

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Psychological Distress and Student Engagement as Mediators of the Relationship Between Peer Victimization and Achievement in Middle School Youth

Totura, C. M. W., Karver, M. S., & Gesten, E. L. (2014). Psychological distress and student engagement as mediators of the relationship between peer victimization and achievement in middle school youth *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43(1), 40-52. doi:10.1007/s10964-013-9918-4

SUMMARY: Students were surveyed to evaluate associations between peer victimization, psychological distress, student engagement, and academic achievement. Results suggest that the relationship between victimization and academic achievement is indirect and is influenced by psychological distress and student engagement.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Peer victimization affects academic achievement via increased psychological distress.
- Psychological distress in turn contributes to reduced student engagement, ultimately affecting academic performance.
- Peer victimization in this sample was relatively infrequent; participants reported experiencing overt or indirect aggression a couple of times per month.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Collaborate with schools connected with military youth to develop ways to support victimized youth and reduce peer victimization at school
- Facilitate support groups for military children dealing with peer victimization to help reduce psychological distress and teach youth healthy ways to cope with peer victimization

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer workshops to military youth to learn skills to prevent and mitigate the negative impacts of bullying
- Provide training to parents about how to speak to their children about peer victimization experiences, including how to cope if victimized and the importance of treating peers respectfully

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Support the development and evaluation of peer victimization prevention efforts in military associated schools
- Recommend the development of an integrated, comprehensive strategy (involving both mental health and academic resources) to help children experiencing peer victimization succeed

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METHODS

- Twenty-five percent of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students from randomly selected classrooms in 11 public schools in a large school district in the Southeast were surveyed.
- Students completed questionnaires regarding bullying and peer victimization, psychological distress, and student engagement.
- Academic achievement was defined by course grades and performance on statewide academic achievement tests.

PARTICIPANTS

- Four hundred sixty-nine sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students participated.
- Fifty-four percent of the students were girls.
- The majority of students were White (74%); 11% were Latino/Latina, 4% were Black; and 3% were Asian American.

LIMITATIONS

- Rates of peer victimization were low; therefore, results may not generalize to students experiencing higher rates of victimization.
- Generalizability may also be constrained by limited racial/ethnic and geographic diversity.
- The data were cross-sectional; therefore, the ability to draw causal conclusions is limited.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Incorporate other informant reports of bullying from teacher, parent, or peers
- Utilize more psychometrically sound measures in a longitudinal design to thoroughly evaluate the associations between victimization, distress, engagement, and academic achievement
- Include a more diverse sample of students, such as those with a broader range of victimization experiences

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