

# *A Friend in Need*

## *The Role of Friendship Quality as a Protective Factor in Peer Victimization and Bullying*

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*This study examined friendship quality as a possible moderator of risk factors in predicting peer victimization and bullying. Children (50 boys and 49 girls, ages 10 to 13 years) reported on the quality of their best friendship, as well as their bullying and victimization tendencies. Parents reported on their child's internalizing and externalizing behaviors, in addition to bullying and victimization tendencies. Results indicated that externalizing problems were related to bullying behavior; however, friendship quality moderated this relation such that among children with externalizing behaviors, a high-quality friendship significantly attenuated bullying behavior. Internalizing problems and low friendship quality were significantly related to victimization; however, friendship quality did not moderate the relation between internalizing problems and victimization. Implications for interventions based on these findings are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *bullying; victimization; friendship quality; externalizing behavior*

**The current study examined the moderating role** of friendship and whether having one high-quality best friendship can protect children who possess characteristics that increase their risk of either becoming victims or bullies. Peer victimization is a serious problem that affects numerous children every day. For a subset of students, however, victimization presents a persistent and long-term problem. In a recent sample of U.S. students in Grades 6 through 10, more than 10% of students reported that they were the victims of moderate or frequent bullying, and 13% reported that they engaged in moderate or frequent bullying of others (Nansel et al., 2001). It is disconcerting to note

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that the kind of chronic harassment reported by these students has been associated with serious consequences and negative outcomes for the targets of the victimization and the perpetrators. Children who are targets of chronic victimization by bullies suffer serious short- and long-term consequences, including loneliness, anxiety, depression, and academic problems (Nansel et al., 2001).

Bullying behavior has also been associated with short- and long-term negative outcomes. Children who are bullies tend to display a number of problem behaviors, including an increased likelihood of substance use, delinquency, and school problems (Nansel et al., 2001). Furthermore, Olweus (1993) reported that young adult men who were childhood bullies had a fourfold increase in criminal behavior in their early 20s. Thus, although much attention has been paid to the consequences of being victimized, children who bully others are also at risk for developing long-term negative problems, with equal if not greater social costs.

Significant research attention has been directed toward identifying potential risk factors for victimization and bullying, so that we can now paint a fairly accurate picture of the characteristics of childhood victims and bullies. Children who are victimized tend to possess certain characteristics that signal vulnerability to a potential bully. These characteristics are often referred to as internalizing problems because these children appear anxious, depressed, and socially withdrawn, and they tend to blame themselves for the victimization. Internalizing problems put children at risk for victimization because such behaviors convey to the bullies that these children are not assertive and are unlikely to defend themselves, which results in increased victimization over time (Olweus, 1993).

In contrast to the internalizing problems that characterize victims, children who are at risk for engaging in bullying behavior often display externalizing problems. Children who are bullies tend to be hostile, impulsive, and have a need to dominate others. The typical bully is a child who is aggressive, not only toward peers but also toward teachers, parents, and siblings (Olweus, 1993).

Now that existing research has identified the major risk factors associated with peer victimization and bullying, it is important to begin exploring what protective factors may moderate the relations between these risk factors and the likelihood of children's becoming victims and bullies. One such factor that has been highlighted as potentially protective is that of friendship. Friendships are believed to serve many functions, including informing persons of their value, promoting the exploration and acquisition of new skills, and providing a protective buffer against negative factors (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). This last function, in particular, has been applied to peer

victimization, as it has been theorized that having friendships protects children from being bullied. Evidence from several studies provides initial support for the potential protective function of children's friendships. Children who are victimized by their peers have been found to have fewer friendships than do children who are not victimized, and they are more vulnerable to increased victimization over time (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999).

Additional research suggests, however, that it is not just whether children have friendships that is important but rather the quality of these friendships that makes a difference as to whether the friendship will serve in a protective capacity. Many times, if victimized children have friends, the friends cannot provide the support necessary to thwart the bullies' attacks because the friends also tend to be victimized, weak, and possess internalizing symptoms (Hodges et al., 1999). Therefore, for friendship to be an effective buffer against victimization, the friend must possess certain qualities, such as being able and willing to stick up for the child (Hodges et al., 1999).

