Children's Aggression-Victimization Status and School Engagement

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Introduction:
Peer aggression (bullying) and victimization (being bullied) are well-established risks for children's healthy school adjustment (Park, 2006). Children who are aggressive and victimized can be classified into four subgroups (Schwartz, 2000): aggressive-victimized; aggressive non-victimized; non-aggressive-victimized; non-aggressive, non-victimized. Research further indicates that children's aggression-victimization status may relate to their levels of school engagement (Buhs et al., 2006; Burk et al., 2007; Iyer et al., 2010). However, few studies have examined these associations in early elementary school or assessed gender differences in these associations. The current study examines the associations between aggression-victimization status and school engagement with a sample of low-income, ethnically diverse children in Kindergarten to grade 3. Gender differences in these associations are also examined.

Research Questions:
1) How does aggression-victimization status (aggressive-victimized; aggressive non-victimized; non-aggressive-victimized; non-aggressive, non-victimized) relate to children's emotional and behavioral school engagement?
2) Do boys and girls differ in their aggression-victimization status and in the associations between aggression-victimization status and school engagement?

Participants:
461 Low-Income Children
51.1% girls, mean age = 6.8 yrs (SD = 1.2 yrs) in 10 high-needs elementary schools
28.5% K, 28.5% Gr. 1, 22.5% Gr. 2, 20.6% Gr. 3
49.4% Caucasian, 50.3% ethnic minority
70.6% lived in a two-parent household
average annual household income = $40,000-$59,000

Procedure:
6-Month Short-Term Longitudinal Study
• Baseline data were collected in January 2010 (W1).
• Follow-up data were collected in March (W2) and June (W3) of 2010.

Measures:
School engagement: Child-reported emotional engagement (5 items; e.g., "Class is fun.") and behavioral engagement (5 items; e.g., "I'm in class."
Peer Aggression: Child-reported relational (5 items; e.g., "tell lies about a kid") and verbal (1 item; e.g., "yell at other kids and call them mean names") aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).

Peers Victimization: Child-reported relational (5 items; e.g., "try to keep others from liking you by saying mean things about you") physical (4 items; e.g., "hit you at school") and verbal (1 item; e.g., "yell at you or call you mean names") victimization (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996).

Data Analysis:
We calculated children's aggression-victimization status at each wave based on whether children's aggression and victimization scores were 1 standard deviation above the mean or not. We tested separate ANOVAs at each wave to assess differences in levels of school engagement by aggression-victimization status.

Results:
1) How does aggression-victimization status relate to children's school engagement? See Table 1.
   • Aggressive-victimized and aggressive non-victimized children consistently showed the lowest levels of school engagement.
   • Non-aggressive, non-victimized children reported the highest levels of school engagement.
   • Aggressive-victimized children were significantly less engaged than non-aggressive, non-victimized children and non-aggressive, victimized children.
   • Aggressive non-victimized children also tended to be less engaged than non-aggressive victimized children.

Table 1: Mean levels (and Standard Deviations) of School Engagement by Aggression-Victimization Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Engagement</th>
<th>Aggressive-Victimized</th>
<th>Aggressive Non-Victimized</th>
<th>Non-Aggressive-Victimized</th>
<th>Non-Aggressive, Non-Victimized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>1.44 (.36)AB</td>
<td>1.47 (.49)</td>
<td>1.66 (.36)A</td>
<td>1.63 (.40)A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1</td>
<td>1.53 (.43)A</td>
<td>1.44 (.45)BC</td>
<td>1.64 (.39)C</td>
<td>1.72 (.33)AB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>1.48 (.45)BC</td>
<td>1.60 (.44)</td>
<td>1.66 (.44)AB</td>
<td>1.74 (.33)A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>1.49 (.43)</td>
<td>1.49 (.53)</td>
<td>1.65 (.43)</td>
<td>1.64 (.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1</td>
<td>1.48 (.48)AB</td>
<td>1.44 (.55)CD</td>
<td>1.66 (.41)CD</td>
<td>1.75 (.36)AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>1.50 (.51)A</td>
<td>1.61 (.46)</td>
<td>1.63 (.50)</td>
<td>1.75 (.36)A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td>1.40 (.38)AB</td>
<td>1.45 (.51)C</td>
<td>1.67 (.37)CD</td>
<td>1.62 (.44)A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1</td>
<td>1.57 (.47)A</td>
<td>1.43 (.45)A</td>
<td>1.62 (.41)</td>
<td>1.70 (.37)A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2</td>
<td>1.46 (.47)AB</td>
<td>1.58 (.51)AB</td>
<td>1.69 (.44)AB</td>
<td>1.72 (.38)A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) Do boys and girls differ in their aggression-victimization status and in the associations between aggression-victimization status and school engagement? See Figure 1.
   • Boys and girls were equally likely to be represented in the aggressive-victimized and non-aggressive non-victimized status at each wave.
   • Boys were over-represented in the aggressive non-victimized status and girls were over-represented in the non-aggressive victimized status at each wave.
   • Overall, girls consistently reported higher levels of school engagement at each wave but only differed significantly from boys at one time point.
   • Girls in the aggressive-victimized and aggressive non-victimized status groups showed significantly higher levels of school engagement in waves 2 and 3 compared to boys in these status groups.

Conclusions & Implications:
• Overall, children who were aggressive but not necessarily victimized showed the lowest levels of school engagement, particularly boys.
• Aggressive children may disengage from school because they don’t enjoy participating in class activities or feel that class is fun, possibly because they have poor self-concepts of their academic skills.
• Victimized children may still gain some enjoyment from class activities and feel interested in participating in class discussions, possibly because they like their teacher and want to try as hard as they can.
• School-based programs that support children’s relationships with each other and with their teacher may work to increase aggressive and victimized children’s school enjoyment and participation in class activities.

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