Is peer victimization at school associated to emotional problems among adolescents living in a low-income Brazilian city?

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Introduction - Peer victimization encompasses two concepts: peer aggression and bullying. Peer aggression includes events of physical aggression, verbal harassment and/or social manipulation. Bullying perceived by adolescents requires victims to feel hurt or harmed by the aggressor.

Objectives - Our study aims to examine the strength of association between peer victimization at school (measured by two variables: suffering peer aggression and being a victim of bullying) and adolescent clinical emotional problems when taking into account the influence of other types of violence exposure (severe physical punishment by parents, victimization by community violence) among other potential risk and protective factors.

Methods - This is a cross-sectional study nested in a longitudinal study [1] that investigated a population-based sample of 1,409 6-to-15-year olds at baseline (response rate=87.8%). A 3-stage probabilistic sampling procedure (random selection of census units, eligible households and target child) was used to generate sampling weights. At baseline, trained lay interviewers applied a semi-structured questionnaire to 680 (94.4% of 720) adolescents (11-15-years). This poster analyses baseline data reported by in-school adolescents (n=669).

Exposure to violence at school (peer aggression events) was measured by a 15-item scale previously used in a Norwegian study with schoolchildren [2]. This scale investigated three types of peer aggression events: physical aggression, verbal harassment and social manipulation. Any suffered peer aggression corresponded to at least one event occurring more than once in the past 6 months.

Self-reported bullying victimization was investigated based on the adolescent response to one question: “How often have you been bullied in the past 6 months?” The frequency of more than once a week or most days identified repeated exposure. This question was asked after investigating peer aggression events, and after informing the adolescent about the definition of bullying (“when one or more school peers are repeatedly doing bad things to you such as name-calling, threatening, hitting, spreading rumors about you, excluding you from the group or teasing you to hurt your feelings”).

Emotional problems were investigated based on the Brazilian version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) for 11-to-17-year olds [3]. Adolescents with emotional problems were those with scale scores in the clinical range according to pre-established cut-off points (www.sdqinfo.com).

Results - Among adolescents who reported exposure to peer aggression at school, only 20.0% (13.1-29.4%) considered themselves victims of bullying. Table 1 shows the statistically significant correlates of adolescent-reported clinical emotional problems identified by multivariable logistic regression. Self-perceived bullying victimization but not exposure to peer aggression events was associated with adolescent-reported emotional problems.

Conclusions - Results suggest that feeling hurt or harmed when suffering peer aggression at school influences the development of emotional problems among adolescents. Therefore, it would be desirable to intervene to reduce violence at school in order to prevent its deleterious consequences for youth mental health.

Table 1. Statistically significant correlates of adolescent-reported emotional problems identified by multivariable logistic regression

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) applied to adolescents (n = 669)			
	N	% with clinical problems	Multivariable logistic regression OR (95% CI)
CORRELATES BY INFORMANTS			
ADOLESCENT SELF-REPORTED VICTIMIZATION			
Self-perceived bullying victimization			
More than once a week	37	32.4	3.23 (1.19, 8.78)*
Less than once a week ^a	630	9.2	
Community violence victimization			3.43 (1.66, 7.07)**
Yes	97	27.8	
No ^a	572	7.5	
COVARIATES REPORTED BY ADOLESCENTS			
Stressful life events			2.48 (1.22, 5.02)*
Any	295	16.3	
None ^a	374	5.9	
Perceived parental rearing style: rejection ^b			1.84 (1.18, 2.87)*
COVARIATES REPORTED BY MOTHERS			
Child age (years)			0.80 (0.63, 0.99)*
Maternal education			2.16 (1.15, 4.03)*
0-7 years	312	14.7	
8+ years ^a	357	6.7	

Note. * p < .05; ** p < .005; *** p < .0005. ^a Reference category; ^b Continuous variable.

Covariates included in the multivariable model which were not identified as statistically significant: child gender, peer physical aggression, peer verbal harassment, peer social manipulation, resilience, emotional warmth (a parental rearing style perceived by the adolescent), maternal anxiety/depression, absent father, mother victim of severe marital physical violence, 3 parenting styles (nurturance, inconsistency, following through on discipline).

References

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Ethical considerations: The Brazilian National Committee for Ethics in Research (process 25000.182992/2011-76) & UNIFESP's Research Ethics Committee (process 0324/11) approved the study.

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