

# Peer Victimization: The Role of Self-efficacy in Children's Coping Strategies

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Peer victimization, whether in the form of conflict, aggression, violence or bullying behaviors, is a common problem in today's schools systems.<sup>1</sup> Until recently, the severity and frequency of these issues were greatly underestimated. On a global level, researchers have estimated that between 7% and 23% of school-aged children are victimized by their peers.<sup>2</sup> Studies have also shown that one in six Australian students are bullied on a weekly basis and a further 77% of secondary schools students report being the victims of bullying at some point throughout their educational experience.<sup>3,4</sup>

Consistently, studies have also shown that children who are victimized, whether in the form of harassment, ridicule, rejection or social isolation, are at a higher risk for social and psychological maladjustment. Specifically, victimized students have been reported to have a variety of health problems, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and negative affect.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Thus, from current research it is possible to conclude that victimized individuals often suffer physically, mentally and emotionally. Evidence has further revealed that these problems, which can interfere with the healthy development of young children, may persist throughout the school years and even into adulthood.<sup>8</sup>

It is apparent that peer victimization affects children to varying degrees. Hoover, Oliver and Hazler studied school children who were victims of bullying and discovered that each of these children were impacted differently from these experiences.<sup>4</sup> While over 75% of secondary school students reported being victimized throughout their educational careers, only 15% believed they had been affected in a detrimental manner. Consequently, researchers have started to focus on the adaptation of diverse coping strategies in order to explain differences in victimized children's adjustment.<sup>7</sup>

Coping has been defined as 'the way people manage life conditions that are stressful' (Lazarus, 1999, p.102).<sup>9a</sup> Coping strategies help to decrease the rate of victimization and mitigate the negative effects of bullying experiences. Depending on the coping strategies that children adopt in stressful situations, they might be more or less at risk of being victimized and of experiencing negative consequences from these bullying behaviours.<sup>10</sup>

Although most of the current research focuses on how

often children utilize coping methods to deal with bullying situations, there is a lack of research assessing children's beliefs in their ability to use these strategies. This perceived capability in managing one's personal ability to function in stressful situations is referred to as "self-efficacy."<sup>11</sup> An increasing quantity of research is beginning to emphasize children's self-efficacy beliefs and the subsequent impact on peer and social influences and developmental outcomes.<sup>12</sup> It is this belief in one's ability to gain control during negative experiences that may help to reduce the risk of victimization and psychological maladjustment. Thus, if children do not believe in their ability to utilize particular coping strategies, they will be unlikely to use them effectively, if at all.

Researchers have commonly examined two different types of coping strategies: approach and avoidance. Approach strategies refer to direct efforts aimed at modifying the stressful situation, while avoidance strategies focus on managing and controlling cognitive and emotional responses to the situation. Examples of approach coping in a bullying context include problem solving, assertiveness and seeking social support. When a child independently chooses a means for reducing distress, this process is referred to as problem solving. Assertiveness, a problem solving technique, is a means of actively modifying the situation by standing up for one's self.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, when a child turns to others for advice or assistance with the situation, a social support method is utilized.<sup>14</sup> Another approach strategy is conflict resolution, which is aimed directly at stopping victimization.<sup>7</sup> Overall, problem solving, seeking social support, conflict resolution and assertiveness are approach strategies that have all been associated with positive outcomes during victimization experiences.

In contrast to approach coping, avoidance strategies include processes such as internalizing and externalizing. Blaming oneself and worrying over the event are referred to as internalizing coping methods, while expressing negative emotions through overt reactions to other people or things are referred to as externalizing coping strategies.<sup>15</sup> Forgiveness, a process which often replaces these negative emotions with positive or other-oriented emotions, is another construct that has had little research, but would be interesting to examine in a bullying context.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, an additional avoidance strategy that literature has shown to be positively

associated with peer victimization is revenge seeking.<sup>7</sup> This study aims to determine if avoiding revenge seeking behaviours may be correlated with lower levels of distress from bullying interactions.

In a study by Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner, children's coping strategies were analysed as possible moderators of the effects of bullying on children's adjustment. Analyses revealed that beneficial adjustment for victimized and non-victimized children depended on the adaptation of specific coping strategies. For example, problem solving strategies appeared to be effective for non-victimized children by helping them stay away from problems, whereas this coping style enhanced problems for victimized children who did not believe they were capable of dealing with the situation themselves. Furthermore, internalizing strategies were related to a higher risk for social difficulties and psychological maladjustment for victimized children. Thus, victims who did not blame themselves appeared to be buffered from social problems.<sup>17</sup> Although little support for externalizing coping methods has been evidenced for boys, Chung and Asher found that girls who utilize externalizing coping processes in stressful situations, through antagonistic or coercive tactics, are often rejected by their peers and poorly adjusted to their school environments.<sup>18</sup> The current study will investigate children's self-efficacy of coping strategies in terms of avoidance of both internalizing, externalizing and revenge seeking strategies and the adaptation of problem solving, support seeking, conflict resolution and assertiveness skills.

