



Vulnerable but Neglected:

Examining Pathways to Peer Victimization among Children with Disabilities

Esther Son, Ph.D., MA, Social Welfare

Lurie Institute for Disability Policy, the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University

Introduction

- Peer victimization is a serious social problem that can negatively affect children's psychosocial development and adjustment in schools.
- Children with disabilities are more frequent targets of peer victimization, and more vulnerable to victimization by peers who have higher status and more social power (Baumeister et. al. 2008; Wiener & Mak, 2009).
- School social workers are in a key position to initiate peer victimization prevention and intervention programs.
- Despite a sizeable body of research on peer victimization, the subject has received little attention in the social work literature (Mishna, 2003; Sveinsson & Morris, 2006)
- Focusing on young children with disabilities in preschool and kindergarten, this study examined the pathways to peer victimization of children with disabilities including risk and protective factors.

Methods

Data

- Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study (PEELS)
- >3,000 children with disabilities, nationally representative study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Special Education Research.
- A longitudinal parent/assessment/teacher sample (N = 1,268) for wave 1-3 (school years beginning in 2003-06)
- Sample: three age cohorts (ages 3, 4, and 5, respectively, at the start of the study 2003-04).

Measures

Dependent variable

- Peer Victimization: measured by three sub-questions of assessing children's behavior.
 - Has {he/she} been bullied or picked on by other children? (Relational);
 - Has {he/she} been physically attacked or involved in fights? (Physical);
 - Has {he/she} been teased or called names? (Verbal)

Predictors (Child-Level)

- Problem Behaviors: The PKBS-2 Problem Behavior Scale (Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scale, Second Edition, Merrell, 2002; 42 items) – Subscale: Externalizing & Internalizing Problem Behavior.

Methods

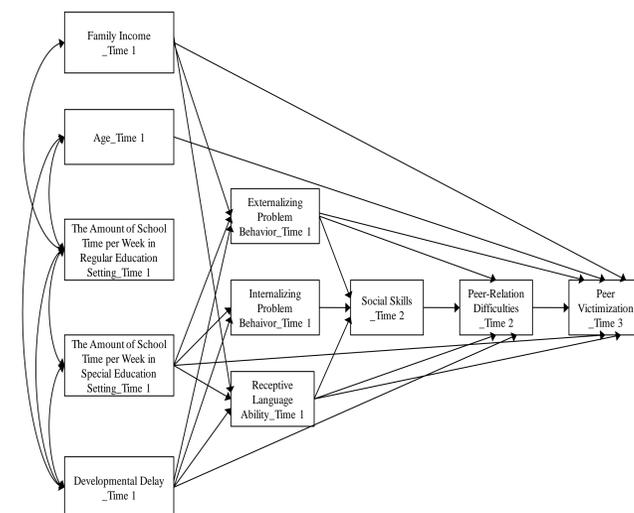
Measures Continued

- Receptive Language Ability: A psychometrically adapted and shortened version of the PPVT-III (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Third Edition, Dunn & Dunn, 1997; 32 items).
 - Social Skills: The PKBS-2 (Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scale, Second Edition, Merrell, 2002; 34 items).
 - Children's Developmental Delay/Disability: measured by the answer to question about the children's disability/delay (yes=1, no=0).
 - Children's age: children's age in months in the first year.
- Predictors (Family-Level)
- Household Income: 0=\$25,000 or less, 1=More than \$25,000.
- Predictors (School-Level)
- School Settings: measured by the amount of school time per week in regular or special-education classroom settings.
- Mediator
- Peer-relation difficulties: measured by three sub-questions of asking about children's social relationships. – "child takes turns," "child has trouble making friends," and "child has trouble playing with other children." (1=not like, 2= a little like, 3= very much like).

Analysis

- Analyses were conducted using Stata 10.0 to account for the complex probability sampling used in PEELS.
- Statistical analyses include Pearson correlations and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS 17.0.

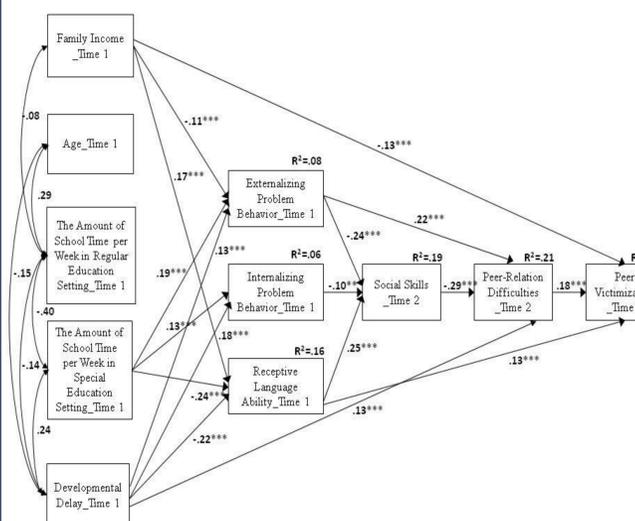
Figure 1. Hypothesized Model: Path Diagram for a Structural Equation Model for Predicting Probability of Peer Victimization with Children with Disabilities



Results

- The model fit was assessed by a joint consideration of the chi-square test (χ^2), the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Incremental Fit Index (IFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) approaches.
- The hypothesized model was found to fit well for the sample, $\chi^2(30) = 107.9$, GFI = .98; CFI = .96; IFI = .96; RMSEA = .048, and accounted for 21% of the variance in peer-relation difficulties and 6% of the variance in peer victimization.
- Children who had more peer-relation difficulties tended to have more peer victimization experiences.
- The total effect of family income on peer victimization was $r = -.12$, $p < .01$, which is the combination of the direct effect (-.134) and the indirect effect (.014). The indirect effect of family income on peer victimization was significantly mediated by the theoretical pathways ($p < .01$).
- The indirect effect of the special education setting on peer victimization was $r = -.018$ and was significantly mediated by the theoretical pathways ($p < .05$).

Figure 2. Standardized Parameter Estimates for the Final Model



Note. N = 1,126. For simplicity, non-significant paths and error variance estimates are not shown. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Conclusions

- Children with low family incomes tended to have more externalizing problem behaviors and less receptive language ability, which were associated with less social skills and more peer-relational difficulties, which was directly related to peer victimization. However, this effect was only partially mediated because the direct effect of family income on peer victimization remained statistically significant ($p < .01$).
- Children who had spent more time in special education settings tended to have more externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors and less receptive language ability, which were associated with less social skills and more peer-relational difficulties, which was directly related to peer victimization.
- The indirect effect of developmental delay on peer victimization was $r = .006$ and was not statistically significant ($p = .537$).
- Practical Implications include developing programs tailored for children with disabilities from low-income families and special-education classroom settings, providing mental health services for pre-elementary children with disabilities, linking parents to available school and community resources to improve children's language and social skills, and promoting policies to enhance social conditions for children with disabilities.

References

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