

Examining How Affective Reactions of Young Adolescents to Friendship Dissolution Impact Their Behavior

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Introduction

- Friendships, and particularly “best” friendships, are critical for positive psychological well-being and adjustment throughout the lifespan (Hartup & Stevens, 1997).
- This is especially true during early adolescence (10-14 years) when the loss of a “best” friendship has been shown to be a significant interpersonal stressor (e.g., Bowker, 2011).
- Theory and research suggest that emotional reactions to significant interpersonal stressors can lead to changes in behavior (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Hubbard, 2001; Zimmer-Gembeck, Lees, & Skinner, 2011).
- This study considers for the first time whether young adolescents’ emotional reactions to best friendship dissolutions explain their later social behaviors.
- It was expected that young adolescents’ internalizing emotional reactions to best friendship dissolution (e.g., their sadness, embarrassment) would predict increases in their socially withdrawn behavior and that young adolescents’ externalizing emotional reactions (anger) would predict increases in their aggressive behavior. Gender was explored as a moderator.

Participants & Procedure

- Participants were 69 sixth grade students (40.6% boys, $M_{age} = 11.65$ years) who reported at least one recent best friendship dissolution.
- Participants were ethnically and racially diverse (approximately 44.70% minority).
- Participants were a selected sample from a larger longitudinal study of 271 sixth-grade students who completed measures in their schools.
- This study focused on data from two time points:
 - Time 1 (T1) = February
 - Time 2 (T2) = May

Tables

Table 1: Means (SD) for Key Study Variables

Variable	Time 1	Time 2
Anger	2.20 (1.24)	
Sadness	2.02 (1.20)	
Embarrassment	1.46 (0.82)	
Social Withdrawal	0.00 (0.80)	0.00 (0.80)
Physical Aggression	0.00 (0.97)	0.00 (0.96)
Relational Aggression	0.00 (0.86)	0.00 (0.89)
Mutual Friends	0.54 (0.50)	
Peer Rejection	0.00 (1.00)	

Table 2: Summary of Regression Analyses

	Outcome	T2 SW		T2 Physical Agg		T2 Rel Agg	
		B	β	B	β	B	β
Step 1	T1 SW	0.34	0.40*				
	T1 Physical A			0.60	0.74**	0.62	0.34*
	T1 Rel A			-0.02	-0.05	0.39	0.41*
	Ethnicity	0.01	0.04	-0.01	-0.06	-0.03	-0.10
	Mutual best friend	0.13	0.15	-0.08	-0.13	-0.11	-0.08
	Peer rejection			0.05	0.15	-0.01	-0.01
Step 2	T1 Sad	0.08	0.23	-0.02	-0.07		
	T1 Embarrassed	-0.15	-0.29	-0.03	-0.08		
	T1 Angry			0.04	0.12	0.05	0.08
Step 3	Gender			0.06	0.09		
Step 4	Gender X Sad	0.07	0.27	-0.09	-0.43		
	Gender X Embarrassed	-0.28	-0.70	0.02	0.07		
	Gender X Angry			-0.20	-0.83*	-0.15	-0.28

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

Measures

Best Friendship Dissolution (Bowker, 2011; Time 1): Participants reported on past best friendship dissolutions and the degree to which they felt anger, sadness, and embarrassment when their best friendships ended. Of the larger study, 39.40% of participants reported experiencing at least one best friendship dissolution.

Mutual best friendship involvement (Time 1): 2 best friends were nominated and mutuality was determined; in the larger sample, approximately 54.00% of participants had at least one mutual best friend.

Social Withdrawal (Times 1 and 2): 4 peer nomination items (T1 $\alpha = .82$, T2 $\alpha = .81$); e.g.: “Somebody who is very shy”.

Physical Aggression (Times 1 and 2): 2 peer nomination items (T1 $\alpha = .94$, T2 $\alpha = .90$); e.g.: “A person who hits, kicks, or punches others”.

Relational Aggression (Times 1 and 2): 2 peer nomination items (T1 $\alpha = .64$, T2 $\alpha = .73$); e.g.: “Someone who spreads rumors about other kids”.

Peer Rejection (Time 1): 1 peer nomination item; “Someone you like the least”.

Results

Preliminary Correlational Analyses

- The three emotional reaction variables were all significantly associated ($p < .05$) and the behavioral variables were all stable over time ($p < .005$).
- Of note, gender was associated significantly with T1 and T2 withdrawal and T1 and T2 physical aggression.

Primary Analyses: Regression Analyses (Table 2)

Main Effects:

- T1 social withdrawal was a significant predictor of social withdrawal at T2; T1 physical aggression was a significant predictor of physical aggression at T2 and a significant predictor of relational aggression at T2; T1 relational aggression was a significant predictor of T2 relational aggression.

Interaction Effect:

- When predicting T2 physical aggression, the interaction involving gender and externalizing emotional reactions (anger) was significant.
- Follow-up simple slope analyses revealed that angry emotional reactions were a significant predictor of *increases* in physical aggression for boys ($\beta = 0.15$, $p = .007$), but not girls ($\beta = -0.31$, $p = .57$).

Conclusion

- Results from this study demonstrate for the first time a linkage between young adolescents’ affective emotional reactions to *best friendship loss* and their subsequent behaviors. However, the findings were specific for *angry* emotional reactions, *physical* aggression, and *boys*.
- This link between angry emotional reactions and physical aggression for boys but not for girls is consistent with past research that found that the connection between aggressive responses to ambiguous social situations (involving unfamiliar peers) and aggressive behavior was stronger in boys than girls (Calvete & Orue, 2012).
- More research is needed but taken together with the Calvete and Orue (2012) study, results from this investigation suggest that young adolescent boys’ angry emotional reactions are more closely related to their later aggressive behaviors. Future research should consider the possible mediating role of social goals and whether girls are better able to inhibit their aggressive behaviors when they feel angry than boys.
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