Nonbullying victims of bullies: Aggression, social skills, and friendship characteristics

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Abstract

Fifty-four early adolescents were selected and classified as nonbullying Victims (frequently bullied by peers but did not bully others) or Nonvictims (neither bullied others nor were targets of bullies) based on the distribution of victimization scores on a self-report questionnaire. These male and female students and a parent from each family completed questionnaires that assessed the students’ victimization of self and others and social skills of cooperation, self-control, and assertion. Adolescents also reported their likely responses to potential interpersonal conflicts and characteristics of their friendships. Results suggest nonbullying victimized adolescents have subtle difficulties managing confrontation adaptively in a variety of contexts for peer interaction. Further research on interpersonal skills related to conflict management may help explain why some nonbullying adolescents are frequent targets of bullying while others are relatively free from victimization by peers.

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1. Introduction

In the United States, between 15% to 20% of children and adolescents experience repeated or intense victimization in the form of intimidation, ostracism, or physical violence by peers at some time during their school careers (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, ...
Victimization in the context of bully—victim problems involves aggression perpetrated repeatedly over time by a dominant aggressor against a weaker victim (Olweus, 1993). Although bully—victim problems occur throughout childhood and adolescence, specific qualities of the early adolescent period make the study of bully—victim problems in this age group particularly important. Physical changes from puberty and variability in timing of puberty create large differentials in size, strength, and secondary sexual characteristics. These physical changes provide ample fodder for harassment and teasing, but also give early maturing youth significant advantages in strength. Not surprisingly, the risk for serious injuries from bullying increases for early adolescents compared to younger children. Although increases in physical size are one explanation for this increase, changes in the nature of adolescents’ conflicts are also implicated (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariépy, 1989). Age-related changes in social cognitive skills in early adolescence lead to increased social comparison, self-consciousness, and concerns for social status (Harter, 1990). Self-esteem often undergoes significant revision and negative self-perceptions typically increase (Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope, & Dielman, 1997). Harassment and ostracism represent strong threats to the formation or maintenance of positive self-perceptions (Vernberg, 1990). The transition from elementary school to middle or junior high school may also set the stage for increases in bully—victim problems by creating a demand for early adolescents to form new social groups and interact with a larger cohort of unfamiliar peers (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Harachi et al., 1999).

Among frequently victimized youth, it is important to distinguish between *bullying victims* (sometimes described as provocative victims), who frequently aggress towards peers despite being bullied themselves, and *nonbullying victims*, who seldom attempt to dominate others through aggressive behavior (Olweus, 1993; Pellegrini, 1998; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Perry, Williard, & Perry, 1990; Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993). Research with elementary school age children has characterized nonbullying victims as markedly unassertive youngsters who typically withdraw from or concede to bullies and readily display emotional distress when bullied (Olweus, 1991, 1993; Perry et al., 1990; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Schwartz et al., 1993; Sharp, 1996). Bullying victims, in contrast, engage in numerous aggressive acts towards peers and often show levels of aggression and aggression-related cognitive profiles comparable to bullies who are not themselves frequent targets of aggression (Vernberg, Jacobs, & Hershberger, 1999). Although both groups of victims merit attention, the current study focuses on early adolescents who may be considered nonbullying victims.

Nonbullying victims’ purported failure to assert themselves directly when confronted by bullying does not necessarily indicate pervasive passive behavior or a total absence of aggressive behavior. Aggressive behavior comes in many forms, and the distinction between reactive and proactive aggression is particularly germane (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Proactive aggression includes behavior intended to hurt or harm for the purpose of obtaining privilege, reward, or dominance for the aggressor. The motivation is instrumental and involves little fear-based emotional arousal, appearing instead to be carried out in a cold, callous, and unemotional manner. Bullying is a form of proactive aggression intended to achieve, demonstrate, or maintain social dominance (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Pellegrini, 1998). Reactive aggression, in
contrast, involves aggression in response to a preceding insult, frustration, or some other provocation. High emotional arousal and lessened self-control are important aspects of reactive or “hot” aggression (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Nonbullying victims experience provocation frequently and may show reactive aggression occasionally (Pellegrini et al., 1999; Poulin & Boivin, 2000). Victimization, hence, cannot be equated with passivity (Perry et al., 1990).

