
Attachment Quality and Bullying Behavior in School-Aged Youth

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between students' quality of attachment to their primary caregivers and the frequency with which they bully others and are the victims of bullying. One hundred and five students in Grades 4, 6, and 8 (46 girls, 59 boys; $M = 10.5$ years) completed paper and pencil surveys. Results indicated that students with lower quality attachment relationships are more likely to bully others and be the victims of bullying than their peers with higher quality attachment relationships. No significant grade or sex differences were found for the attachment, bullying, or victimization variables. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Résumé

Nous avons étudié le rapport entre la qualité de l'attachement avec leurs parents et la fréquence de l'intimidation. Cent cinq enfants de quatrième, sixième, et huitième années (46 filles, 59 garçons; âge moyen = 10.5 ans) ont rempli des questionnaires. Les résultats suggèrent que les enfants avec moins de qualité d'attachement dans leurs relations avaient la tendance à l'intimidation envers les autres, et d'être les victimes de l'intimidation. Les différences entre les années et sexe n'étaient pas significatives pour la qualité d'attachement ou d'intimidation. Les conséquences et directions pour la recherche font l'objet de discussion.

Keywords

peer victimization, bullying, attachment

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Bullying among school children is a serious problem in many countries, including Canada (Baldry & Farrington, 2005; Beran & Tutty, 2002). Given the adverse consequences for children involved in bullying (Aluede, Adeleke, Omoike, & Afen-Akpaída, 2008), it is important to examine its correlates. The following article explores the relationship between bullying behavior and students' self-perceived quality of attachment to their primary caregivers.

Definition and Effects of Bullying

Bullying¹ is defined as repetitive, intentionally hurtful acts (physical, verbal, or relational) that occur over a prolonged period of time and involve an imbalance of power (Nordahl, Poole, Stanton, Walden, & Beran, 2008). That is, the bully is in a position of greater power than the victim who is targeted. Bullying is of major concern as it leads to negative outcomes for the victims' physical and psychological well-being (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Physical symptoms of being bullied can include headaches and migraines, ulcers, panic attacks, irritable bowel syndrome, and frequent illness (Aluede et al., 2008). Depression, anxiety, loneliness, and decreased self-esteem are just some of the common psychological outcomes of being victimized (Drake, 2003), which often persist into adulthood (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Being bullied can also have a significant impact on academic achievement. In the first large-scale study of bullying in the United States, published by Nansel and colleagues in 2001, a significant association was found between bullying involvement and low self-perceived academic achievement. Similar results were reported in Canada (Beran, 2009; Beran & Lupart, 2009). This may occur as a result of victims' perceptions of the school as an unfriendly and anxiety provoking environment (Aluede et al., 2008). Because the bullying often takes place at school, many victimized children become hesitant or afraid to attend class, resulting in high rates of absenteeism and truancy (Fried & Fried, 1996). When they do attend class, they often have difficulty concentrating on their schoolwork, as the fear of being humiliated provides a powerful distraction and source of stress (Aluede et al., 2008; Beran, Hughes, & Lupart, 2008).

Children who bully others can also suffer the negative consequences of their actions. They often feel lonely and lack close friendships (Mash & Wolfe, 2007). Bullying is also associated with other problem behaviors, including smoking and underage drinking (Nansel et al., 2001). Furthermore, children who bully others are at risk for antisocial and violent behavior (Beran, 2005; Rigby, 2003); thus, bullying may represent a first step toward a life of criminal activity (Aluede et al., 2008).

Correlates of Bullying and Victimization

Children who bully and are bullied have been characterized in the following ways. Perpetrators of bullying have been described as showing high levels of anger, beliefs supportive of violence, and impulsivity (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Olweus, 1994). For children who are bullied, unpopularity in school, physical characteristics

such as small size or weakness, submissive–withdrawn behaviors, depression, and anxiety have been documented (Olweus, 1994; Schwartz, Chang, & Farver, 2001).

Rather than focusing solely on the personality characteristics of children involved in bullying, it has become recognized that bullying interactions can be viewed from an ecological perspective—that is, one that takes into account family, peer, school, and community factors (Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008; Swearer & Espelage, 2004). In particular, the role of parents in children’s interactions with their peers has been the focus of much attention, as parents represent the primary agents of socialization for their children (Nickerson et al., 2008; Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998).

Attachment

Attachment is best described as the discriminating bond that a young child forms with his or her primary caregiver/s (Goldberg, 2000). Although all children will become attached to caregivers who are consistently part of their lives, there are individual differences in the quality of each parent–child attachment relationship (Goldberg, 2000; Weinfield, Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999).