In order to select either an approach or avoidance coping method, it is important to make an appraisal of the stressful situation. Process theories of coping emphasise the role of one's perceptions or of the degree of control one has over the stressful situation, which can be construed as a measure of efficacy. Research has shown that appraisals of the stressor are important determinants of what coping style one chooses to employ.<sup>19</sup> A study by Hunter, Boyle and Warden examined the appraisal of coping processes used by 830 school children between nine and fourteen years of age in Scotland. Results demonstrated that children were more willing to seek help (approach coping style) when they believed they had some control of the stressful situation.<sup>20</sup> Thus, individuals who are able to construe victimisation in a more positive manner are more likely to seek help and thus reduce the risk of psychological maladjustment. The current study will also analyse children's ability to use coping strategies in terms of victim disengagement (i.e. not taking on the victim role; not taking other victimization personally) and control.

In particular, the current study will focus on children's self-efficacy for using different coping strategies. This study will examine an array of coping processes that have been identified from the intervention literature, including problem solving, seeking social support, conflict resolution, assertiveness, avoiding revenge, avoiding externalizing, avoiding internalizing, forgivingness, construal of victimisation, victim disengagement and control. In order to investigate how these different coping strategies interrelate with one another, it is necessary to perform a factor analysis. A factor analysis of the previously mentioned strategies will be used to establish the psychometric components of a newly developed coping scale. Although past research has demonstrated that the ability to gain control during a negative interaction is an important indicator of whether or not a child

will adopt an approach or avoidance coping style,<sup>12</sup> a factor analysis will help determine if more specific coping strategies emerge for bullying victims. Overall, the current study will analyse children's propensity to use different coping strategies during peer victimization interactions. The aim of this study is to devise a better understanding of useful coping strategies for bullying victims which can then be used as a future guide for intervention programs.

## Method

### *Participants*

Parental consent to participate in the present investigation was obtained for 1375 children (719 boys and 656 girls) who attended Independent and Catholic schools in the Eastern, Western and Northern suburbs of Sydney, Australia. These participants were recruited from several grade levels to obtain a sample that was representative of secondary school-aged children (11 to 15 year-olds): grade 7 (boys= 251, girls= 210), grade 8 (boys= 234, girls= 232) and grade 9 (boys=234, girls= 214). Parents of all participants were sent letters explaining the aims of the study and were provided with either a passive or an active consent form, depending on the school administration's policy. For the passive consent forms, parents returned the forms only if they did not want their child to participate. On the other hand, active consent forms required parental signatures for student participation in the study. Verbal assent was also obtained from all those students who wished to participate in the study.

### *Procedure*

Postgraduate students and research assistants from Macquarie University administered questionnaires to secondary school-children in the spring (term 1) of the school year. Participation consisted of a fifty-minute session which was supervised by student researchers and some teachers. The first five minutes of the session were spent giving directions and explaining that the aim of the study was to obtain student feedback on peer interactions. During group administrations, children were spaced adequately apart to ensure their answers would be kept private and confidential. The survey was divided into two sections, consisting of demographic questions assessing age, gender and ethnicity and a series of self-report questions.

### *Measures*

For this study, a large coping efficacy scale was developed. Most of the measures were drawn from published articles while others were specifically developed for this project. The items created for this study were modelled after pre-existing scales, but re-worded as efficacy measures to fit within the bullying context. The items that were selected to go into this coping efficacy scale are discussed below.

*Self-Report Coping Measure*<sup>15</sup>: This measure was designed to examine coping strategies based on both the approach and avoidance conceptualizations.<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of this study, problem solving and seeking social support were the only approach strategies included, and for the avoidance strategies, only internalizing and externalizing were explored. Typical problem solving questions include "trying to think of different ways to fix the problem", while support seeking questions ask how well one can "get help from a family member". Examples

of avoiding internalizing and externalizing questions were “avoid crying about it” and “avoid yelling to let off steam”. A total of four approach and avoidance strategies were assessed using this scale.