Instead, victims’ responses to confrontation may be only one expression of broader problems with interpersonal behavior. For example, observational studies of elementary school age boys indicate that victims in general may be less likely than their peers to use either threats or prosocial behavior to persuade other boys to avoid aggression against them (Schwartz et al., 1993). Peers in this age range also tend to reject victims (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Pellegrini et al., 1999), and peers and teachers both characterize victims as more demanding of attention and less skilled at interacting with peers (Egan & Perry, 1998; Olweus, 1993; Perry et al., 1990; Rigby & Slee, 1991). These findings suggest that victims in middle childhood, whether bullying towards peers or not, possibly use ineffective strategies to respond to provocation and lack friendships and alliances with peers that help ward off attacks by bullies. It remains to be seen whether similar difficulties exist for nonbullying victims in the early adolescent years.

Difficulties managing confrontation and maintaining typical friendships in adolescence may reflect disruptions in the development of social competence that contribute to victims’ vulnerability to bullies. Rubin and Rose-Krasnor (1992) define social competence as “the ability to achieve personal goals in social interaction while simultaneously maintaining positive relationships with others over time” (p. 285). This definition provides a broad perspective encompassing many aspects of social behavior including understanding appropriate social behaviors, generating and selecting behavioral responses, and establishing mutually satisfying friendships. Much of social behavior is automatic, but children and early adolescents are limited in their experience and regularly confront social problems that challenge them to construct solutions to social problems. Adaptive responses to social challenges are evidence of effective processing of information and of effective management of emotional processes (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000; Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992).

Distinct from general peer acceptance or rejection, friendship is an important interpersonal context that facilitates social and emotional development during adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Hartup, 1992; Laursen, 1993; Laursen & Collins, 1994). For example, supportive friendships portend fewer internalizing and externalizing behavior problems following aversive peer experiences (Boivin, Hymel, & Hodges, 2001; Vemberg, 1990; Vernberg, Ewell, Beery, Freeman, & Abwender, 1995). Available evidence indicates that victimized children and adolescents do not necessarily lack friends, although their friendships may be with other victims who do not offer much protection from victimization (Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997; Pellegrini et al., 1999). It is possible that adolescent victims achieve less support or have more conflict in their friendships, compared to friendships of nonvictims. If so, this may reflect general social skills problems or specific difficulties in negotiating close, egalitarian relationships. Regardless of cause, problematic friendship relationships could limit
opportunities for victims to develop important social skills and to gain support for the many challenges of early adolescence.

Examinations of social support, friendship, and aggression must consider gender differences. Boys as a group consistently exhibit more physical aggression compared to girls (Cairns et al., 1989; Coie & Dodge, 1998), whereas gender differences in relational forms of aggression (e.g., spreading rumors, excluding from desired activities) are less pronounced (Crick, 1997; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Girls’ overall lower incidence of physical aggression may make victimized girls less prone to reactive aggression during confrontation than victimized boys. On the other hand, gender roles define expectations for aggression and assertiveness, and girls who exhibit these responses to victimization (and boys who do not) may possibly be seen as violating gender-normative behavior (Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996). Similarly, girls typically score higher on measures of general social skills than boys (Gresham & Elliot, 1990) and report more support in their close friendships than boys (Furman, 1996; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992, 1985). Thus, weaknesses in general social skills and friendship support for girls may carry the added burden of diverging from gender normative expectations.

Finally, past studies of victims have rarely included the perspective of parents, but have emphasized the voices of peers and teachers. The absence of parents is understandable to the extent that bullying occurs in schools. Nonetheless, parents may be the victim’s most important advocate and the individual most likely to seek intervention on the victim’s behalf. For these reasons, it is important to gain some knowledge of caregiver perspectives on victimization and interpersonal behavior. It remains to be seen whether parents of victims recognize their adolescents as more frequently victimized or observe social behaviors consistent with adolescent observations.

The current study compared four aspects of social competence for nonbullying victims (Victims) and nonbullying, nonvictimized adolescents (Nonvictims): (1) aggressiveness towards peers, (2) typical behavior in a broad range of social situations (general social skills), (3) hierarchies of behavioral response selection for hypothetical scenarios involving potential peer conflict (behavioral intent), and (4) support and conflict in closest friendship (friendship characteristics). Little prior research has measured aggression and general social skills exclusively among adolescent nonbullying Victims. Some literature, however assumes social impairment. For instance, early adolescent victims in general may make self-blaming attributions and perceive poor self-competence (Graham & Juvonen, 1998), and models of social cognition posit that victims of peer aggression enact poor responses to social challenges (Perry et al., 1990). Potentially, poorer general social skills or poorer skills in more specific social situations contribute to peer rejection of Victims during early adolescence that in turn fuels continued victimization. In accordance with previous studies of victims in general, Victims were expected to be more aggressive towards peers, exhibit poorer general social skills, and select less adaptive responses to confrontation (i.e., passive withdrawal or aggression). Victims’ perceived support from friends was expected to be lower and conflict with friends higher. Based on differences in gender normative expectations for various aspects of interpersonal relationships, effects for gender were considered in all analyses.
2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