When caregivers are consistently sensitive, supportive, responsive, and accepting of their child’s behaviors, a high-quality or secure attachment relationship develops (Weinfield et al., 1999). Alternatively, parents who are insensitive, rejecting, unresponsive, or inconsistent in their interactions develop a lower quality relationship and have children who are insecurely attached (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Goldberg, 2000). The importance of having a healthy, secure parent–child relationship cannot be understated. The early patterns of social interaction that underlie attachment quality can have a profound, formative influence on children’s personalities, emotional regulation, and social competence (Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992).

The concept of internal working models (IWMs) provides an explanation for how these early attachment experiences influence later social relationships (Moss, St. Laurent, Dubois-Comtois, & Cyr, 2005). It is based on the idea that children’s attachment history shapes their internal representations, or “working models,” of the environment (Thompson & Raikes, 2003). That is, early experience with attachment figures allows children to develop expectations about their self-efficacy and worthiness as well as the availability and responsiveness of others (Renken, Egeland, Marvinney, Mangelsdorf, & Sroufe, 1989). These expectations act as “interpretive filters” coloring subsequent social experiences (Thompson & Raikes, 2003).

It is through these IWMs that children’s attachment profiles are thought to influence bullying behavior (Renken et al., 1989). Securely attached children, who hold positive and productive expectations about social relationships, are unlikely to engage in or become victims of bullying (Troy & Sroufe, 1987). Children with insecure attachment styles, on the other hand, carry with them the expectation that others are unavailable and social exchanges are not positive or rewarding (Renken et al., 1989). This negative bias regarding social interactions may result in hostile interpretations of ambiguous behaviors and aggressive reactions to them. Thus, children with poor-quality parental

attachment relationships may be more likely to bully others than children with high-quality attachments because of their negative expectations regarding social interactions. Furthermore, the feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem that children may experience as a result of caregiver inconsistency or lack of responsiveness may make them appear vulnerable to aggressive initiations from their peers (Georgiou, 2008). Thus, attachment theory suggests that children with low-quality parental attachments may be more likely to be the victims of bullying than their securely attached peers.

Previous Research on Attachment and Bullying

Troy and Sroufe (1987) found links between attachment status and bullying in their empirical investigation. Preschool children, ages 4 to 5 years, whose attachment status had been assessed at age 18 months with the Ainsworth Strange Situation procedure, were paired and observed during free play interactions. The pairs were later scored for the presence or absence of bullying and the roles the children played in situations with bullying. It was found that children with insecure attachments bullied others or were the victims of bullying, whereas securely attached children were neither bullying others nor were bullied. The authors suggested that these attachment-related differences are the result of expectations for social interaction that children carry forward to their peer relationships from their early attachment experiences with their parents (in other words, their internal working models). For example, Troy and Sroufe noted that because securely attached children have a history of being treated with consistency, warmth, and respect, they expect the same in their interactions with peers. Likewise, the positive model of caring relationships they have internalized deters securely attached children from showing disrespectful (e.g., bullying) behaviors toward others (Troy & Sroufe, 1987).

The results of Troy and Sroufe's (1987) study provided preliminary evidence for a connection between preschool children's attachment to parents and their bullying behavior with peers. However, research indicates that most bullying takes place in the late elementary and junior high years (Berthold & Hoover, 2000); thus, it is important to investigate whether quality of attachment is related to bullying behavior in these older age groups. Furthermore, it should be noted that their findings were based on a small nonprobability sample and should, therefore, be regarded as exploratory.

More recent studies have examined the link between attachment and bullying. In an investigation by Coleman (2003), there was no significant relationship between attachment to parents and victimization. Children in fifth and sixth grade with secure attachments to both parents, when compared to children who were less securely attached to both parents or children who exhibited discordant attachments, were not less likely to report being victimized. The authors suggested that a secure attachment to one parent may provide sufficient opportunity to foster emotional security, trust, and social competency (Coleman, 2003). This interpretation implies that future research in this area should focus on children's attachment to their primary caregiver, rather than both parents. Coleman (2003) also noted that with a sample of fewer than

70 participants, the statistical power was relatively low and only the strongest effects could be detected, which may also account for the nonsignificant results. Additional evidence of the relationship between attachment and children's behaviors among peers is from a study on children's helping behaviors. Nickerson and colleagues (2008) found that children with higher quality self-perceived attachment to their mothers were more likely to report standing up for victims of bullying than those with lower self-perceived quality of attachment.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the relationship between attachment to caregivers and bullying behavior in middle childhood and early adolescence based on the available empirical data. Troy and Sroufe (1987) found evidence of a relationship between children's attachment profiles and their tendency to bully or be the victims of bullying in a promising yet exploratory study with preschool children. However, Coleman (2003) did not find support for the association between attachment quality and victimization (bullying was not explored). These authors examined the experience of attachment to both, rather than the primary caregiver, and there were sample size limitations. In sum, the extent to which parent-child attachment relationships are related to children's involvement in perpetrating and being targeted by bullying remains unclear.

