All too often, children victimize other children at school. This peer victimization can take diverse forms and may range in severity from verbal (e.g., name calling, threatening, and taunting) and relational assaults (e.g., gossiping, excluding from social interactions, and destroying social relationships) to physical assaults (e.g., hitting, kicking, and shoving) and weapon use (Furlong, Sharma, & Rhee, 2000). A recent observational study of peer interactions in the classroom revealed that children victimize their classmates approximately two and one-half times an hour (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). This estimate is likely to be even higher in other school settings in which adult monitoring is less consistent than in the classroom such as playgrounds, hallways, or restrooms (cf., Whitney & Smith, 1993).

Peer victimization is a troubling problem for school personnel because it can hinder teaching and learning in numerous ways. Not only does peer victimization cause disruptions in the classroom environment that directly interfere with instruction, but also the children who are involved in victimization, either as victims or perpetrators, are at risk for developing potentially severe social, emotional, behavioral, and academic problems that may further hamper education (Furlong et al., 2000; Hanish, 2000; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Schwartz, McFadyen-Ketchum, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1998). For example, aggressive and victimized children may display disruptive and delinquent behaviors, inattention in the classroom, symptoms of anxiety and depression, disrupted peer relationships, reduced interest in and attachment to school, and diminished academic achievement. These
behaviors can disrupt children's learning by interfering with their participation and engagement in schoolwork (e.g., Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999). Thus, understanding and reducing school victimization is crucial for creating academic environments that facilitate learning. In this article we explain why peer victimization occurs and provide recommendations to school counselors about how to reduce it.

**Why Do Children Get Victimized?**

At one time or another, most children are victimized by peers; however, some children are much more likely than others to be victimized. On average, approximately 1 in 10 children are repeatedly and persistently victimized by peers, although prevalence estimates vary considerably (Olweus, 1994). The degree to which particular children are targeted for victimization by peers depends, in large part, on their personal characteristics and behaviors, the dynamics of the peer group, and the structure and climate of the school environment.

**Demographic Characteristics**

Prevalence estimates vary greatly and depend, in part, upon demographic characteristics—age, gender, and ethnicity—that make some children more vulnerable than others (Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996; Hanish & Guerra, 2000). Age is an important risk factor for being victimized because younger children are less likely than older children to have developed physical, cognitive, and social skills that can protect them from peer attacks (Finkelhor, 1995). Rates of peer victimization are quite high among early elementary school-aged children, particularly for second graders who are beginning to spend increasing amounts of time with peers (Ellis, Rogoff, & Cromer, 1981; Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Olweus, 1994). At these early elementary school ages, however, victimization is only minimally stable over time, and most young children experience victimization as relatively untargeted and transient (Hanish & Guerra, 2000). As children get older, however, this pattern changes. Victimization is less common among older children than among younger children, in part because older children have developed more self-protection skills. When it occurs for older children, though, it tends to be quite stable over time (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Olweus, 1978). Thus, older children are victimized more selectively, and those who are targeted by peers tend to be victimized repeatedly over time.

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Although both boys and girls get victimized, boys' victimization takes a different form than does girls' victimization. In the school years, social interactions tend to be gender-segregated; boys interact predominantly with boys, and girls interact predominantly with girls. Moreover, social interaction styles differ by gender. Boys tend to engage in physical activities such as rough-and-tumble play and physical contests, but girls tend to engage in quieter and more intimate social activities (Maccoby, 1999). Not only do girls and boys engage in different forms of social interaction, but they are differentially vulnerable to certain forms of victimization such as sexual victimization, because they are differentially reinforcing to perpetrators (Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996). It is no surprise, then, that boys and girls experience victimization differently. Boys are more likely than girls to be physically victimized; they are more often punched, kicked, and threatened with a weapon. Girls, in contrast, are more likely to be relationally and sexually victimized; they are more often gossiped about, intentionally excluded from social activities, and sexually harassed (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Furlong et al., 2000).

Ethnicity also influences children's experiences of being victimized. A recent study of elementary school-aged children living in moderately and highly disadvantaged communities revealed that the risk of being victimized was higher for White and for African-American children than for Latino children (Hanish & Guerra, 2000). Moreover, whereas White children were likely to be victimized in ethnically integrated schools, African-American were likely to be victimized in nonintegrated, predominantly African-American schools. Latino children experienced low rates of victimization in integrated as well as nonintegrated schools. Thus, not only is victimization more common for children of some ethnic groups than others, but the ethnic background of schoolmates also influences children's likelihood of being attacked.

**Behavioral Characteristics**

Some children also display behaviors that increase the risk of being victimized. One reason that some children get victimized is that peers perceive them as unable to defend themselves. Indeed, some children develop a reputation among their peers as easy targets because they are physically weak, they submissively acquiesce to peers' demands, or they are rejected by the peer group and have few friends who are able to
Although children's individual characteristics may be risk factors, it is peers' interpretations of these characteristics that drive peer victimization. Although only a small percentage of children directly victimize others, peers are involved in most instances of victimization (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). This participation may be active, by assisting or retaliating with the bully, or passive, by avoiding or refusing to intervene (Salmivalli, Huttunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997). Both forms of peer involvement, however, support, rather than hinder, victimizing interactions. It is relatively rare for children to intervene to protect victimized children; estimates suggest that peer protection occurs in less than 15% of victimizing interactions (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). This is true despite the fact that peers are generally distressed by victimization and their intervention is often successful in interrupting the harassment (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Hodges et al., 1999).

