

## **Protecting against school-based victimisation: The role of children's friendship**

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### **Abstract**

Given the detrimental short- and long-term effects of peer-victimisation (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), it is not surprising that bullying has become a central topic for multiple parties; including stake-holders, the media, educators, and researchers. In addition to examining the effect that peer-victimisation can have on a child, researchers have also focused on associated risk and protective factors (e.g., Ttofi & Farrington, 2012) that exacerbate or ameliorate the effects of peer-victimisation respectively. Over the last few decades a wide-range of risk and protective factors have been identified, including poor academic achievement (Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007), mental health issues (Sourander, Helstelä, Helenius, & Piha, 2000; Yang, Kim, Kim, Shin, & Yoon, 2006), exposure to child abuse and domestic violence (Bowes et al., 2009) and lack of parental involvement (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001). The following chapter will focus on one protective factor that has received increasing attention: friendship.

This chapter will begin by briefly presenting an overview as to the function of friendship in childhood before discussing evidence that suggests for some children, friendship can serve to protect against the experience of victimisation, and alleviate symptoms associated with peer-victimisation. In particular, the chapter will focus upon the different facets of friendship including: (1) the number of friends a child has, (2) the quality of these friendships, and (3) the individual characteristics of friends. The extent to which each of these three facets of friendship serve as a protective factor against peer-victimisation will be explored in turn. Paradoxically, friendship does not always function as a protective factor, but rather a child can be bullied by their friends. The 'darker' side of friendship will also be discussed, including why some children choose to stay friends with their perpetrator. Finally, this chapter will debate the effectiveness of peer support programs in schools and highlight areas that require further empirical focus.

## **Introduction**

Defined as a positive and emotional dyadic relationship between individuals (Ladd, 1999), friendship is said to be a fundamental component for normative human development (Bukowski, 2001). Even in children as young as two, signs of early friendship begin to emerge, with toddlers displaying preferences for certain peers (Howes, Unger, & Seidner, 1989). As children grow and develop in the social world, friendships become increasingly important throughout both childhood and adolescence (Wentzel & Battle, 2001). Furthermore, these friendships can be extremely powerful, impacting on both a child's short- and long-term psychosocial adjustment (Bukowski & Adams, 2005).

There are several theoretical propositions for the function of friendship in childhood and adolescence. For example, Sullivan (1953) argued that close, mutual friendships serve to promote the development of interpersonal skills. Without the opportunity to develop these important skills, relationships later in life may prove to be unsuccessful, or individuals may not fully capitalise on the benefits afforded to them by their relationships. Bukowski (2001) also suggested that friendship enables children to challenge each other in ways that extend beyond interactions with adults, which leads to the enhancement of cognitive functioning. Furthermore, he believed that friendship can introduce children to new cultures and experiences. The extant literature on children's friendship provides clear evidence for the developmental and social benefits associated with friendship. For example, friendship can serve as a 'secure base' for children at school, supporting both children's self-esteem and willingness to participate in school activities (Birch & Ladd, 1996). The provision of companionship and social support can also improve children's positive mood, feelings of well-being and enhance school-liking (Wentzel, 1996). Evidence also suggests that friendship can support school adjustment, particularly during transition from primary to secondary school (Betts, 2013). Furthermore, friendship is also found to promote academic achievement (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997).

Whilst peers as friends can provide developmental and social benefits for a child, not all aspects of peer relationships can be so positive. For example, peers can also be bullies, resulting in negative psychosocial and physical consequences for the victim (Wei & Jonson-Reid, 2011). Victimised children and adolescence have a greater risk of experiencing social difficulties, internalising symptoms, mental health issues (such as depression and anxiety), and somatic symptoms, including headaches and stomach complaints (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). However,

there is increasing evidence that the consequences of peer-victimisation are not the same for all children suggesting that, for some children, protective factors exist. Children's friends represent one such protective factor. The next section in this chapter will discuss the extent to which friends act as a protective factor during the experience of peer-victimisation.