Grade and Sex Differences

In the United States, bullying tends to increase in severity over the late elementary years, peak in middle school or junior high, and decrease after ninth grade (Berthold & Hoover, 2000). This is likely related to children's struggle for social dominance, as bullying others may be a method of establishing oneself in the social hierarchy. Importantly, these hierarchies may not be fully stabilized until age 15 (Peterson & Ray, 2006), which is equivalent to ninth or tenth grade. In regards to grade differences in attachment, previous research has not shown differences in perceived quality of attachment to parents between early and middle adolescence (Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983; Paterson, Field, & Pryor, 1994). Although with increasing age adolescents prefer to spend more time with their peers than parents, the influence of primary caregivers remains important, as they continue to serve as psychological bases of security (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999).

Research indicates that most children who bully tend to be boys (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 2001; Sharp & Smith, 1991). This may be because society is more accepting or tolerant of boys being involved in bullying than girls. Indeed, a recent study by Dijkstra, Lindenberg, and Veenstra (2007) found that preadolescent girls tend to view bullying in boys as part of "being a boy," rather than as a negative, antisocial act. Thus, we expect more boys than girls to report bullying others in the current sample. Regarding attachment, previous research (Coleman, 2003; Kenny & Gallagher, 2002; Nelson & Rubin, 1997) has found that boys and girls report similar levels of attachment to their parents; thus, we do not expect to find any significant sex differences either.

Current Study

The current study aimed to investigate the relationship between self-perceived bullying, victimization, and attachment quality in a sample of fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-grade students. We predicted that youth who report a lower quality parental attachment relationship also report a higher frequency of bullying peers than those who report a higher quality parental attachment relationship. Similarly, we expected that youth who report a lower quality parental attachment relationship are likely to report being victims of bullying. We also explore grade and sex differences in bullying and attachment.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The sample consists of 105 students (59 boys, 46 girls; $M = 10.5$ years) from one large middle school (Grades 4 to 9) located in a predominantly White, middle-SES suburb of a major Canadian city. In total, 45 students were in Grade 4, 42 were in Grade 6, and 18 were in Grade 8.

We randomly selected schools and contacted administrators. The sixth one contacted agreed to participate. Then a researcher visited all Grades 4, 6, and 8 classrooms to explain the study and distribute consent forms. The researcher returned 2 weeks later to administer the questionnaires to those students who had parental consent and assented to participate. Students were administered the questionnaires in groups of approximately 10. They were asked to sit apart from one another in an effort to maintain privacy. The two measures took approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete.

Instruments

To determine the quality of participants' attachment relationships with their primary caregivers, the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) was administered. The IPPA is a self-report questionnaire designed to assess students' perceptions of the degree of mutual trust, quality of communication, and the extent of anger and alienation in their current relationships. It consists of three distinct scales to measure individuals' attachment to their mothers, fathers, and peers. Only the "mother" scale was used in the current research. It was explained that if participants' primary caregiver was someone other than their mother (i.e., their father, aunt), they were to fill out the IPPA with that person in mind. As per Gullone and Robinson (2005), certain items were reworded (orally) in a simplified language for the students. The IPPA has a 5-point response format, where students must decide whether a statement regarding their relationship with their caregiver (e.g., "My mother accepts me as I am") is "almost never or never true" to "almost always or always true." The negatively worded items are reverse scored, and then the sum of the responses in each category (parent communication, parent trust, and parent alienation) and across categories are obtained for subscale scores and a total attachment score. High total scores indicate a

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Variables ($N = 105$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Minimum	Maximum
Attachment total	106.06	13.97	68	57	125
Parent communication	36.94	6.13	32	13	45
Parent trust	44.62	5.58	26	24	50
Parent alienation	11.49	4.30	20	6	26
Bullying total	11.26	2.04	13	10	23
Victimization total	16.04	6.18	35	10	45

highly secure attachment (with the exception of parent alienation). The authors reported that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the items is .87, which is similar to other studies (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Coleman, 2003). Concurrent validation studies found that scores on the IPPA are positively associated with measures of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and affective status (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987).

