah et al., 2015). Being that an adolescent's peers are so influential on their self-concepts at this age, it is conceivable that the lack of these relationships could be damaging to their mental health. Furthermore, a lack of social support from their peers may make adolescents an easier target for bullies. These ideas are supported by the current body of research. In one study that followed 390 7th-9th graders across a school year, researchers found that early adolescents who reported being socially lonely in the first semester of each year studied also reported increased levels of victimization the following semester (Acquah et al., 2015). Given the many negative outcomes associated with victimization, like social anxiety, these results are important in understanding the implications loneliness may have on an adolescent's well-being.

Being that belonging to a peer group and being well-liked by other adolescents are so important to youth this age, it is not surprising that good social skills also seem to contribute to an adolescent's likelihood of being victimized by their peers. In fact, having good social skills is one of the most widespread personality traits among students considered popular by their peers. One study conducted in 2011 supports this idea and found that adolescents' friendship quality is positively associated with their quality of social skills, and those with lower quality of friendships are at higher risk for being bullied (Crawford & Manassis, 2011).

Another risk factor for peer victimization notated throughout the literature is the presence of some sort of impairment or disability, such as a stutter. In a large study of 13,177 students grade 5th-12th, children with disabilities were 2-4 times more likely to experience victimization more than once a month than children who did not have a disability (Hartley et al., 2015). In another

study looking more specifically at adolescents who stutter, researchers found associations both between stuttering and peer victimization and stuttering and social anxiety (G. Blood & I. Blood, 2016). These findings are interesting because they create curiosity about which factor may be leading to which, and this is another common theme in this body of literature though not very thoroughly studied. Though causation cannot be concluded based on these research studies, it is still important to understand the implications of these risk factors in order to protect adolescents from the negative outcomes associated with peer victimization, like social anxiety.

Bidirectional Influences of Bullying and Social Anxiety

Vast amounts of research strongly suggest that there may be a relationship between bullying and social anxiety in adolescents. Recent research, however, has sought to further characterize the relationship between the two variables. Specifically, is there bidirectionality between bullying and social anxiety? While the more traditional or well-understood relationship between bullying and social anxiety might be that bullying increases social anxiety for the victims, recent studies have also used social anxiety as a predictor of peer victimization. Pabian & Vandebosch conducted a study using questionnaires, and they found that social anxiety was associated with an increased likelihood of being bullied, instead of the other way around (2016). This relationship was particularly evident in cases of cyberbullying, which is certainly an important finding in the ever-increasingly technology-dependent world. Additionally, the authors suggest that identifying children with deficient social skills and improving those skills may help to mitigate the risk of being bullied and perhaps even decrease the incidence of bullying. This finding is further supported in imaging studies, where early childhood reticence predicted social anxiety as shown via fMRI studies while participants were shown a virtual school paradigm

(Clarkson et al., 2019). Additionally, the social anxiety in the imaging study led to an increased measure of social anxiety when the participants were re-evaluated two years later.

fMRI studies have also strengthened the evidence for positive correlations between bullying and social anxiety. As mentioned before, peer victimization predicted higher levels of social anxiety, which was measured by fMRI activity in the right amygdala, which is associated with fear/emotional responses that would indicate anxiety (Jarcho et al., 2019). These results are also supported by cross-sectional studies, which found that social anxiety is independently associated with increased peer victimization, suggesting that the more socially anxious an adolescent feels, the more likely they are to be victimized (Crawford et al., 2011). Interestingly, that study also identified social skills as a potential therapeutic target, as social skills were indirectly associated with an increased risk of peer victimization by creating lower-quality friendships.

A recent longitudinal based study also suggested that bullying predicts social anxiety. This study suggests that bullying increases withdrawal behaviors, further increasing social anxiety and the likelihood of being bullied (Ladd et al., 2019). Therefore, not only is bullying significantly associated with high levels of social anxiety in adolescents in multiple studies throughout the literature, but it may also promote behavioral tendencies that act to amplify the outcomes associated with bullying.

The evidence now suggests that there is a clear bidirectional relationship between bullying and adolescent social anxiety. As expected, bullying seems to predict social anxiety, though recent research has shown that there are various outcomes of bullying that lead to the increase in social anxiety. Additionally, social anxiety can serve as a predictor for the likelihood of bullying.