### *Quantity, quality and characteristics of friends as protective factors*

The 'friendship protection hypothesis' provides a theoretical basis for the argument that friends can provide a buffer against the experience of victimisation, and associated negative outcomes (Boulton, Trueman, Chau, Whitehand, & Amatya, 1999). However, in order to understand the mechanisms behind friendship as a protective factor, one must consider and examine the different facets of friendship, including: (1) the quantity or number of friends a child has, (2) the quality of these friendships, and (3) the individual characteristics that the friends possess. The next section of the chapter will discuss each of these in turn.

Although friendship is constructed of different facets, research has predominately focused upon the quantity of friends a child has when examining the extent to which friendship acts as a protective factor. Unequivocally, victimised children have been found to have fewer friends. Specifically, those children without a reciprocal or mutual friend are more likely to be victimised than children with a mutual or reciprocal friend (Beran & Violato, 2004; Perren & Hornung, 2005; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). A friendship is regarded as 'reciprocal' or 'mutual' when both parties in the dyad confirm that the friendship exists (Ladd, 1999). This relationship is found even in children as young as five (Hanish, Ryan, Martin, & Fabes, 2005). The effect of friendship on victimisation severity is thought to increase over time, with children who have friends in kindergarten experiencing steeper declines in peer-victimisation during primary school compared to those children who did not have a friend at aged 5 (Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2010). Additionally, the effect of friendship quantity is found to extend across most types of victimisation, except cyber-bullying (Wang et al., 2009). In particular, this relationship is stronger for relational forms of bullying, whereby the child experiences social exclusion, rumour spreading and social humiliation (Malcolm, Jensen-Campbell, Rex-Lear, & Waldrip, 2006). Together, these studies suggest that children with a greater number of friends are less likely to experience peer victimisation.

Alongside focusing on the number of friends that children have, researchers have also explored the quality of these friendships. Friendship quality has been defined as comprising of five dimensions: companionship, conflict, help, security and closeness (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). Friendships that are considered to be of high quality score high on each of these dimensions with the exception of conflict where high quality friendships are characterised by low conflict. High quality friendships can have a positive impact on a child, including the regulation of emotions (Lopes, Salovey, Coté, & Beers, 2005), problem solving (Strough, Berg, & Meegan, 2001), and academic success (Crosnoe, Cavanagh, & Elder, 2003; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). The quality of a child's friendship as a protective factor has received less attention within peer-victimisation literature, with research predominately focusing on the number of friends a child has. Nonetheless, there is increasing evidence to suggest that high-levels of friendship quality serve to buffer against both the experience of, and the negative outcomes of, victimisation. Social support theories propose that friendships which are of a high-quality have a positive effect on children's behaviour and adjustment to negative situations (Berndt, 2002). Both cross-sectional and longitudinal research have provided empirical support for this hypothesis. For example, victimised children are more likely to report lower levels of support and intimacy from their friends, greater levels of conflict, and are less satisfied with their friendships (Bollmer, Milich, Harris, & Maras, 2005; Erath, Flanagan, & Bierman, 2008; Gini, 2007). Longitudinal research has come to similar conclusions. For example, Kendrick, Jutengren, & Stattin (2012) investigated perceived support from friends and both bullying involvement and victimisation across one year in 12- to 16-year-olds. Kendrick and colleagues found that not only was friendship quality linked to lower levels of victimisation a year later, but also lower levels of bullying involvement. Researchers and practitioners have suggested that friendship quality may be more crucial to reducing the negative effects of peer-victimisation as opposed to reducing the likelihood that a child will be victimised. Waldrip, Malcolm, and Jensen-Campbell (2008) found that even after controlling for other relationships and the number of friends, friendship quality was found to be associated with higher levels of adjustment in adolescents. In other words, an adolescent needs only one friend whom offers support, protection, and intimacy in order to adjust successfully after negative life-events, such as victimisation.