*Assertiveness Scale*<sup>13</sup>: Assertiveness was assessed as an approach strategy that is used to directly modify the situation by standing up for one’s self. Examples of items include “in a calm and pleasant manner, tell the kid to stop” and “say something to stick up for yourself”.

*Conflict Resolution and Revenge Seeking Scales*<sup>7</sup>: These measures assessed coping strategies of conflict resolution and revenge seeking in terms of various things children could do if they were being picked on. Children were asked if they ‘would definitely do that’ (3.00), ‘maybe do that’ (2.00) or ‘no, would not do that’ (1.00). Typical conflict resolution items included ‘make a plan to get along with the kid who was picking on you’ and ‘take some time to cool off before responding’. Examples of avoidant revenge items included “stay calm and avoid wanting to hurt the kid in some way” and “avoid thinking about getting even with the kid”.

*Trait Forgiveness Scale*<sup>16</sup>: Measures a respondent’s self-appraisal of his or her proneness to forgive interpersonal transgressions. Sample items include “forgive and forget them picking on you” and “forgive them even if they have hurt you”.

*Victim Disengagement Scale*: This measure was created for the purposes of this study in order to assess the victim’s ability to not take on the victim role and to not take other victimization personally. This scale was designed to measure how some children are not bothered by peer victimization. Typical victim disengagement items include “keep from taking it personally by thinking, I don’t care what they think anyway” and “stop yourself from taking it personally by thinking, I don’t value their opinion”.

*Victim Construal Scales*<sup>20,22, 23</sup>: The avoiding negative construal (or self-blame) scale developed for the current study assesses how well victimized children can avoid blaming themselves and feeling guilty for the things that they did or did not do. Sample avoiding negative construal questions include “avoid thinking, I am the one to blame for this” and “keep from thinking, why do they only pick on me”. On the other hand, positive construal of victimization include questions like “being picked on will help me change or grow as a person in a good way” and “I will learn something positive from being picked on”.

*Control Scale*<sup>15</sup>: This scale focused on children’s self-efficacy of degree of control in peer victimization interactions. Sample questions include children’s belief in their ability to control a situation where they had been “left out” and “hit, kicked or pushed”.

Overall, the coping measures created for this study included 56 items divided into several categories: Problem Solving (3), Seeking Social Support (6), Avoiding Internalizing (3), Avoiding Externalizing (4), Assertiveness (2), Conflict Resolution (3), Avoiding Revenge Seeking (3), Forgiveness (3), Victim Disengagement (5), Avoiding Negative Construal (10), Positive Construal (4) and Control (9).

## Results

Different coping strategies that children adopt during

bullying interactions were analysed using a factor analysis procedure. Principal-components factor analyses with oblimin rotation resulted in the identification of six factors that accounted for 50% of the variance. An oblimin rotation method was utilized because the different coping strategies were expected to be correlated. For this study, the data fit very well into a six-factor model which accounted for a high level of the variance. Any items that loaded below 0.3 were dropped from analysis. In addition, two items were omitted because of cross-loading on multiple factors for which it was conceptually difficult to deem one factor a better fit than another. Factor loadings for the remaining items are reported in Table 1.

The first factor consisted of items predominantly relating to avoidant coping strategies, such as externalizing, revenge seeking and forgiveness. (i.e., ‘avoid holding a grudge against them’, ‘avoid thinking about getting even with the kid’). High scores indicate high coping self-efficacy and this factor was labelled ‘Avoiding Behaviours’. Additionally, the alpha value of factor 1 was calculated in order to check the reliability and was found to be 0.905.

The second factor consisted of items relating to the ability to gain control during negative interactions (i.e., making the situation better when you have been ‘left out’ or ‘teased’). High scores indicate high coping self-efficacy and this factor was labelled ‘Reconstructing’. The alpha value for this factor was 0.960.

Markers of the third factor related to avoiding self-blame during negative interactions (i.e., ‘avoid thinking, I get picked on because of the way look’, ‘keep from thinking, it only happens to me’). High scores indicate high coping self-efficacy and this factor was labelled ‘Avoiding Negative Construal’ with an alpha of 0.901.

The fourth factor consisted of four items predominantly related to positive construal of victimisation (i.e., ‘being picked on will help me become more self-confident’, ‘I will learn something positive from being picked on’). These four items had an alpha value of 0.883 and the factor was labelled ‘Positive Construal’.

The fifth factor consisted of items demonstrating an approach coping strategy to bullying interactions (i.e., ‘get help from a family member’, ‘try extra hard to keep it from happening again’). These items included processes of support seeking, problem solving and conflict resolution. This factor was labelled as ‘Approach Coping’ and had an alpha value of 0.853.