The current study advances the literature on peer victimization and bullying by exploring the potential protective factor of friendship quality. The relation between the risk factors of internalizing and externalizing problems and peer victimization and bullying has been well established by existing research, so we turned our attention to potential moderators of this relation and were interested in whether perceived friendship quality would play a moderating role. With regard to peer victimization, we predict that (a) children higher in internalizing problems will be targeted for peer victimization more so than children lower in internalizing problems; (b) children with lower quality best friendships will be victimized more so than children with higher quality friendships; and (c) friendship quality will moderate the relation between internalizing symptoms and peer victimization, such that children who possess internalizing symptoms and have a higher quality best friendship will be less likely to be victimized than children who possess internalizing symptoms without such a friendship.

As to bullying, we predict that (a) children scoring higher on externalizing problems will be more likely to engage in bullying behaviors than children scoring lower on externalizing problems. Given the lack of research on friendship quality and bullying behavior, we also test the hypotheses that (b) children with a higher quality best friendship will be less likely to engage in bullying behavior than children with a lower quality best friendship and (c) children who display externalizing problems and have a higher quality best friendship will be less likely to engage in bullying behavior than children who display externalizing problems but have a lower quality best friendship.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 99 children (50 boys and 49 girls) between the ages of 10 and 13 years ( $M = 11.45$  years), who were accompanied to a session by either a parent or legal guardian. Participants were recruited through a notice placed in a local newspaper for a study looking at children's peer relationships. Families received U.S. \$30 for completion of the study.

### Procedure

On arrival, the child and parent were separated and consent and assent were obtained. The children were then asked to complete a series of measures.

*Friendship Qualities Scale (FQS).* Children first were asked to complete the FQS, which is a measure of the perceived quality of children's close friendships (Bukowski et al., 1994). The measure consists of 23 items that ask participants to rate how true the statement is about their relationship with their best friend using a 5-point scale. The FQS has been found to be a valid and reliable measure of children's friendship quality (Bukowski et al., 1994), and in the current study, the coefficient alpha for the total scale score was .81.

*Perception of Peer Support Scale (PPSS).* After completing the FQS, children were asked to complete the PPSS (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997). The PPSS consists of 12 items that ask children how often (*never, sometimes, or a lot*) they experience a variety of victimizing events. The PPSS is designed to tap into verbal and physical victimization. The PPSS has been shown to be a valid measure with good reliability (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997). In the current study, the PPSS had a coefficient alpha of .81.

*Reactive-Proactive Aggression Questionnaire (RPAQ).* Finally, children were asked to complete the RPAQ, a newly designed measure that assesses reactive and proactive aggression (Raine et al., in press). It consists of 23 items, answered using a 3-point response scale (*never, sometimes, or often*), that yield scores on reactive and proactive aggression subscales. Raine et al. (in press) found evidence of good validity for the Reactive and Proactive subscales, as well as good reliability (coefficient alphas of .86 and .84, respectively). The coefficient alphas in the current study were .75 and .70, respectively.

*Structured interview items.* Following completion of the questionnaires, children were asked a series of questions designed to tap into their experiences with victimization. Two of these questions focused on experiences with being the target of hostile teasing and physical aggression, and two additional questions focused on bullying behaviors and teasing.

*Victimization items—Parent report.* At the same time the children were completing their portion of the study, parents were asked to complete a series of measures about their son or daughter. Parents were asked several questions about their child's experiences with bullying and victimization, using 5-point scales.<sup>1</sup>

*The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL).* Parents completed the CBCL, a measure of parents' perceptions of their children's social and behavioral competencies and problems (Achenbach, 1991). This scale consists of 113 items that are rated by the child's parent using a 3-point response scale (*not true, somewhat or sometimes true, and very true or often true*). The CBCL yields scores on eight subscales, which can be combined to create an Internalizing scale (consisting of the Withdrawn, Somatic Complaints, and Anxious/Depressed subscales) and an Externalizing scale (consisting of the Delinquent Behavior and Aggressive Behavior subscales). The CBCL has been found to have good validity and internal consistency (Achenbach, 1991). In the current study, we focus on the Internalizing and Externalizing subscales, both of which were found to be reliable in our sample (coefficient alphas of .86 and .90, respectively).

