Victimization predicting aggression: Does the association depend on socialization of coping and adolescent gender?

Parental coping suggestions may be an important factor in the relationship between a child’s experiences of peer victimization and subsequent aggression. As not all children who experience peer victimization react aggressively, a child’s response to stress may be related to how the problem is appraised (Power, 2004). Coping suggestions involve primary control engagement coping (PC; e.g., problem solving), secondary control engagement coping (SC; e.g., reframing the problem), and disengagement coping (DC; e.g., avoidance, wishful thinking). Gender may also affect the role of coping suggestions in the relationship between peer victimization and aggression. Abaied & Rudolph (2010) found that, when faced with high stress, boys who received PC suggestions exhibited more externalizing behaviors, while girls exhibited fewer externalizing behaviors.

The goal of the current study is to examine whether the association between children’s experiences of peer victimization and their own aggressive behavior is moderated by parental coping suggestions. The second goal was to explore the potential gender differences in this association. Previous research has focused primarily on physical victimization and aggression (e.g., Abaied & Rudolph); thus, the current study focused on measures of relational victimization and aggression.

Thirty-seven children (9-12 years old, 49% female) and their parents participated. Parents reported on their children’s victimization experiences and aggressive behavior, as well as the type of coping suggestions they provided. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses revealed a significant three-way interaction of victimization, DC and gender \( (b = -1.12; t = -2.50; p = .018) \) in the prediction of aggression. Relational victimization was related to relational aggression for males who received more DC suggestions and for females who received fewer DC suggestions.

These findings suggest a difference in how DC suggestions function for males and females. Implications for research and intervention will be discussed.