The characteristics of a child's friends has also been found to predict levels of victimisation and the buffering of negative effects associated with victimisation. Children who

have friends that are socially withdrawn, lack physical strength, and are less accepted by peers, are more likely to be bullied (Güroğlu, van Lieshout, Haselager, & Scholte, 2007; Hodges & Perry, 1999). Additionally, research has also found that the victim's friends are usually more introverted and lonelier than others in the class, and are often victimised themselves (Scholte et al., 2009). Furthermore, it has been found that having victimised friends is stressful and dissonant (Crick & Nelson, 2002), which may put children at risk of being victimised themselves. It is thought that the reason why many victims have friends with 'less desirable' characteristics is due to a human propensity to choose friends based on our own characteristics, even when this choice can result in continued victimisation. Alternatively, it has been argued that some children may have limited availability of interaction partners, particularly those who are rejected by peers, and thus they may be friends with other rejected and victimised children due to having a limited choice of peers to befriend (Deptula & Cohen, 2004). However, not all literature supports this argument, with Mouttapa, Valente, Gallaher, Rohrbach and Unger (2004) finding no significant relationship between friends' victimisation and becoming victimised. Therefore suggesting that not all victimised children form friendships with other victimised children.

Examining how and why friendships are able to buffer against the experience of peer-victimisation and associated negative outcomes, is also of equal importance. It has been suggested that friendship provides children with a social skillset that may ensure effective coping when faced with peer-victimisation. Interactions with friends allow children to practise important skills such as conflict management, help-seeking and emotional regulation, all of which can compensate for early risk factors associated with victimisation (Mishna, 2012). Children with high-quality friendships may also enable those victimised children access to other peers in the class, and thus allow for the development of new positive relationships (Berndt, 2002). Conversely however, children with low-quality friendship may develop a more negative style of interaction with peers that promotes aggression and therefore increases the risk of being bullied. It has further been suggested that the experience of peer-victimisation is an antecedent for social problems. For example, victimised children have been found to have difficulties with the formation and maintaining of friendships (Ellis & Zabatany, 2007). As victimisation increases, children report decreased levels of trust and affection with friends (Goldbaum, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008). It is argued that this is the result of instances whereby friends are unable to support the child being victimised, and thus the child begins to lose trust in their friendship group. Recently, research has

identified that a child's belief in their ability to manage their friendships, also known as perceived friendship self-efficacy, can also determine the extent to which a friendship ameliorates the negative effects of victimisation. Fitzpatrick & Bussey's (2014) cross-sectional study found high levels of perceived friendship self-efficacy predicted lower levels of negative effects in regards to social victimisation in adolescence. However, whilst this may explain individual differences in regards to which children benefit from their friends, further research, particularly using a longitudinal design is needed.

In summary, there is growing evidence that friends play an important role in protecting against the experience of peer-victimisation and associated outcomes. When considering which aspects of friendship are fundamental for this protection, high friendship quality is of importance. Evidence suggests that a child needs only one high-quality friendship in order to increase the likelihood that they will adjust successfully after being victimised. It is also important that one considers the characteristics that a child's friend has. Children who are friends with a child who suffers from internalising problems, lacks physical strength, and who are disliked by peers, are often at an increased risk of being victimised. However, less is known as to how and why friends provide a buffer against peer-victimisation, although researchers have proposed that friends enable children to hone important social skills (Mishna, 2012), which in turn reduces the risk that a child will be victimised. Additionally, there is a distinct lack of research examining the protective role of friendship within the context of cyber-bullying. This form of bullying is becoming increasingly common (Smith & Slonje, 2010), and is associated with similar negative outcomes as traditional face-to-face bullying (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013). As with face-to-face bullying, it is crucial that researchers examine possible risk and protective factors (such as friendship), allowing the development of intervention and prevention strategies. However, whilst friendship is often seen as a positive factor in a child's life, enabling a child to develop socially, and as previously discussed, serving as a protective factor against peer-victimisation, there is a 'darker' side to friendship. In the next section of this chapter, the negative side of friendship will be discussed within the context of bullying.