A total of 54 adolescents were identified as either nonbullying Victims (14 boys, 13 girls) or nonbullying Nonvictims (14 boys, 13 girls) from a larger sample of seventh-grade students recruited from a single junior high school in a large central city school district in the Midwestern United States. This larger sample was recruited by mailing information about the study to 274 randomly selected adolescents and their parents from a list of the seventh grade students enrolled in the school (approximately 300), followed by a telephone contact requesting participation. When families were contacted, they were invited to participate in study about bullying, friendship, and social behavior being conducted in their school. They were also informed that no individual information would be shared with the school. To exclude highly aggressive adolescents while maintaining student privacy, the assistant principal removed mailing labels for adolescents who had received multiple discipline referrals for aggressive behavior prior to giving the remaining labels to the researchers. The study was conducted throughout the Spring semester (January to June).

Of 274 families initially contacted, 119 agreed to participate and arranged data collection sessions when they were contacted by telephone by a member of the research team (55 boys, 64 girls).1 Twenty-one fathers and 94 mothers participated. Measures were administered individually to the adolescent and a parent by a trained advanced undergraduate or graduate research assistant. Interviews were held in the home or in a quiet location in the community (e.g., the library), based on the family’s preference. Participating adolescents received a gift certificate to a family recreation center as compensation for their time.

Information from the parent- and adolescent-completed Bully–Victim Questionnaire (BVQ) was used to identify the final sample of Victims and Nonvictims. Thirty-six adolescents (15 boys, 21 girls) were excluded because they had bullied others in one or more ways “a few times” or more in the previous 4 months, based on self- or parent-responses on the BVQ (Vernberg et al., 1999). For the remaining 83 adolescents (40 boys, 43 girls) and their mothers (this subsample did not include any fathers) judged to be nonbullying, scores for each item of the Victimization of Self (VS) scale of the BVQ were averaged to create a single score on victimization. Based on the distribution of these self-reported victimization scores, participants were divided into three equal groups by gender. Participants in the highest third of the distribution for same-sexed peers were identified as Victims, and those in the lowest third were identified as Nonvictims. To clearly distinguish between Victims and Nonvictims, adolescents in the middle of the distribution (12 boys, 17 girls) were excluded from further analyses. This procedure yielded the 27 nonbullying Victims (14 boys) and 27 nonbullying Nonvictims (14 boys) that comprised the final sample. In terms of ethnicity, 42 adolescents were white, non-

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1 Primary reasons for refusal included a lack of interest (n = 85) and a lack of time (n = 50).
Hispanic, 3 were African American, 2 were Native American, 4 were biracial, and 2 did not report ethnicity.

To further validate victimization status grouping, we examined the average self-reported VS scores in the Victim and Nonvictim groups relative to results from Vernberg et al. (1999), which assessed a much larger sample of adolescents who were similar to our participants. Mean scores for Victims in our study on VS was 1.50 SDs above the overall mean for two junior high schools included in Vernberg et al. Mean scores on VS for the Nonvictims’ was one-half standard deviation below the mean of participants in Vernberg et al.