Finally, the sixth factor consisted of items related to avoiding worrying and taking peer victimization personally (i.e., ‘avoid crying about it’, ‘stop your self from taking it personally by thinking, I don’t care what they think anyway’). This final factor was labelled ‘Victim Disengagement’ and had an alpha value of 0.901.

## Discussion

This study aimed to create a measure of children’s self-efficacy for using various coping techniques. This study developed a psychometrically sound measure of children’s beliefs in their abilities to use these strategies. Factor analysis of the entire scale revealed six main factors: Avoiding Behaviours, Reconstructing, Avoiding Negative Construal, Positive Construal, Approach Coping and Victim Disengagement.

Factor 1 consisted of several avoidant coping strategies that children believe they can adopt during bullying interactions. These included externalizing, revenge seeking, forgivingness, conflict resolution and assertiveness. Prior research has linked externalizing and revenge seeking together, demonstrating that using these strategies in stressful interactions can often lead to poorer social adjustment.<sup>7, 15</sup> Forgivingness, a process of replacing negative emotions with more positive ones, has been minimally researched.<sup>16</sup> Future research will be helpful to determine if this variable can be classified as an avoidant coping method. Additionally, conflict resolution and assertiveness are both typically viewed as approach strategies, but appeared within this factor as well.<sup>7,13</sup> While both of these variables had low factor loadings (0.473 and 0.467 respectively), further research is necessary to clarify these findings.

Factor 2 consisted of the variables found within the control scale that was devised for this study. These items included three different types of control: verbal, physical and relational. Together, all of these items correspond to ways in which an individual can attempt to make a stressful situation better. Past research validates these associations.<sup>15</sup>

Factor 3 included items assessing the victim construal of the situation. Based on past research by Graham and Juvonen, the avoiding negative construal items assessed how often children can avoid blaming themselves when being bullied.<sup>23</sup> Also included in this factor was an item that assessed avoidant internalizing behaviour. This item, "avoid becoming too upset to talk to anyone", is very similar to the avoiding negative construal items with an appraisal of one's self rather than the situation. While past research has not linked these two items together, avoiding a negative appraisal of the situation and one's self appear to be useful strategies that children are able to adopt during peer victimization interactions.<sup>19</sup>

Factor 4 consisted of variables associated with a positive construal of bullying interactions. Researchers have demonstrated that children who are able to construe victimization in a more positive manner are more likely to seek help and thus reduce the risk of psychological maladjustment.<sup>22</sup>

While Factor 1 included several avoidant coping strategies, Factor 5 included approach coping strategies that children believe they can adopt during bullying interactions. These included seeking social support, problem solving, assertiveness and conflict resolution. All of these techniques aim to modify the situation by making an active effort to talk to someone else, stand up for one's self, or change the situation. Past research findings have demonstrated a link between all four of these approach coping strategies and more positive outcomes during victimization experiences.<sup>7, 13, 14</sup>

Finally, Factor 6 consisted of variables associated with victim disengagement. A victim disengagement scale was created for the purposes of this study in order to assess the victim's ability to not take on the victim role and to not take victimization personally. Avoiding internalizing items were also included in this factor, as they were believed to be an additional method for measuring how some children are not bothered by peer victimization. Additional research on these variables is needed to assess the validity of these constructs.

While most of the findings in this study were highly significant, the study also had its limitations. First of all, one limitation of this study is that the data were only assessed at one

time interval. In order to validate the effectiveness of children's coping strategies, longitudinal research is necessary. This plans to be completed later on this year, by collecting data from Term 4 of the 2006 school year from the same students tested in Term 1. Another limitation is the sample used for participants. Bullying behaviours appear to begin when children are as young as five to six years old<sup>2</sup> and thus gathering data from a wider age distribution will either validate or help to improve the current findings. Furthermore, this study only assessed a selective number of possible strategies. There may be other more effective coping strategies for reducing psychomaladjustment following bullying that were not analysed in this study. Since only fifty percent of the variance was accounted for by the variables utilized in this analysis, it is important to look at additional variables that may play a significant role in peer victimization interactions.