In addition, the revised version of the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ; Olweus, 1996) was administered. It consists of 40 questions that evaluate a number of aspects of bully/victim problems, such as location and people's reactions to the bullying. We used the 20 questions about the frequency and type of bullying perpetrated and experienced (e.g., "Students told lies or spread false rumors about me and tried to make others dislike me"). Bullying types included physical, verbal, and relational forms. Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale from "It hasn't happened to me in the past couple of months" to "It happened several times a week." Internal consistency of the scale is high at .85 as measured by Cronbach's alpha (Kyriakides, Kaloyirou, & Lindsay, 2006). High scores on the OBVQ indicate a high frequency of bullying and victimization.

Results

The mean, standard deviation, range, and minimum and maximum values for each variable are presented in Table 1. Students reported information on their quality of attachment to their mother (or other primary caregiver) and the frequency with which they bully others and are victimized.

Correlations

Table 2 presents the correlations among the dependent variables. The total score for attachment quality is negatively correlated with the bullying and victimization totals (−.38 and −.45, respectively). Thus, students who report a high-quality attachment relationship with their primary caregiver are unlikely to bully others and be victimized. Attachment subscales for parent communication, trust, and alienation are also significantly correlated with the bullying (−.36, −.34, and .27, respectively) and victimization totals (−.35, −.42, and .41, respectively). High levels of parent communication

Table 2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients for Attachment, Bullying, and Victimization Variables ($N = 105$)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
Attachment total	—					
Parent communication	.90**	—				
Parent trust	.92**	.74**	—			
Parent alienation	-.79**	-.52**	-.62**	—		
Bullying total	-.38**	-.36**	-.34**	.27**	—	
Victimization total	-.45**	-.35**	-.42**	.41**	.57**	—

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

Table 3. Between Group Comparison for Grade and Sex ($N = 105$)

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>p</i>	η
Attachment total					
Grade	2	0.80	105	.45	.02
Sex	1	2.69	105	.10	.03
Parent communication					
Grade	2	1.90	105	.16	.04
Sex	1	2.26	105	.14	.02
Parent trust					
Grade	2	0.03	105	.98	.00
Sex	1	2.39	105	.13	.02
Parent alienation					
Grade	2	0.68	105	.51	.01
Sex	1	1.35	105	.25	.01
Bullying total					
Grade	2	0.38	105	.69	.01
Sex	1	0.44	105	.51	.00
Victimization total					
Grade	2	0.30	105	.74	.01
Sex	1	2.44	105	.12	.02

and trust are correlated with a low frequency of bullying others and being bullied. High levels of parent alienation are correlated with a high frequency of bullying others and being bullied.

ANOVA

ANOVAs were conducted to investigate grade and sex differences for students' reports of parental attachment quality and frequency of perpetration and victimization. No significant differences were found, indicating no differences between boys and girls or across grades on any measures of attachment or bullying (see Table 3).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to replicate Troy and Sroufe's (1987) findings that children who experience an insecure attachment with their primary caregiver are likely to bully others and be bullied. We used a reliable and valid measure of attachment with a larger randomly selected sample of children from a wider age range, to address the design limitations of Troy and Sroufe's study published over 20 years ago. We found similar results whereby students with low self-perceived quality of attachment to their primary caregivers report a high frequency of bullying others as well as being victimized by bullying. We also examined grade and sex differences in children's ratings of attachment, bullying, and victimization.

According to attachment theory, children's early experiences with their primary attachment figures set the stage for later peer relations by creating expectations, or working models, for social interactions (Renken et al., 1989). Securely attached children, who have experienced warm, consistent, and emotionally available caregivers, will likely expect social relationships to be positive and productive (Weinfield et al., 1999). Thus, they are unlikely to bully others because harassment has a negative and counterproductive impact on relationships (Troy & Sroufe, 1987). In fact, research shows that they may actually be inclined to stand up for or defend victims of bullying (Nickerson et al., 2008). Furthermore, because their parents have been models of empathy, kindness, and compassion, children with high-quality attachments are likely to display similar behaviors in their interactions with peers. Consequently, behaving prosocially increases the likelihood of being socially accepted and decreases the likelihood of being excluded from peer groups (Georgiou, 2008). Therefore, they are also unlikely to be bullied by others.