There are multiple reasons why children may victimize or facilitate others' victimizing actions. Victimization sometimes occurs as children vie for positions of dominance within the social hierarchy. That is, children sometimes victimize others (or permit victimization to occur), in part, to maintain and achieve social prominence within and across peer groups (Adler & Adler, 1995). Thus, peers sometimes victimize others to achieve positions of power and status among their peers.
A second reason children may choose to victimize others is because they believe that their behavior is legitimate and acceptable (Guerra, Huesmann, & Hanish, 1995). Children who are highly aggressive perceive their victimizing behavior as an effective means of achieving valued rewards such as high self-esteem, tangible resources, and peer approval (Boldizar, Perry, & Perry, 1989; Perry, Perry, & Rasmussen, 1986; Slaby & Guerra, 1988). They also devalue their victims by assuming that they deserve to be victimized and by minimizing their suffering (Perry et al., 1990; Slaby & Guerra, 1988). Such beliefs support participation in victimization by maximizing the perceived rewards and minimizing the perceived costs of aggression.

In addition, children who victimize are often directly reinforced by their peers for harassing others. Aggressive children tend to have moderate-sized friendship networks, and these friendship networks are typically populated by children who endorse a similar set of values and behaviors (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariepy, 1988; Salmivalli et al., 1997). Indeed, the children in aggressors’ peer networks are often themselves aggressive. Moreover, those who are not, frequently facilitate aggressive behavior by helping to find victims and by actively encouraging victimization by cheering or laughing (Salmivalli et al., 1997). Thus, aggressive children frequently affiliate with peers who validate their behaviors.

School Structure Influences
Victimization tends to occur in settings in which adults are not directly monitoring children’s interactions. Schools can afford many opportunities for children to congregate relatively unseen. Thus, attacks on the playground and in the hallways are common (Whitney & Smith, 1993). However, even in classrooms victimization is frequent during solitary or group activities, when teachers are less likely to be directing or supervising children’s interactions (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). To compound the fact that victimization is often concealed from adults, many victimized children report that they do not tell teachers or other adults about their experiences for fear of reprisal from the bully (Smith & Thompson, 1991). Thus, teachers, counselors, and other school staff are often unaware of the extent of peer victimization among their pupils and consequently are unable to intervene.

What Can School Counselors Do?
Peer victimization is a multilevel process; factors at the level of the individual child, the peer group, and the school jointly influence the occurrence of peer victimization. Individual children are victimized by peer bullies as schoolmates look on or ignore, and school staff are unaware. Thus, peer victimization operates at multiple ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Peer victimization is also a systemic process; the behaviors and interactions of various participants influence one another. For instance, bullies’ victimizing actions may harm their victims. At the same time, schoolmates’ failures to defend victimized children reinforce bullies’ actions.

Therefore, school counselors’ efforts to intervene must also take an ecological and systemic approach. In other words, change must occur at all (i.e., individual, peer, and school) levels simultaneously so that attempts to modify one aspect of the problem are not thwarted by tendencies at other levels to maintain the status quo. Thus, we conceptualize peer victimization interventions as three-level interventions and suggest that interventions include components that are designed to assist victimized children, to reduce bullies’ victimizing behaviors, and to modify the structure and climate of the school so that opportunities for and reinforcement of victimization are reduced. In the following sections, we discuss our intervention recommendations and provide examples of existing programs that have been designed to effect changes at each level.

Assisting Victimized Children
Using ineffective social skills is a significant risk factor for peer victimization. In particular, children who exhibit aggressive behavior are at relatively high risk, because their behavior is bothersome to peers. Peers may then victimize because they dislike such children, or they are provoked to attack by these irritating behaviors (Hanish & Guerra, in press). Providing social-skills training interventions that teach more effective and appropriate ways of interacting with others may decrease rates of victimization for these children.

Children who are both aggressive and rejected, and thus at high risk for being victimized, tend to respond positively to such interventions. Lochman, Coie, Underwood, and Terry (1993) provided a social-relations training program to aggressive rejected and nonaggressive rejected African-American children.
Children received individual and group instruction and practice in social-problem solving, positive play skills, group-entry skills, and managing negative emotions. Although the intervention had no effect on the behavior or social status of nonaggressive rejected children, it did improve both the behavior and social status of aggressive, rejected children. Children who were both aggressive and rejected demonstrated post-intervention reductions in teacher-rated aggressive behavior and rejection and increases in peer-rated social acceptance compared with aggressive rejected children who did not receive the intervention. Some of these effects persisted, and at a one-year follow up, aggressive rejected children who participated in the intervention displayed less teacher-rated aggressive behavior and more teacher-rated prosocial behavior than their aggressive, rejected peers who did not receive the intervention. However, differences in social status had disappeared over the follow-up period.