*PPSS—Parent Version.* Finally, parents were asked to complete a parent version of the PPSS adapted from the original child version of the PPSS (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997). The 12 items relating to victimization in original the PPSS were reworded to reflect the parent's point of view (e.g., "Does anyone in your child's class ever say mean things to your child?"). Parents were asked to rate each item using a 5-point scale to indicate how often each event happens to their child. In our sample, the adapted PPSS was found to have a coefficient alpha of .92.

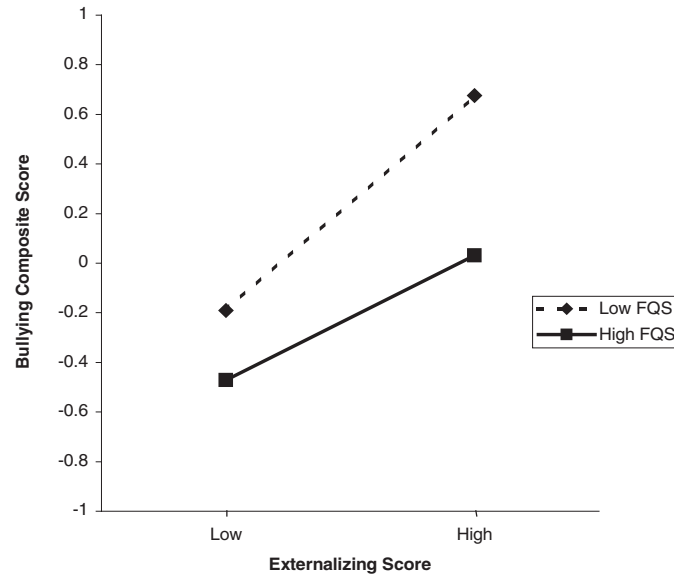
*Creation of the victimization and bullying composites.* A variety of victimization and bullying measures, described above, was administered in this study, some based on the children's self-reports, some based on parent reports, and some involving standardized measures validated in previous studies and some single items created specifically for the current study. Reli-

ability analyses, in the form of computing coefficient alphas, were then conducted on the combined pools of items of the measures (separately for bullying and victimization) to see if these measures could be combined to form single indices of victimization and bullying. Analyses revealed that the eight bullying items or measures were all positively intercorrelated, and a subsequent reliability analysis yielded a coefficient alpha of .76. The seven victimization items or measures were also positively intercorrelated, and this reliability analysis yielded a coefficient alpha of .76. We thus standardized the various corresponding measures and averaged them to obtain a mean Z-score for the bullying composite and the victimization composite for each child.<sup>2</sup>

## RESULTS

Two sets of regression analyses were conducted to determine the relations of internalizing behavior with victimization and the relations of externalizing behavior with bullying and whether these relations are moderated by perceived friendship quality.<sup>3</sup> Before conducting the analyses, all continuous predictors were centered. The predictors and their interaction terms were entered into the regression equation, with lower order effects being entered in the first step and higher order effects entered in the second step (Aiken & West, 1991). In addition, the effects of externalizing behaviors were controlled for in the victimization analyses, and the effect of internalizing problems were controlled for in the bullying analyses. Interactions were interpreted using predicted values at one *SD* below and above the means of the predictors and were probed using simple slope analyses following procedures recommended by Aiken and West (1991).