### *The 'darker' side of friendship*

Having friends does not always guarantee protection and support against victimisation. In fact, a significant proportion of reported victimisation occurs within friendship dyads. For example,

Closson, Hymel, Konoshi, and Darwich (2007) found that 35% of elementary school children in their sample were victimised by another individual in their own social group, with 38% reporting that the perpetrator was a friend. Wei and Jonson-Reid (2011) found similar levels of friendship victimisation, with 25% to 30% of bullying events being found to occur within the context of perceived friendship. However, Crick and Nelson (2002) found lower levels of victimisation by friends in their sample of 496 elementary school children, with a prevalence rate between 12% and 1.8% (variation dependent upon type of victimisation and gender). Although these findings still indicate that children do experience victimisation within their friendships.

From an evolutionary perspective, children view positive social contacts as a resource that is worthy of pursuit. Whilst some children pursue this resource through prosocial strategies (i.e., doing something nice for peers), other children have been found to use coercive strategies for controlling peers, such as bullying and aggression (Hawley, Little, & Pasupathi, 2010). Interestingly, those children who adopt both prosocial and coercive strategies have more positive features in their friendships (i.e., high levels of intimacy, companionship, and fun) than those children who use solely either prosocial or coercive strategies (Hawley, Little, & Card, 2007). Resultantly, some evolutionary psychologists argue that aggression can be socially adaptive, particularly when individuals in a social group feel they must compete for social resources (e.g., attention, affection and support; Hawley, 2002, 2003). Empirical support shows that whilst bullies may not always be liked, they can have a high peer group status and are often popular (Salmivalli, 2010). Research in this area is particularly scarce though, and a further empirical focus as to why children bully their friends, and which specific children are involved in these bullying incidences is needed.

The phenomenon of inter-friendship victimisation has been found to have distinct gender differences. Girls are particularly vulnerable to being victimised by female friends, especially when these friends are relationally aggressive (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Mishima, 2003). Regarding forms of bullying, boys are more likely to be physically victimised by friends, whereas girls are more commonly relationally victimised. When boys are physically victimised, and girls relationally victimised, there is a higher association with maladjustment problems including social anxiety, loneliness and psychological distress (Crick & Nelson, 2002). However, whilst girls in relationally victimising relationships report negative friendship qualities, they also report that these friendships have positive features (Daniels, Quigley, Menard, & Spence, 2010).

Conversely, both boys and girls who experience physical victimisation in relationships, or physical and relational victimisation, report high levels of negative qualities in these friendships. This therefore suggests that the form of victimisation a child experiences can influence how they perceive the quality of such friendship.

Research is less clear as to why children chose to stay in victimising friendships. It is possible that victimisation within the context of friendship can be confusing and the victim may be reluctant to report the bullying for the fear that they may lose a friend (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). Alternatively, despite the negative outcomes of being victimised by a friend (Claes, 1992; Dane, 2001), the aggressive incidences may be viewed as friendship conflict rather than victimisation per se. Whilst some studies have reported children's ability to distinguish between bullying behaviour and insults not meant to harm (Geiger & Fischer, 2006; Monks & Smith, 2010; Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefoghe, 2002), other children (particularly younger children) have been found to struggle to identify whether the behaviours of their friends are classified as peer-victimisation or fighting (Mishna, 2012; Monks & Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2002). Although Besag (2006) argues that friendships conflicts, which are often ignored by teachers and caregivers, should be considered as possible acts of bullying, due to associated negative outcomes. If children view negative interactions with friends as conflict rather than victimisation, this may in part explain why children stay friends in these situations. Additionally, friendships are extremely important to children and adolescents, and therefore children may feel they need the friendship despite the suffering (Dane, 2001). This hypothesis has received empirical support, such that victimised children are found to maintain interaction with the perpetrator (Crick & Nelson, 2002).