Children with insecure attachment styles, on the other hand, carry with them the expectation that others are unavailable and social exchanges are not positive or rewarding (Renken et al., 1989). This negative bias regarding social interactions is likely to result in hostile interpretations of others' behaviors and aggressive reactions to them. Thus, children with poor-quality parental attachment relationships are more likely to bully others than children with high-quality attachments. In addition, the experience of having a parent who is unresponsive or inconsistently responsive to a child's needs may lead to feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem (Georgiou, 2008). This, in turn, creates vulnerability to bullying, as perpetrators often perceive children with insecurities and low self-esteem as being submissive and unlikely to retaliate against attack. Thus, in addition to being at risk for bullying others, these children are likely to be bullied by others.

Grade and Sex Differences

Regarding grade comparisons, we found no significant differences in the prevalence of bullying or victimization across Grades 4, 6, and 8. This is in contrast to previous research, which found that bullying increases over the late elementary years and

reaches its peak in junior high school (Berthold & Hoover, 2000). However, it is important to note that the Grade-8 sample in the current study was small (consisting of only 18 students); thus, there may not have been the statistical power to detect such differences. Also, attachment quality did not differ across the grades, which is consistent with previous research (Greenberg et al., 1983; Paterson et al., 1994).

Sex differences were also examined. Boys did not report bullying others more often than did girls. This finding is in contrast to previous research, which has suggested that bullies are more likely to be boys than girls (Bosworth et al., 2001; Sharp & Smith, 1991). This may, however, be due to the fact that many studies of bullying (including Bosworth et al., 2001) have focused only on physical forms of bullying and verbal threats, which girls are less likely to take part in. Rather, girls more often engage in social or relational bullying, such as spreading rumors or excluding the victim from a peer group (Aluede et al., 2008). In the current study, physical, verbal, and relational forms of bullying were all queried, which may explain why boys were no more likely than girls to report bullying others. Boys and girls also reported similar levels of victimization. Again, this is likely because a variety of victimization experiences were represented in the items (not just physical or verbal harassment). Finally, there were no sex differences in attachment to the primary caregiver. Boys and girls reported similar levels of quality, which is commensurate with previous research (e.g., Coleman, 2003; Kenny & Gallagher, 2002; Nelson & Rubin, 1997).

Implications

The results of the current study suggest that including primary guardians in school efforts to curb bullying would be worthwhile. Providing incentives and child care for them to attend education sessions aimed at teaching them the importance of attachment, its connection to peer victimization, and ways to promote a secure attachment relationship could potentially serve as an intervention for bullying. Research has shown that although IWMs become increasingly stable as children develop, they can be changed to reflect new experiences with the attachment figure (George, 1996). Therefore, if parents improve in their ability to respond to their children's needs with consistency, warmth, and sensitivity, their children may begin to develop more positive representations of and expectations for social interactions (Goldberg, 2000). These healthier IWMs may in turn lead to decreases in bullying and victimization. Other researchers (e.g., Georgiou, 2008; Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998) have also emphasized the importance of family-based bullying interventions, noting that to resolve the problem, parents need to understand and acknowledge how their interactions and behaviors may be contributing to school bullying. Empirical support for the use of structured parent education programs has been provided by Barlow and Stewart-Brown (2000), whose review of the literature concluded that such interventions are effective in reducing behavior problems in children and in maintaining those improvements.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations of the study are noted. Results were derived solely from children's self-reports, rather than from multiple sources. Although this methodological approach has been used extensively in bullying and adolescent attachment research, and seems to produce reliable and valid findings that are comparable to peer reports (see Crick & Bigbee, 1998), future research using parent, peer, and teacher reports are needed to substantiate the findings of this study. Furthermore, given the cross-sectional design of the study, it was not possible to determine whether poor quality of attachment to parents causes children to bully others or become victims of bullying. Subsequent research should employ longitudinal designs to investigate the causal implications of attachment quality. In addition, the sample size was too low to compare attachment and bullying for boys and girls separately. Finally, all of the data used in the current study were obtained from students in one school. Further replication is needed across communities.

Conclusion

Given the significant impact bullying can have on children, it is critical that researchers continue to examine this issue. A deeper understanding of the factors that are associated with bullying and victimization will better prepare mental health professionals, teachers, and parents to deal effectively with the problem. The results of the current study highlight the importance of children's quality of attachment to their primary caregivers for positive peer relations in the elementary and junior high years. The findings also imply that including parents in intervention efforts may be helpful in reducing school bullying.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. The term *bullying* is used to refer to acts of perpetration toward peers. The term *victimization* refers to the targeted child's experience of these aggressive acts.

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Bios

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