3. Measures

3.1. Victimization and aggression

The BVQ included nine items pertaining to Victimization of Self (VS) and four items assessing Victimization of Others (VO) drawn from surveys of entire school populations (Vernberg et al., 1999). The VS scale consisted of items assessing being victimized by another student: (a) a student teased me in a mean way, called me bad names, or said rude things to me; (b) a student said he/she was going to hurt me or beat me up; (c) a student scared me so that I gave up money or other things; (d) a student told rumors about me; (e) a student hit, kicked, or pushed me; (f) a student grabbed, held, or pushed me in a way I didn’t like; (g) some students left me out of an activity or conversation that I really wanted to be included in; (h) a student chased me like he/she was really trying to hurt me; and (i) a student played a mean trick to hurt or scare me. Because this study focused primarily on victimization of self, the VO subscale included only the four items (of nine) that were reported most often in Vernberg et al. (1999): (a) I teased a student in a mean way, called him/her names, or said rude thing to him/her; (b) I threatened to hurt or beat up another student; (c) I hit, kicked, or pushed another student in a mean way; (d) I told put-downs or rumors about another student. Items of the VS and VO subscales represent both overt and relational forms of aggression. Adolescent respondents reported the frequency of the occurrence of each item over the previous 3 months on a Likert-type scale: 1 = never, 2 = once or twice, 3 = a few times, 4 = about once a week, 5 = several times a week. Average scores on the nine items of the VS scale represented victimization of self. Average scores on the four items from the VO scale represented victimization of others. Higher scores indicate greater victimization of self or others.

Parents also reported on the victimization behavior of their adolescents. Parent-reported VS scores were averages of the raw scores on nine VS items, and VO scores were averages of the raw scores on four VO items, range = 1–5. Internal consistency was acceptable for adolescent and parent reports on both VS (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$ and .84 for adolescents and parents, respectively) and VO (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .72$ and .73 for adolescents and parents, respectively), and supported the use of mean scores on VS and VO as overall indicators of victimization of self and others.
3.2. General social skills

The Social Skills Rating System assesses general adolescent behavioral social skills (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). The three subscales included in both the Parent and the Adolescent Form were used in the current study: (a) Cooperation (helping, sharing, and compliance with rules; for example, I keep my desk neat and clean; I listen to adults; My child uses a nice tone of voice); (b) Assertion (initiation of social interactions, responding to peer pressure and insult; for example, I join group activities; I ignore others who tease me; my child makes friends easily); and (c) Self-control (appropriate and compromising responses to conflict; for example, I end fights with my parents calmly; I tell adults when they have done something for me that I like; my child controls his/her temper when arguing with others; receives criticism well). Each subscale consists of 10 items that are rated on separate forms by the parent and the adolescent using a 3-point scale assessing the frequency of a behavior (0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = very often) and summed, range from 0–20. The time frame for rating is not specified, but is intended to reflect recent behavior. Two scores (one from the parent report, one from the adolescent report) were generated for each of the three subscales: (Cooperation, Assertion, and Self-control). Higher scores indicate better social skills. Estimates of internal consistency within the subscales for our data were adequate (Cronbach’s alpha range from .66–.81) and consistent with other findings (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). Reliability across time is good for parent reports (test–retest \( r \) range from .77–.87) and adequate for student reports (test–retest \( r \) range .52–.66) and the scales are moderately predictive of social competence and problem behavior (Gresham & Elliot, 1990).

3.3. Behavioral intent

Completed only by adolescents, the Behavioral Intent Measure is a self-report scale that assesses the hierarchy of intended behavioral responses to ambiguous scenarios involving potential conflicts among adolescents, e.g., You’re walking down the sidewalk. A kid walks up to you, looking mad. You think the kid might hit you (Slaby, Wilson Brewer, & Das, 1994). Adolescents responded by rank-ordering five possible behavioral responses to each of seven scenarios. Participants were instructed to rank according to what they would be most likely to do if confronted with each situation. The five categories of behavioral responses included physical aggression (e.g., hit the kid first), verbal aggression (e.g., call the kid a “jerk”), information seeking (e.g., ask the kid why they’re so mad), avoidance of confrontation (e.g., walk away from the kid), and problem solving (tell the kid not to hit you). Consistent with Slaby et al. (1994), we used averaged assigned rank across scenarios to create continuous scores for each category of behavioral response. For example, an average score of 1.0 on Physical Aggression would indicate that the adolescent selected a physically aggressive response as his or her most likely first response for all seven scenarios, whereas a score of 5.0 would indicate that a physically aggressive response was selected as the least likely intended response in all seven scenarios. Similar to results from Slaby et al. (1994), relative ranks for four of the response categories demonstrated sufficient internal consistency across seven scenarios to warrant inclusion in subsequent analyses (physical aggression,
verbal aggression, information seeking, avoidance) whereas problem solving was less internally consistent. Cronbach’s alpha for the Behavioral Intent Measure was .79 for physical aggression, .77 for verbal aggression, .69 for information seeking, .72 for avoidance, and .63 for problem solving.