This finding is important for several reasons, the most important of which being that it provides a new source of targets for interventions to attempt to decrease bullying by providing at-risk children with the necessary skills to help them fit in and decrease the likelihood of experiencing bullying. These relationships are supported by a wide range of evidence, including cross-sectional, biological, and longitudinal studies, thereby suggesting a strong, bidirectional relationship between bullying and social anxiety.

Interventions

Although bullying and peer victimization has been shown through this research to be correlated with higher levels of social anxiety in adolescence, this is not an end all be all. Not all adolescents who are victimized end up developing Social Anxiety Disorder. The articles are quick to note the fact that there are correlations between bullying and social anxiety, but due to the nature of these studies causation cannot be concluded, which is important to address. Although throughout the literature there were many significant correlations between bullying and social anxiety through the lifespan, there are certain structures that can be put in place to reduce these associations that can be seen later in life.

A specific intervention that one of the research articles studied was the UTalk intervention method for adolescents. This method works to inform students about coping skills and interpersonal problem-solving skills while also helping them understand the link between their moods and events happening in their lives, whether positive or negative. This three-session approach overall had the goal of teaching adolescents how to manage their emotions and how to improve their peer relations overall. The research article that analyzed the effectiveness of the UTalk strategy found that overall there was a high satisfaction rate, and increased positive

outcomes were observed such as lowered symptoms of social anxiety and depression, measured by both self-report and independent evaluators. (La Greca et al., 2016)

Another possible way to mediate relationships between bullying and social anxiety is voluntary coping responses to stress. Constructive coping skills for dealing with life events are necessary to know how to handle these situations and not let stress consume oneself. Socially anxious children were shown to report higher levels of disengaged coping strategies compared to engaged strategies. Disengaged strategies include things like denial and distraction, whereas engaged methods include problem-solving and dealing with the emotion evoked (Kaepllar et al., 2017). This shows the importance of interventions such as UTalk to teach these children how to cope with socially stressful situations in a positive and productive way.

Competent social skills are also noted as an individual characteristic that can offset the negative outcomes associated with victimization for an adolescent. This was explained by their response to stress in their environment. Individuals with competent social skills were shown to have a lower rate of arousal to social stress (Kaepllar et al., 2017). This theme was attributed to the individuals with competent social skill's ability to identify moods and regulate their emotions in social situations. Certain traits that were measured in this study to determine social competence include if the child gets along with others, being able to accurately interpret what a peer is trying to do, and being aware of the effects of their actions on others.

Influence of Attachment Styles

Children and adolescent attachment styles vary among each other and through different stages of their lifetime. Attachment styles consist of secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant, all of which are very different but carry over throughout a lifetime. An

individual who goes through their childhood with a dismissive-avoidant attachment style can have more susceptibility to a more anxious lifestyle when they approach adolescence and early adulthood. As stated in the majority of the articles listed, there have been positive correlations found between adolescent stress/anxiety and peer victimization. Anxious-avoidant adolescents may be more susceptible to peer victimization because the anxiety cast on the need to fit in can be higher for these individuals due to the lack of consistent support they felt from one or more of their parents in their childhood. There is also greater susceptibility for these adolescents to cower down to negative outcomes related to bullying, which in turn may lead to even greater levels of social and emotional anxiety in that individual. 12 studies conducted in 2019 support this idea and showed that the correlation between social anxiety and peer victimization was likely to increase the odds for greater onset depressive symptoms and worsening anxiety (Pontillo et al., 2019). However, correlation does not equal causation; therefore, it is important to note that not every child who grows up with an anxious-avoidant attachment style will fall victim to peer victimization or experience feelings of social anxiety.

There are other attachment styles and patterns that are to be considered when discovering the correlations between attachment styles and bullying. For instance, parents who tend to have a harsher parenting style are more likely to have children who are more aware of peer victimization (Jarcho et al., 2019). One study conducted by Clarkson, et al., (2019) consisted of 384 participants that were studied in a span of two years with childhood wariness correlations. The results consisted of childhood wariness due to harsher parenting styles that were correlated to pre-adolescents' neural responses to peer victimization and bullying situations. The correlations vary from person to person, but all were closely related to childhood wariness and

parenting styles. The results from this study give insight to physical anatomy correlations instead of just mental contributions; which provides a well-balanced platform for understanding the relationships between youth well-being and bullying.