Findings from this study and related studies (Lochman et al., 1993; Pepler, King, & Byrd, 1991) suggest that this kind of a social-skills training program is modestly successful in improving children’s social behaviors, showing short-term but not lasting improvements when used in isolation. This suggests that simply providing social-skills training to children who are being victimized due to their aggressive and ineffective social behaviors is not enough to reduce peer victimization in the schools. Without simultaneously modifying the behavior of the bullying children and other members of the school context, the processes that contribute to peer victimization continue to operate. Instead, this technique may be more effective when it is combined with intervention strategies targeted toward additional levels of the peer victimization system. Thus, we recommend that school counselors use it as one component in a multilevel intervention approach.

Reducing Bullies’ Victimization Behaviors
It is also important for victimization interventions to include a component that targets bullies’ victimizing and aggressive behaviors. As discussed, peer victimization occurs within social contexts. In these settings, the responses of others reinforce rather than inhibit victimizing. Thus, counselors’ intervention efforts must also target the victimizing behaviors of perpetrators as well as the reinforcing behaviors of peers.

One example of such an intervention is the Good Behavior Game (Dolan et al., 1993; Kellam, Rebok, Ialongo, & Mayer, 1994). In this intervention, all children in the class are assigned to teams that then can earn tangible rewards and privileges by exhibiting cooperative and nonaggressive behaviors. Because entire teams lose the rewards and privileges when a single student misbehaves, this intervention changes the contingencies for victimization—individuals’ aggressive and victimizing behaviors no longer elicit passive or active reinforcement from peers. Instead, peers encourage their classmates to inhibit victimization while simultaneously supporting and promoting more positive peer behaviors.

In field trials, this intervention has significantly reduced aggressive and victimizing behaviors for the most aggressive children, particularly boys, and these effects have lasted for several years (Dolan et al., 1993; Kellam et al., 1994). This suggests that taking a classroom approach to reducing children’s victimizing behaviors is effective. By including all members of the classroom (i.e., all participants in victimization), the entire peer group is modified, creating a more favorable classroom climate. Thus, all peers rather than simply the bullies are reinforced for discouraging victimization. Such an approach epitomizes the truly ecological nature of peer victimization.

Modifying School Climate and Structure
Attempts to reduce peer victimization in the schools must recognize that the school environment significantly affects peer victimization. Often, teachers and other school personnel are unaware that victimization is occurring, and even when they are aware, they sometimes do not intervene. Thus, it is crucial for school counselors to provide the staff with assistance in recognizing, preventing, and stopping victimization when it occurs.

One effective approach has focused on modifying school policies related to victimization by providing information and developing and implementing school-wide policies for managing victimization (Olweus, 1992). In doing so, school personnel are instructed about the problem of peer victimization in general as well as the prevalence and severity of the problem in their particular school. Such instruction is designed to increase teacher and staff awareness of the extent of the problem. In addition, a set of policies is developed and implemented that create a warm and positive environment for children coupled with close monitoring of children’s interactions and consistent sanctions for victimizing behaviors. This often involves increased supervision of children, increased discussion of rules regarding victimization and enforcement of consequences for violating such rules, enhancement of teacher and peer intervention in victimization, and cooperative learning activities for children.

This school-wide intervention has been shown to be effective in decreasing victimization on, but not off, campus (Olweus, 1992). Moreover, children attending schools that have participated in this program have reported improved peer relationships and greater interest and involvement in school (Olweus, 1992). This intervention modifies the school environment by...
substituting existing policies and practices that inadvertently facilitate victimization with those that directly inhibit victimization. By doing so, this intervention directs change toward multiple aspects of the school and classroom structure.

Conclusion

Peer victimization occurs in schools because of interacting risk factors that exist at multiple levels. Individual children’s personal characteristics or behaviors may signal particular vulnerabilities that peers interpret as weaknesses or differences. Peers often target their attacks toward these children, and their victimizing is frequently reinforced by the responses of other children as well as their own belief systems. Moreover, teachers’ relative lack of awareness of the problem further encourages this behavior. Thus, peer victimization in the schools is a systemic problem that requires that school counselors adopt a systemic and comprehensive solution. Anything less is likely to be only partially effective.

We recommend that school counselors simultaneously provide multiple interventions that are targeted toward different aspects of the peer victimization problem, including assisting victimized children in interacting with peers, reducing peers’ engagement in and reinforcement of victimizing behaviors, and increasing teacher and staff awareness and intervention. We discuss samples of programs that have been developed to target each level of the problem. Each of these forms of intervention has been shown to reduce some victimization-related behaviors; however, when used in isolation, none effect change in all relevant aspects of victimization. Using them in combination, though, is likely to produce more comprehensive and systemic changes. Although all three types of intervention components have not yet been tested together, related intervention research demonstrates that comprehensive, multicomponent, multilevel, ecological interventions tend to be more effective in reducing systemic and ecological problems than simple, single-component interventions (Henggeler, Schoenwald, & Munger, 1996). Thus, we suggest that school counselors use each of these types of intervention in combination to reduce peer victimization at school.

Counselors should provide the staff with assistance in recognizing, preventing, and stopping victimization when it occurs.

References