3.4. Friendship characteristics

Completed only by adolescents, the Network of Relations Inventory is a brief structured interview that assesses perceived support and conflict in important relationships (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Adolescents were asked to name their closest same sex friend and then to rate 24 items describing their relationship with this “best friend.” Twenty-one items tap social support (Support) in this relationship (e.g., how much free time do you spend with your friend; how much does your friend really care about you; how much do you tell your friend everything). Three items assessing conflict (Conflict) in the relationship (e.g., how much do you and your friend get upset or mad with each other; how much do you and your friend argue with each other; how much do you and your friend disagree and quarrel). Adolescents indicated their responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = little or none; 2 = some; 3 = very much; 4 = extremely much; 5 = the most). Mean scores on the items of each scale represented Support and Conflict, and higher scores indicate higher levels of each relationship quality. Internal consistency was adequate (Cronbach’s alpha; Support scale = .91; Conflict scale = .73). Previous research demonstrates good psychometric properties for this measure (Cauce, Mason, Gonzale, Hirage, & Liu, 1994; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985).

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary analyses

To verify differences by victimization status on victimization of self, we first examined agreement between parent- and adolescent-report of VS and found that parent- and adolescent-reports of student VS were positively correlated, \( r(54) = .49, p < .001 \). Next, we conducted a 2 (victimization status: victim and nonvictim) \( \times \) 2 (Gender) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on mean scores of self- and parent-reported VS. Results indicated a multivariate main effect for group, \( F(2, 49) = 45.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .65 \). Follow-up univariate analysis of variance procedures (ANOVA) demonstrated that Victims reported significantly more frequent victimization of self (\( M = 2.26, SD = 0.55 \)) than Nonvictims (\( M = 1.29, SD = 0.15 \)), \( F(1, 50) = 80.5, p < .001, \eta^2 = .62 \). In addition, parents reported more victimization for Victims (\( M = 1.95, SD = 0.53 \)) than for Nonvictims (\( M = 1.67, SD = 0.55 \)), although the difference did not reach statistical significance in the univariate analyses, \( F(1, 50) = 3.53, p < .07, \eta^2 = .07 \).

There was also an overall multivariate effect for gender on victimization, \( F(2, 49) = 3.57, p < .04, \eta^2 = .13 \). Follow-up univariate ANOVA tests, however, did not reveal any
significant univariate effects for gender on either adolescent or parent reported victimization of self. According to Stevens (1992), a significant univariate effect may or may not be found after a significant multivariate effect. The multivariate effect merely indicates a difference associated with the variable in question and may not be due to differences of interest. A post hoc examination of the correlations between parent and adolescent reports of VS found that responses by male adolescents and their parents were strongly correlated, $r(28) = .66, p < .001$, and that reports by female adolescents and their parents, also were significantly correlated with one another, $r(26) = .48, p < .015$.

4.2. Victimization, gender, and aggression

To examine the effects of gender and victimization on aggression towards others we conducted a 2 (victimization status) × 2 (gender) MANOVA on parent- and self-reported VO because parent- and adolescent-reports positively correlated, $r(54) = .35, p < .01$. A multivariate main effect emerged for victimization status, $F(2, 49) = 5.24, p < .01, \eta^2 = .18$. Follow-up univariate analyses revealed that adolescent Victims self-reported significantly more victimization of others, ($M = 1.58, SD = 0.36$) than Nonvictims reported, $M = 1.33, SD = 0.33, F(1, 50) = 7.37, p < .01, \eta^2 = .13$. Parent-reported VO by their adolescent children were also significantly higher for Victims ($M = 1.30, SD = 0.22$) than for Nonvictims, $M = 1.15, SD = 0.20, F(1, 50) = 6.48, p < .015, \eta^2 = .12$. There were no significant multivariate main effects for gender or for the gender by victimization status interaction.

4.3. General social skills

Parent- and adolescent-reports on two of the three subscales of the SSRS correlated at a statistically significant level, $r(54) = .53$ for Assertiveness, $p < .001$, and $r(54) = .46$ for Cooperation, $p < .001$. The correlation between parent- and adolescent reports on Self Control, however, was not statistically significant, $r(54) = .20, ns$.

