

Peer Experiences as Moderators of the Associations between Stressful Life Events and

Psychological Adjustment

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Introduction

- Research has shown that many adolescents who experience stressful life events (SLEs), such as a death in the family, are at risk for psychological distress.
- Not all adolescents who experience SLEs suffer psychologically, but little is known about factors that might help or hurt when SLEs occur.
- This study examines for the first time whether school-based peer experiences function protectively or exacerbate the psychological problems associated with SLEs during early adolescence (10-14 years).
- Of interest were the effects of peer rejection and victimization, and friendship involvement as moderators of depression and loneliness following the occurrence of stressful life events. We predicted mutual best friendships would mitigate the impact of SLEs, acting as protective factors against adjustment difficulties whereas peer victimization and rejection would serve as risk factors, augmenting loneliness and depressive symptoms.

Participants

- Participants were 268 (46% female; *M* age = 11.54 years) 6th grade students from two middle schools in Buffalo, NY.
- Students were part of a larger longitudinal study. Of interest in this study were the questionnaires completed at Time 3, which occurred in May of 2012.

Measures

- **Stressful life events** were assessed with a 16-item self-report measure (Attar et al., 2004). Items pertained to violence and negative life changes ($\alpha = 0.76$).
- **Depressive symptoms** (10-item Children's Depressive Inventory; Kovacs, 1992) were assessed by calculating the mean score across all items ($\alpha = 0.76$).
- **Loneliness** (16-item Asher Loneliness Scale; Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984) was assessed by children's self-reports of loneliness and social dissatisfaction with higher mean scores indicating greater loneliness ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Tables

Means (SD) for Key Study Variables

Variable	Mean (SD)
Stressful Life Events	0.00(.18)
Depressive symptoms	0.30(.33)
Loneliness	1.59(.64)
Peer Rejection	0.00(1.00)
Peer Victimization	0.00(.80)

Summary of Regression Analyses

	Variable	Depressive symptoms		Loneliness	
		β	β	β	β
Step 1	<i>Ethnicity</i>	.08- .11	.08- .11		
Step 2	<i>SLE</i>	.26**	.08 - .12		
Step 3	<i>Sex</i>	-.03- -.1	-.05- -.14		
	<i>Peer rejection</i>	.03	.00		
	<i>Peer victimization</i>	.35**	.25**		
Step 4	<i>Friendship</i>	-.04	.04		
	<i>Rejection-x-Sex</i>	-.19	-.12		
	<i>Stress-x-Sex</i>	.00	.13		
	<i>Rejection-x-Stress</i>	.08	.12		
	<i>Victimization-x-Sex</i>	-.05	.14		
	<i>Victimization-x-Stress</i>	.24**	.15		
Step 5	<i>Friendship-x-Sex</i>	.18	.02		
	<i>Friendship-x-Stress</i>	-.07	-.01		
Step 5	<i>Friendship-x-Stress-x-Sex</i>	.32	.22		

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Measures (cont'd)

Peer nomination items were used to assess:

- **Peer rejection**; with the item "Someone you like to be with least."
- **Peer victimization**; with the items: "Someone who gets picked on or bullied by other kids;" "Someone who gets hit or pushed around by other kids;" "Someone who other kids say mean things or gossip about" ($\alpha = 0.66$).
- **Best friendship involvement**; identified by mutual best friend nominations; 50% had at least one mutual best friend (e.g., Jane nominated Jessica, Jessica nominated Jane).

Results

- Regressions evaluated the relation between *SLE* and loneliness and depression, and peer rejection, victimization and friendship (as well as sex) as moderators.
- **Main effects**: *SLEs* were significant predictors of depressive symptoms. Peer victimization was a significant predictor of loneliness and depressive symptoms.
- **Peer rejection as a moderator**: Peer rejection was not a significant moderator.
- **Peer victimization as a moderator**: The two-way interaction between victimization and *SLEs* was significant when predicting depression. Follow-up analyses indicates that *SLEs* were a significant predictor of depression at high ($p < .001$) and medium levels ($p < .01$) of peer victimization but not at low levels.
- **Friendship involvement as a moderator**: When predicting depressive symptoms, the interaction between *SLEs*, friendship involvement, and sex approached significance ($p = .07$). Simple slope analyses revealed that *SLEs* were associated with depressive symptoms only for boys *without* friends and girls *with* friends ($ps < .06$).

Conclusions

- As expected, *SLEs* interacted with peer victimization to increase depressive symptoms. This is most likely because peer victimization is stressful and this stress adds to the stress associated with *SLEs* to increase adolescents' feelings of sadness and despair.
- *Why are girls with friends but boys without friends at risk for depression when SLEs occur?* Boys without friends may be left without a school-based support to help with *SLEs*, which in our study pertained primarily to home/family events. However, past research suggests that girls have a greater tendency to co-ruminate with their friends about negative events, which increases psychological distress. Thus, it is possible that girls with friends co-ruminate *about the SLEs*, which in turn, increases depressive symptoms.
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