As one of the risk factors related to peer victimization is acting in submissive or passive ways, we had predicted that higher levels of internalizing symptoms would be associated with more frequent victimization. Consistent with this prediction, even when we controlled for externalizing behaviors, we found a main effect of internalizing problems,  $\beta = .26$ ,  $t(94) = 2.40$ ,  $p = .018$ , such that those children scoring higher in internalizing problems were more likely to be victimized by their peers. We also found a main effect of overall friendship quality,  $\beta = -.29$ ,  $t(94) = 3.00$ ,  $p = .003$ , with children reporting a higher quality best friendship being less likely to be victimized by their peers. However, inconsistent with our hypothesis, we did not find a significant Internalizing  $\times$  FQS interaction,  $\beta = .06$ ,  $t(91) = .55$ , *ns*. Overall friendship quality did not provide the buffering effect from peer victimization that we had anticipated. Instead, FQS and internalizing problems appear to exert significant and independent effects.



**Figure 1: Effects of Externalizing Behavior and Friendship Quality on Bullying of Peers**

As the profile of the typical bully involves displays of aggression and dominance, we predicted that externalizing behavior would be related to bullying of peers. Supporting this prediction, even when controlling for internalizing problems, we found a significant main effect of externalizing behaviors,  $\beta = .55$ ,  $t(94) = 5.78$ ,  $p < .001$ . Children scoring higher on externalizing behavior were more likely to bully their peers than children scoring lower on externalizing behavior. In addition, we also found a significant main effect of overall friendship quality,  $\beta = -.33$ ,  $t(94) = 4.31$ ,  $p < .001$ , such that children with a higher quality best friendship were significantly less likely to bully their peers than children with a lower quality best friendship. Furthermore, these two main effects were qualified by a significant Externalizing  $\times$  FQS interaction,  $\beta = -.18$ ,  $t(91) = 2.09$ ,  $p = .04$  (see Figure 1). Among children scoring high on externalizing behavior, those with a higher quality best friendship were less likely to engage in bullying behavior than those with a lower quality friendship,  $t = 2.66$ ,  $p = .009$ . In contrast, among children scoring low in externalizing behavior, the level of friendship quality had no impact on bullying behavior,  $t = 1.32$ ,  $p = .19$ . In other words, friendship quality played a buffering role in reducing bullying behavior when externalizing problems were present.

## DISCUSSION

The major contribution of the current study is the demonstration that friendship quality may actually play an important role in both sides of the peer victimization problem. Our findings suggest that having a high-quality best friendship might function in different capacities to protect children from becoming targets of peer victimization and also to attenuate bullying behavior.

Looking first at bullying, we explored externalizing problems as a potential risk factor and perceived friendship quality as a potential protective factor. Consistent with past research, we found that children who tended to display externalizing behaviors were more likely to engage in bullying than were children who tended not to display externalizing behaviors (Olweus, 1993). More interesting, however, was the moderating relation between the protective factor of friendship quality and bullying behavior. Although various research has been conducted looking at how having a high-quality best friendship may protect children from being victimized by their peers, the question of whether having a high-quality best friendship may protect children from becoming bullies has not, to our knowledge, been directly investigated by previous research. We found that overall friendship quality moderated the relation between externalizing problems and bullying behavior, such that children who displayed externalizing behaviors and who had a higher quality best friendship were significantly less likely to engage in bullying behavior than children displaying externalizing behaviors but who had a lower quality best friendship.

How might friendship protect children from becoming bullies? Friends have been found to be a vital part of a child's development, as friendship provides many different functions, including warmth, affection, nurturance, and intimacy. Having a high-quality friendship may serve as a protective factor against bullying for some children because it provides a template for healthy peer relationships. Children who are in a relationship characterized by closeness, security, and helping may become more attuned to the feelings of others and hence may develop a greater sense of empathy than children who are not in this kind of friendship.

The high-quality best friend may be particularly important in providing the bullies with the opportunity to learn and rehearse certain social skills that they may not have learned elsewhere. It is also possible that just as aggressive peers may strengthen a child's positive attitude toward aggression and tendencies to use aggression to solve conflict, a high-quality friend may encourage a child to have negative attitudes toward aggression and approach conflict from a more prosocial orientation.



Given the contemporaneous nature of the data of the current study, however, we of course can only speculate as to how friendship quality may serve to attenuate bullying behavior and by what mechanisms this is accomplished. It very well could be that children who have higher empathy are the ones who are more likely to have high-quality friendships, as opposed to high-quality friendships' increasing feelings of empathy. Nevertheless, the first step in developing interventions to decrease bullying is to identify potential protective factors, such as friendship quality, that reduce the likelihood of children at risk for bullying to engage in such behavior.