To examine Victims’ social skills, we conducted a 2 (victimization status) × 2 (Gender) MANOVA on parent-reports and adolescent-reports on the Assertiveness, Cooperation, and Self-Control subscales of the SSRS for a total of six dependent variables (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). Findings revealed a significant overall multivariate Victimization Status × Gender interaction, $F(6, 45) = 2.32, p < .05, \eta^2 = .24$. Follow-up univariate analyses confirmed a significant Victimization Status × Gender interaction on adolescent-reported Self-Control, $F(1, 50) = 10.59, p < .01, \eta^2 = .18$, and an effect approaching significance for the interaction between Victimization status and gender on adolescent-reported Cooperation, $F(1, 50) = 3.39, p < .07, \eta^2 = .06$. No significant main effects or interaction effects were found for parent-reported social skills.

To explicate the victimization status by gender interaction on the adolescent-reports, univariate analyses were conducted within gender groups. For girls, main effects for victimization status emerged for Self-Control, $F(1, 25) = 11.43, p < .01, \eta^2 = .32$ and Cooperation, $F(1, 25) = 5.35, p < .04, \eta^2 = .18$. Inspection of means indicated that female Victims reported fewer self-controlled responses to conflict and less cooperative behavior than female Non-
victims reported. See Table 1 for means of all the SSRS raw scores by gender by victimization status by respondent on each subscale.

To clarify the meaningfulness of group differences, we examined the mean scores for each subscale relative to normative data reported in the SSRS manual and found that regardless of victimization status or gender, average scores for Assertion and Cooperation were within the average range of behavioral skill level. Similarly, mean scores on Self-Control for victimized girls, victimized boys, and nonvictimized boys were also in the average range. In contrast, Nonvictim girls scored in the high range of behavioral social skills on Self-Control (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). Thus, the effect was due to Nonvictim girls displaying better skills handling potential challenges and conflict than their same-sex victimized peers.

4.4. Behavioral intent

To examine Victims’ risk for maladaptive responses to respond to ambiguous confrontation we conducted a 2 (victimization status) × 2 (gender) MANOVA on the averaged responses across seven items of four of the behavioral intention response categories (physical aggression, verbal aggression, avoidance, information seeking). Findings revealed a statistically significant overall multivariate main effect for victimization status on behavioral intention, $F(4, 47) = 4.35, p < .01, \eta^2 = .27$. There were no statistically significant multivariate effects for gender or for victimization Status × Gender interaction.

Follow-up univariate ANOVAs examining each subscale of the Behavioral Intent measure indicated that Victims selected physically aggressive responses sooner than Nonvictims, $F(1, 50) = 7.47, p < .01, \eta^2 = .13$. Nonvictims, in contrast, were more likely to select

<table>
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<th>Nonvictims</th>
<th>Nonvictims</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Males ($N = 14$)</td>
<td>Females ($N = 13$)</td>
<td>Males ($N = 14$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
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<td>3.05</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.02</td>
<td>11.46&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td><strong>Parent report</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-control</td>
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<td>2.88</td>
<td>14.00</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<sup>a</sup> These means in the row are different at $p < .04$, $t(1, 24) = 2.31$.

<sup>b</sup> These means in the row are different at $p < .01$, $t(1, 24) = 3.3$. 
information seeking sooner than Victims, $F(1, 50) = 4.10, p < .05, \eta^2 = .08$. Nonvictims also appeared to tend to walk away from confrontation sooner than Victims, $F(1, 50) = 2.83, p = .10, \eta^2 = .05$. See Table 2 for means and standard deviation by victimization status.

Review of the means demonstrates that all participants tended to rank physically aggressive responses as unlikely—recall that a score of 1 indicated the response to be a last resort barring all other options and 5 indicated a first choice response. In addition, differences in mean scores were not large. Victims, however, were less likely to consistently select aggression as a last resort response and less likely to seek additional information as a first or second choice than Nonvictims. Although the data generally reflect a similar pattern of first and last choices regardless of victimization status, the advantage of the forced choice ranking is that additional information about participants’ intentions are captured beyond the most likely intended response. Victims appeared to hesitate to seek information across situations and Nonvictims were more likely to select physical aggression last among other options.

4.5. Friendship characteristics

To examine the relation between support in a close friendship and victimization we conducted a 2 (victimization status) $\times$ 2 (gender) ANOVA. There was a main effect for gender $F(1, 50) = 7.74, p < .01, \eta^2 = .13$. Girls reported significantly greater support from friends ($M = 3.95, SD = 0.59$) than boys reported ($M = 3.48, SD = 0.63$). There were no significant effects for victimization status or the Gender $\times$ Victimization Status interaction on friend support.