Another study done on over 6,000 students tested to discover the correlation between bullying instances and interpersonal characteristics. Attachment styles are a part of interpersonal characteristics because they relate to who we are as a person moving into adolescence and adulthood. The results of questionnaires and charts that were created in the study showed that someone who may have endured a secure attachment style or strong self-efficiency were less likely to experience bullying victimization and in most cases were shown to have a sufficient mental health status (Lin et al., 2020). More positive-related attachment styles were shown to have a better means of support for bullying victimization and mental health than someone who experienced a harsher attachment style; however, this is not necessarily true for every student in the study. From this, there can be a conclusion drawn that there may be relations between more avoidant-attachment styles and the negative connotations and mental health of bullying victims due to a lack of confidence and an increased level of stress. A study in Australia was done to furthermore assess the outcomes correlated to bullying from children who suffer a more avoidant attachment with added levels of stress and anxiety. Wave 6 data was used to show any correlation and was used among children of younger ages into adolescent years (Ford et al., 2017). The study concluded that there are positive correlations between children who are initially more avoidant in their attachment styles and experience bullying and their negative mental health into later years in life. There were also speculations made that this in turn could lead to suicidal thoughts or actions, which can vary from person to person.

Limitations

Common limitations within the studies were small sample sizes, lack of diversity in samples, and possible bias due to the region and type of studies being conducted. Some of the articles researched consisted of smaller sample sizes that were limited to approximately 300-400 individuals to determine correlations between bullying and various outcomes related to it. This limitation is not an overall good representation of the adolescent population as a whole. Given the fact that a bigger portion of the world's population consists of younger individuals, a sample of 300-400 could be misrepresentative of this group.

Certain sources reviewed used sample sizes that were lacking in diversity. In particular, certain studies used samples that contained a majority of white participants. This lack of diversity in studies could weaken the generalizability of the research to schools with more racially diverse populations. More research on the relationship between bullying and social anxiety is needed for adolescents from racially diverse backgrounds to see if there are differences that may be more applicable to adolescents in schools and communities that are not predominantly white. Many studies were conducted in a specific region of the world, which could be more difficult to loop that particular region in with adolescents as a whole because cultures vary in different geographical locations. This can mean that family systems and individuality can be different depending on the location they are in the world. If there were multiple studies pulled into a research article, it would be beneficial to have those studies at different geographical locations if possible in order to get a better consensus of data that represents adolescents more as a whole.

Another limitation of these studies is that most of them used a questionnaire to collect their data. Self-report measures used to gather data via a questionnaire pose some validity concerns, especially when considering participants' abilities to rate themselves on external characteristics like social issues. Questionnaires rely on participants' abilities to accurately perceive themselves and their lives, which is not always possible for anyone, let alone an adolescent who is not yet fully emotionally developed. Therefore, conducting a study not solely based on self-report measures would be useful for this body of literature.

Conclusion

This literature review has found that the relevant research suggests an association between bullying and social anxiety. More recent evidence suggests that there is bidirectionality in this relationship, so that social anxiety may actually predict adolescents being bullied, just as bullying is correlated to increased risk of adolescents developing social anxiety. While this bidirectionality is supported by the evidence, more research should be done to determine whether there is equivalent bidirectionality, or whether one component influences the other to a greater degree. That evidence would be of particular interest, because if social anxiety does predispose adolescents to bullying, then based on other evidence cited this could create a harmful feedback loop.

Certain risk factors that may predispose adolescents to being bullied and therefore potentially to social anxiety include low self-esteem, loneliness, underdeveloped social skills, and disability status. Additionally, some research has suggested that attachment style may play a role in bullying and therefore social anxiety. However, this data is mostly correlational and should be investigated further to discover specific findings that may aid in how risk factors for bullying are

seen. Understanding these risk factors may help teachers, parents, and others who interact with children in late childhood/early adolescence identify those who may be at risk for being bullied and attempt to prevent those adverse experiences from happening or mitigate the harm associated with those experiences.

Along with further research needing to be done, interventions that could possibly decrease the likelihood of bullying and related outcomes like social anxiety should be highly considered.

Interventions such as the UTalk approach discussed in this review allow adolescents to learn how to manage peer relationships and any conflict that can arise in those relationships. Schools in particular taking a look at this strong research about intervention effectiveness could have a huge impact on their students and their emotional well-being through adolescence and beyond. Since the development of social anxiety is just one aspect of a vast array of outcomes related to bullying, institutions such as schools assisting youth in this area would be extremely beneficial throughout their schooling and beyond.

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