Whilst further research is required to fully determine (1) why children are victimised by their friends and (2), why victimised children chose to stay friends with their perpetrator, it is clear that friendships can sometimes be the cause of victimisation for a child, rather than serving as a protective factor. However, despite evidence suggesting that friends can be a risk factor for victimisation, peer-support as an intervention strategy is extremely popular in many countries. The next section of this chapter will discuss the use of peer-support interventions in schools, and the effectiveness of these interventions to address school-based victimisation.



### *Using peer support as an intervention for peer-victimisation*

Given the research evidence surrounding the importance of friends as a protective buffer, it is perhaps unsurprising that peer support has been used as an intervention strategy to tackle victimisation. The method of peer support as a bullying intervention strategy has grown in popularity, particularly in-line with UK government initiatives (e.g. Department of Education, 2014). For example, in the UK it has been reported that 50% of primary (elementary) and secondary (high) schools now use a peer support system (Houlston, Smith, & Jessel, 2009; Smith & Samara, 2003). Additionally, peer support programs have also been reported in Australia (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005), Canada (Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994), Finland (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010; Salmivalli, 2001), Italy (Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli, & Cowie, 2003), Spain (Ortega, Del Rey, & Mora-Merchán, 2004), and the USA (Lane-Garon & Richardson, 2003).

There are a number of different types of peer support programs that schools can adopt, with the age of the children involved in the program often dictating which method is used. For example, primary schools in the UK often train a chosen number of pupils to be *buddies* (Cowie & Smith, 2010). These children are asked to respond to conflicts, social exclusion and bullying in pro-active and non-violent ways. For example, a buddy may look out for fellow peers at recess, identifying those who may be upset and/or lonely. At a secondary school level children can become *peer supporters* or *peer counsellors* (Cowie & Smith, 2010). It is common that these schemes are run across the whole school, therefore allowing older pupils to support younger pupils. Schools may also provide a designated area or room for the mentoring and support to take place. Additionally, schools have also used a 'bully box' or the school intranet to help victims make contact with the peer supporters. It is important that there is good staff supervision in place to support the scheme and those involved, with staff presence linked to higher scheme success rates (Smith & Watson, 2004).

The evaluation of peer support programs varies across the world, particularly with regards to whom evaluates the programs and the methods employed to evaluate such programs. Many evaluation studies are conducted by those who implement the intervention, which can include both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, rarely are evaluations of peer support programs completed by independent un-biased researchers, or use non-intervention control groups. It is fundamental that the role of peer support as a means of improving bullying and victimisation outcomes in schools is continually evaluated, in particular using unbiased methods. It is also

important that the outcomes of interventions are evaluated longitudinally to examine whether the effectiveness of the intervention is sustained.

Studies evaluating the effectiveness of peer support schemes have often examined the benefits of these schemes for those who have been trained to provide support as well as those who have received the support. Peer supporters have been found to gain in both social and developmental skills. For example, (Cowie, Naylor, Talamelli, Chauhan, & Smith, 2002) identified that children reported developing a greater capacity for empathy towards a person in need, experienced a gratifying sense of responsibility for others, and many also stated that they wished to go into caring professions later in life. Furthermore, peer supporters display significant increases in social self-esteem when compared to age-matched controls who were not peer supporters (Houlston & Smith, 2009). However, no differences were found with regards to social skills or shame acknowledgement.

The benefits of peer support schemes for the users of peer support are less established and results are often mixed. Cross-sectional and qualitative studies have generally reported that users find the schemes as helpful. For example, Cowie et al. (2002) noted that 87% of pupils had reported the peer support scheme as useful, with pupils citing 'it helps to talk to peers' as the most frequent reason. However contrariwise, Houlston and Smith (2009) evaluated a program aimed at year 7 (ages 11-12) and year 8 (ages 12-13) pupils in an all-girl secondary school in the UK, finding that whilst year 7's reported that the program helped a lot, the year 8's did not. In studies adopting a more experimental design, including pre- and post- measures, less positive findings were reported. It is of the trend that these studies identify a mixture of positive and negative findings, with more positive effects being found in younger years (Cowie & Olafsson, 2000; Menesini et al., 2003; Rigby & Slee, 1999; Salmivalli, 2001). Naylor and Cowie (1999) also found that peer support programmes did not appear to reduce the level of victimisation, however they argued that the presence of the peer support system reduced the negative impact of bullying on victims instead. The mixed findings identified in evaluation studies may be due to the variation in intensity and duration of intervention, making comparisons difficult. There is support for a 'dose-response' relationship between the intensity of a program implemented in a school and the duration of the intervention on the effect of bullying (Olweus, 2005; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011).