To examine the relation between conflict with a close friendship and victimization we conducted a 2 (victimization status) $\times$ 2 (gender) ANOVA on the conflict scores as well. There was a nonsignificant trend with a small effect size (Cohen, 1988) for victimization status, $F(1, 50) = 3.46, p < .07, \eta^2 = .07$, suggesting that Victims reported somewhat more frequent conflict with their best friend ($M = 1.80, SD = 0.78$) than did Nonvictims ($M = 1.44, SD = 0.59$). There were no significant effects for gender or the Gender $\times$ Victimization Status interaction on conflict.

Table 2
Mean scores on behavioral intent by victimization status and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Victimization status</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Victims</td>
<td>Nonvictims</td>
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<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
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<td>0.72</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance*</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p = .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01.
5. Discussion

Nonbullying Victims differed from Nonvictims in relatively subtle ways that cumulatively suggest that this group of victimized adolescents had difficulty managing confrontation adaptively in a variety of contexts for peer interaction. Based on both self- and parent reports, Victims engaged in more aggressive behavior toward peers than did Nonvictims. Because of careful selection criteria, none of the participating adolescents had high scores on aggressive behavior toward others. The Nonvictims, however, apparently managed to avoid being involved in almost any aggressive exchanges with peers even within this restricted range, either as targets or perpetrators. Some of the Victims’ aggression towards peers could be reactive following episodes of being bullied, as Victims tended to be a bit more likely to rank physically aggressive responses to ambiguous confrontation higher and information-seeking lower than Nonvictims. This suggests Victims may access physically aggressive responses quicker in potential confrontations with peers and in some instances fail to seek additional information before potentially escalating ambiguous situations into conflict. Similarly, girls in the Victim group reported fewer self-controlled responses to conflict and less cooperative behaviors than Nonvictim girls on the measure of general social skills. Although Victims’ more aggressive intentions and behavior do not preclude supportive friendships, results suggest that Victims may experience more conflict with their closest friendship, compared to Nonvictims.

5.1. Victims and aggression

Although previous studies have examined peer and teacher reports, few have examined parents’ knowledge of their adolescents’ victimization experiences. Nonetheless, we found that adolescent- and parent-reported victimization in this truncated sample were related at levels similar to other studies examining parent and adolescent agreement on personality variables (Caspi, 1998; Youngstrom, Loeber, & Southamer-Loeber, 1989). The relation between victimization status and aggression was strongest for adolescent reports, which likely reflects both shared method variance as well as real differences in information available to parents (Caspi, 1998; Youngstrom, Loeber, & Southamer-Loeber, 2000). Parents are unlikely to have access to a complete picture of their adolescents’ victimization for two reasons. First, bullying tends to be a covert behavior hidden from parents and rarely discussed with adults by the victim (Vernberg, Ewell, Beery, Freeman, & Abwender, 1995). Second, relational aggression emerges as a significant aggression strategy in early adolescence (Cairns et al., 1989) and tends to be unobservable by uninvolved parties (Pellegrini, 1998). Thus, adolescents’ access to a larger set of observations of their own behavior with peers than parents’ likely contributes to the differences between parent and adolescent ratings. Still, the overlap between the findings from parent-and adolescent-report are sufficient to suggest that parents may be a resource for identifying the most severely victimized youth who are at risk for poorer social and emotional outcomes and in need of preventative services.

No gender differences were found for aggression among the Victims in this study. Assessing a range of victimization experiences that included relational and overt aggression (Crick &
Bigbee, 1998; Crick et al., 1996) and identifying victim groups relative to same-gender peers may have reduced a bias towards the more frequently and more overtly aggressive males. More work is needed to explore how and when victims aggress. The current data do not allow us to reliably parcel out different types of relational, overt, proactive, or reactive aggression.

5.2. General social skills

Findings on general behavior skills were mixed. Victimization status and general social skills were related for girls but not boys. Only female victims reported fewer skills related to maintaining self-control and getting along with others. No differences emerged on parent-reported adolescent social skills. The lack of differences for male victims and on parent-reported social skills raise important questions. Potentially, adolescents’ responses to confrontation and interpersonal problems in adult and sibling contexts are not predictive of problems in peer contexts. Considerable research has shown that there are real and important differences in the information revealed by different informants (e.g., Caspi, 1998). A more specific measure of self-control in a variety of settings, for example, may be more informative.