The coping strategies analyzed in this study were used to examine children's self-efficacy in peer victimization interactions. Through a factor analysis of the chosen variables, six factors emerged as coping strategies that children believed would be effective during bullying interactions. This study appears to demonstrate that self-efficacy plays a large role in the effectiveness of coping mechanisms. Coping techniques usually associated with better outcomes in this study include avoiding revenge seeking, avoiding externalizing and internalizing, forgivingness, gaining control, avoiding negative construal, engaging in positive construal, assertiveness, problem-solving, seeking social support, conflict resolution and avoiding taking it personally. Thus, if children can be trained to use these coping strategies efficiently, it may be possible to further reduce victimization and psychological maladjustment. Future research should investigate how children's self-efficacy in various coping strategies varies with age and gender. Different findings may be evident as a result of these additional variables. Furthermore, future analyses should assess more specifically how the adaptation of coping strategies is shaped by children's belief in their ability to use these measures effectively. The model will need to test all of these variables in order to establish validity as these beliefs may be related to the rate of victimization (i.e., whether the bullying behaviours have continued or ceased) and the degree of psychomaladjustment the child experiences.

The coping strategies analysed in this study have high alphas and explain fifty percent of the variance, indicating that these techniques should have some predictability. Overall, more research is necessary to establish whether children with a greater ability to use these strategies are associated with less victimization. Future research will need to assess the validity of such conceptualizations.

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## About the Author

*Stefanie Putter will receive her B.A. Psychology from the University of Rochester in May 2007. She plans to ???*

*jur: Is there a particular area or aspect of your major that you wanted to further explore with this current research? Or, did you purposely choose this topic because it wasn't as related to your direct area of your study?*

*I am so fortunate to have been given the opportunity to participate in psychological research in Sydney, Australia. While I have been a research assistant under the direction of several faculty members at the University of Rochester, going abroad and participating in research was an entirely new experience. Working on this particular project I was able to fully engage in all aspects of the psychology research process, from gathering and entering data, to running statistical analyses and finally constructing a journal article based on the findings of a subset of the data.*

*jur: How did you arrive at this research topic in the first place?*

*As an intern in the developmental psychology department, I worked with a postgraduate student, Puneet Singh, as she began to gather data for her doctoral dissertation. The main focus of her thesis regards peer victimization and the coping strategies that school children utilize to effectively deal with these situations. I analyzed a subset of the data that was collected, as her project was only in the beginning stages, and focused my paper on the self-efficacy of children's coping strategies.*

*jur: How did you go about refining your focus for this research?*

*At the time, no analyses had been done on the gathered research and I had to option of choosing what subset of the data I would like to focus on. I chose to examine coping self-efficacy as a means of performing difficult statistical analyses, including a factor analysis which I have never done before.*

*jur: Initially, what was your main goal for this research—what did you ultimately want to achieve?*

*Throughout the creation of this journal article, my main goal was to further learn about the research process. As a result of this internship experience, I was able to expand my understanding of statistics, refine my writing abilities and learn in-depth knowledge about Australian school children.*

*jur: Provided the above question, was there any point in your research where your main objective changed, and, how did that affect the outcome of the research?*

*I believe that everything I have learned from this experience will greatly aid my future psychological research endeavors. As an active participant in the research process, I am able to continually refine my skills and knowledge of the psychology field.*

*jur: Is your currently completed research a topic that you will be exploring further?*

*While I do not intend to continue research on this particular project, it is possible that I may investigate related areas in the future. At the current moment I am not participating in any research pertaining to peer victimization; however, I feel that this is an interesting area of study that I may decide to pursue one day.*

*jur: What was most difficult about getting the research ready and together? What aspects, do you think, were easiest?*

*One of the most challenging aspects of this particular research study was actually gathering the data. In Australia, it was very difficult to get approval by the school districts to allow students to participate in psychological research. Eventually, we got approval to gather data from several Independent and Catholic schools in suburbs of Sydney. I have definitely realized the necessity for patience and determination to succeed in psychological research. Setbacks are always going to occur, so it is important to persist and focus on the end goal.*

*One of the easiest aspects of the research process was working with the graduate students and my supervisor, Dr. Kay Bussey. They provided an extremely supportive environment which made me feel comfortable to ask questions and inquire further about various aspects of the research project.*

*jur: How do you think getting published will help your research, and, what kind of impact (if any) do you want to have on colleagues by getting this published?*

*While I never intended to get this article published, I believe that it is important to show others, especially those interested in psychology research, that there are no boundaries in this field. Even as an undergraduate, there is the potential to study cross-cultural research. While I am just beginning my research career, I have already established a psychological network at the University of Rochester and at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. As a result of my research internship in Australia, I definitely have a greater appreciation for psychology researchers and I hope that one day I can contribute to this continually evolving field.*