In light of the mixed findings regarding the effectiveness of peer support programs, it could be considered that targeting the social skills of victimised children through friendship interventions

may be more successful. As discussed earlier in the chapter, children who are unable to form and maintain successful friendships are at an increased risk of being victimised (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007). In particular, those children without high-quality friendships are lacking the opportunity to develop important social skills that can protect them both from experiencing victimisation but also the negative outcomes associated with being bullied (Schmidt & Bagwell, 2007). Friendship intervention programs target children who have social difficulties, teaching them how to make and maintain friends, with the aim of improving social acceptance and therefore making them less vulnerable to peer victimisation (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2013). Social Skills Training (SST) is one example of such an intervention, which aims to enhance children's social skills, such as improving social problem-solving, how to think positively, modifying non-verbal behaviour and the use of verbal strategies such as 'fogging' and 'mirroring' (Fox & Boulton, 2003). Interventions are often delivered through group role-playing to help the children practise new skills. Again, as with peer support programs, evaluation of friendship interventions are scarce, and have mixed results. Fox and Boulton (2003) used the SST specifically for victimised children, and compared against a set of waiting-list controls. Whilst there were improvements in the children's self-esteem, there were no improvements in their victim status. Tierney and Dowd (2000), two educational psychologists, also ran social skills training sessions for adolescent girls identified as victims of bullying. Although the girls reported more pronounced improvements in their happiness (69% of the sample) than their victimisation status (43% of the sample), none of the girls reported that their victimisation had worsened. It appears that SST has been found to be more successful when implemented in children with learning and behavioural difficulties. For example, Laugeson, Frankel, Gantman, Dillon, and Mogil (2012) ran a skills training intervention for adolescences with high-functioning autism, identifying significant improvements in social skills post-training.

In conclusion, there is some evidence to suggest that peer support schemes are successful, although results are mixed, particularly when considering the benefits for the victims of bullying. It is possible that peer support schemes do not significantly reduce levels of bullying within school, but rather help victims cope better with the negative outcomes. However, there is a distinct lack of well-controlled quantitative studies, which could help to concretely determine the effectiveness of peer support schemes. Additionally, less is known about which specific pupils benefit from these schemes, again highlighting a further area that needs research. As an alternative (or in addition), engaging in friendship interventions could help reduce the risk of experiencing peer-victimisation,

by equipping children with fundamental social skills, which in turn can help reduce the child's risk of being victimised.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the extant literature that suggests friendship is important for protecting children against the experience of peer-victimisation and can help to alleviate the negative consequences of being victimised. Research suggests that whilst having a large number of friends can protect against being victimised, the quality of a friendship is seemingly more important. Conversely, the chapter also presented evidence to suggest that having friends does not always guarantee protection and support against peer-victimisation, but rather friends can act as perpetrators. Less is known however, as to why children may choose to victimise their friend, and furthermore why victimised children stay friends with their perpetrator. Finally, the chapter discussed peer support programs as a method of reducing bullying incidences and supporting those who have been victimised. The effectiveness of these schemes is mixed, with a need for more unbiased and well-controlled quantitative studies to fully ascertain the success of such schemes. The role of friends within the phenomenon of peer-victimisation is clearly an important area of focus for both researchers and practitioners. A continued focus is a necessity, not only furthering our understanding as to the extent in which friends may serve as a protective or risk factor, but also to support the continued development of peer-support intervention strategies.

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