

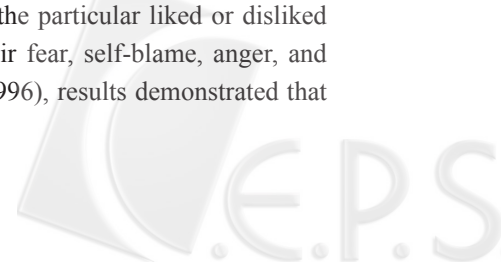
Children's Vulnerability and Inflammability to Peer Verbal Provocation: Sociometric and Developmental Differences

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When children enter middle childhood, mode of aggression becomes increasingly less physical. Instead, verbal aggression occurs frequently in peer interaction of elementary school students. The purpose of this research is to investigate, during middle and late childhood, the age, sex, and individual differences of the vulnerability and inflammability in response to peer verbal aggression delivered either by liked or disliked classmates. Vulnerability is measured by children's fear and self-blame in response to peer provocation. Inflammability is measured by children's anger and hostility attributions. Whitesell and Harter (1996) indicated that children respond with more intense and prolonged negative emotion if conflict situations involve best friends. Fabes, Eisenberg, Smith, and Murphy (1996), by contrast, demonstrated that children's responses to provocations by well liked peers are more controlled than is the case for anger provoked by peers who are not well liked. The first goal of this study thus is to compare children's response to verbal provocation enacted by liked versus disliked classmates. Selman and Byrne (1974) suggested that, from middle to late childhood, children move from being incapable of integrating self and other's perspectives to simultaneously considering mutual roles during interactions. Crick, Grotpeter, and Bigbee (2002) as well as Underwood, Coie, and Herbsman (1992) and Underwood, Hurley, Johanson, and Mosley (1999) suggested that older children are better at regulating their anger and distress. That is, older children are better both at understanding other's perspective and regulating one's own emotion. The second goal of this study thus is to test the hypothesis of milder vulnerability and inflammability for older children in response to peer verbal aggression. Previous research on the Social Information Processing (SIP) of proactive aggressors, reactive aggressors, and victimized children suggested that each type of children may react to peer conflict with different encoding, interpretation, response evaluation, and response enactment. Accordingly, the third goal of this study is to examine whether children with high reactive aggression tendency are more likely to be inflamed by both negative and neutral peer verbal provocation (Dodge & Coie, 1987; Crick & Dodge, 1996); whether those with high proactive aggression tendency, because of their emotional-callous traits (Frick et al., 2003; Kimonis et al., 2006), are less vulnerable and inflammable to verbal provocation; and whether those with high victimization tendency are more vulnerable and less inflammable while facing peer verbal provocation (Finnegan, Hodges, & Perry, 1998; Schwartz, Chang, & Farver, 2001).

Eleven classes of fourth graders (189 males and 166 females) and eleven classes of sixth graders (190 males and 175 females) from the Metropolitan Taipei area participated in the two-stage study. During the first stage of data collection, information about each subject's liked and disliked classmates and the proactive aggressors, reactive aggressors, and victims in the class was collected through sociometrics. Results revealed that those who scored lower on social preference and those who scored higher on social impact were more likely to be nominated as proactive aggressors, reactive aggressors, or victims of aggression (all $ps < .01$). During the second stage of data collection, each subject read hypothetical scenarios about receiving verbal aggressions and neutral verbal stimuli from the particular liked or disliked classmates that the child had nominated during the first stage. Subjects were to rate their fear, self-blame, anger, and hostility attribution in response to the scenarios. Concordant with Whitesell and Harter (1996), results demonstrated that



fourth graders revealed higher vulnerability in response to negative verbal provocation delivered by liked as opposed to disliked peers (effect of “liked vs. disliked peer x age” interaction on vulnerability: $F(1, 499) = 10.84, p < .01$). Contrary to Whitesell and Harter (1996), but concordant with Fabes et al. (1996), verbal aggression from disliked peers resulted in higher inflammability, $F(1, 499) = 371.57, p < .001$. Sixth graders were less inflammable to verbal aggression than their fourth grade counterparts, $F(1, 499) = 10.02, p < .01$. No sex differences were found in sixth graders’ inflammability, but fourth grade boys’ inflammability was significantly higher than girls, $F(1, 499) = 6.90, p < .01$. The above results indicate the development of children’s emotional regulation and social information processing from the fourth to the sixth grade especially in boys.

Children with high proactive-aggression tendency experienced lower vulnerability, $F(1, 162) = 14.89, p < .01$, and children with high victimization tendency experienced higher vulnerability $F(1, 166) = 8.11, p < .01$. upon being verbally provoked by peers, In addition, children with high victimization tendency responded to liked versus disliked peers’ negative verbal provocation with less differentiated level of inflammability as compared with the non-victimized children (the effect of “liked vs. disliked peers x victimization” interaction on inflammability : $F(1, 166) = 14.61, p < .01$). Contrary to the original hypothesis, children with high reactive-aggression tendency did not show higher inflammability in response to peer verbal aggression. The methodological and theoretical implications of the present findings were discussed.

Keywords: *proactive aggression, reactive aggression, peer relationship, vulnerability, inflammability*