From this perspective, the current study may have important implications for the development of interventions that focus on attenuating bullying behavior through the use of friendship. Similar interventions have been suggested for addressing problems with peer victimization, and such methods often focus on the victims and ways to help them develop friendship skills (Boulton, Trueman, Chau, Whitehand, & Amatya, 1999). Analogous interventions could be developed to help decrease bullying behavior in children who are at risk. Interventions would need to focus on cultivating the friendship skills of potential bullies, helping them to develop quality friendships with their peers that are characterized by closeness, supportiveness, and trust.

In addition to exploring the moderating effects of friendship quality on bullying behavior, we explored the relations among victimization, internalizing symptoms, and perceived friendship quality. Consistent with past research finding a relation between internalizing symptoms and victimization, we found that children who tended to possess internalizing problems were more likely to be victimized by their peers than children who tended not to possess internalizing problems. Children who have internalizing problems tend to appear anxious, depressed, and socially withdrawn. Through these characteristics, these children signal to bullies that they are unlikely to be assertive and unlikely to defend themselves against an attack. They also reinforce the bully's behavior by acting submissively and giving in to the bully's demands, and they may further reward the bully by displaying emotional distress (Olweus, 1993).

Consistent with past research suggesting that having one supportive, quality friendship may protect children from victimization (Hodges et al., 1999), we found that children who had an overall high-quality best friendship were less likely to be targets of peer victimization than children without such a friendship. Unlike Hodges et al. (1999), however, we did not find an interaction between internalizing symptoms and friendship quality in predicting peer victimization. One difference between the two studies is that Hodges et al. included only those children with reciprocated friendships. In contrast, our primary interest was in how the perceived quality of children's friend-

ships would be related to peer victimization, so our sample may have included some children whose perceived best friendships were not reciprocated. In our study, we found an independent, additive relation for internalizing problems and friendship quality. Children who possessed more internalizing symptoms and who did not have a higher quality perceived best friendship were most likely to report being victimized by their peers. Hence, the combination of these two factors appears to be an especially risky one.

There are several limitations of the current study that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample size is relatively small, precluding more fine-grained analyses of moderating effects. Second, because of recruitment procedures, the sample cannot be considered representative of the population at large. Finally, as noted earlier, causal conclusions cannot be drawn from these cross-sectional data.

### Conclusions

Although many adults may whimsically look back on their childhoods and remember them as some of the best days of their lives, for many children, victimization and bullying can make them seem as though things could not be any worse. We now have a fairly detailed picture of who the typical victims and bullies are and what characteristics and risk factors they may possess. By focusing attention on identifying factors, such as friendship quality, that may potentially protect children from either becoming targets of peer victimization or perpetrators of these acts of bullying, we hopefully will be able to develop successful interventions aimed at attenuating victimization and bullying behavior. The ultimate goal is to ensure that our children feel safe and secure at school and that they will be able to actually experience the carefree childhood that adults so often whimsically remember.

### NOTES

1. Copies of all of the questions employed in this study are available from the authors.
2. We examined the convergence between parent and child reports of the victimization experiences of our sample. Composites of victimization and bullying were computed separately for parent and child measures and then intercorrelated. We found that children's and parents' reports of bullying behavior were strongly correlated  $r(97) = .43, p < .01$ . The analogous correlation for reports of victimization experiences was  $r(97) = .40, p < .01$ . Thus, parents and children show good agreement with respect to the children's victimization experiences. Because the reliabilities of the combined scores were greater than those of the individual parent and child composites, we decided to employ the combined composite in all subsequent analyses.

3. The correlations among all measures included in the regression analyses ranged from  $-.43$  to  $.58$  (median  $r = .24$ ), indicating that multicollinearity was not a problem. In addition, preliminary analyses revealed no significant main effects or interactions involving sex, so this factor is not considered further.

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