The lack of findings for boys is more difficult to explain. An examination of the means suggested that the effect was due to very high scores on these two social skills scales by Nonvictimized girls that were not matched by the Nonvictimized boys. Cooperative behavior and self-control may be more important in the peer culture for girls for establishing a protective network from bullying for girls than boys but this is a question for further research, as we did not assess peer networks.

5.3. Behavioral intent

Victims were more likely to rank order physically aggressive responses to ambiguous conflict higher than nonvictims and less likely to rank getting more information as high as nonvictims. Victims also tended to rank passive avoidance lower. At first glance, our results may be quite puzzling because frequently victimized youth are unlikely to have much evidence of the effectiveness of aggression—by definition victims are the repeated target of more powerful individuals’ aggressive acts. Nonvictims’ preference for avoidance of confrontation, however, is consistent with developmental literature on adaptive responses to anger provocation. Youth typically avoid direct expressions of anger, in part, because they perceive expressions of anger to have little adaptive function and to elicit counterattacks (Jenkins & Ball, 2000; Tangey et al., 1996; Underwood, Hurley, Johanson, & Mosley, 1999).

Victims’ aggressive intentions and behavior might be explained by victims’ failure to select appropriate alternatives to aggression during confrontation. This leaves unanswered the question of why victims lack this skill. We suspect that the explanatory power of attitudes, intentions, and beliefs may be limited. Yet, very little work has explored the influence of emotion processes on victims’ thoughts and actions. Perhaps victims’ intentions to aggress are generated by less adaptive coping with emotional arousal.
5.4. Friendship qualities

In this study and others (Furman, 1992; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985), girls reported more social support in their friendships than did boys. Victims and Nonvictims reported similar levels of support (warmth, companionship, intimacy) in their closest friendship, but Victims reported more conflict in this friendship. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that victims have reciprocal friendships (Pellegrini et al., 1999). The current study goes beyond peer networks and examines perceived qualities of the relationship. We found that although victims may have supportive friends, their relationships are marked by frequent conflict. Victims’ aggressive intentions and responses could prevent them from successfully negotiating conflicts in important relationships (Laursen, 1993; Laursen, Hartup, & Koplas, 1996) and increase the opportunities for victims to become embroiled in fights with their friends. Both of these situations in adolescence would increase peer rejection and decrease adolescents’ opportunities to develop better social competence.

5.5. Future directions

Our results demonstrate that both male and female nonbullying victims may be at risk for problems that may invite more victimization or, at least, exacerbate confrontations with peers. There are, however, some caveats to this study. First, our results rest heavily on findings from self-report measures with support from parent-report measures but without the presence of peer report. It is likely that shared method variance contributed to our findings. The few studies that have compared victim groups identified by different informants, however, generally show consistency across groups with only a few exceptions (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Characteristics of frequent victims have also been found to be similar across studies using self- and other-report to identify victims (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Also, self-report measures of friendship characteristics are central to the study of interpersonal characteristics. Perceived support and conflict, even in unilateral relationships, can add meaningfully to understanding the behavior of individuals in relationships (Furman, 1996). Nonetheless, future studies should explore these findings by including peer reports and the extent to which victims’ perceptions of friendship quality are reciprocal. Although perceptions are important, other studies have shown important differences in behavioral outcomes between victims who recognize their social competence deficits and victims who do not (Graham & Juvonen, 1998).

Similarly, although studies of self- and peer-perceived victimization find that both procedures identify a similar group of victims, our results may have been different had we explored differences in each type of procedure. It is noteworthy that a specific study of differences between self- and peer-identified victims found that self-identified victims were less likely to suffer peer rejection (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). We might have found less perceived support among victims who were peer identified.

As is the case with much research, longitudinal studies of friendship and responses to provocation are needed. Of the many important theoretical questions to be answered with such a study, the most interesting one may be the extent to which individual differences in coping
with conflict, confrontation, and anger are causes and/or consequences of peer victimization. The friendship literature indicates that friendship experiences provide a significant developmental context for adolescents to learn to manage conflict in relationships. More attention to victims’ ability to manage behavior and emotion may prove a rich source of information regarding development and psychopathology. Clearly, more specific assessments of conflict management, responses to confrontation, and emotion processes are needed to elucidate victims’ interpersonal problems.

6. Uncited references

Craig et al., 2000
Crick & Dodge, 1996
Egan et al., 1998
Olweus, 1978

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