

Do Coping Behaviors Mediate The Adjustment Of Elementary School Children Who Are  
Victimized By Relational Aggression?

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Educational Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

Do coping behaviors mediate the adjustment of elementary school children who are victimized by relational aggression?

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This study explored whether coping strategies had an impact on the adjustment of third through fifth grade students ( $N = 88$ ) who experienced conflict with their peers. The victimized students' level of adjustment and strategies used to cope with bullying, were additionally investigated. Self-report data was gathered on the students' victimization experiences, coping strategies and level of school and peer adjustment. A measure of school and peer adjustment was also obtained by the participants' teachers, as a means of validating the student reports. Victims of peer aggression were anticipated to exhibit poorer adjustment due to their tendency to rely on more maladaptive ways of coping and less often on adaptive ways of coping. Statistical support was found for several direct relationships, but not for any of the mediated effects. Specifically, both overt and relational victimization were related to lower rates of peer adjustment. Coping was also found to have a direct impact on adjustment. The use of avoidant coping was associated with lower rates of school and peer adjustment and the use of approach coping was associated with higher rates of school and peer adjustment.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Bullying has most recently been regarded as a form of aggression that is hostile (directed at inflicting harm), proactive (in the absence of provocation rather than in response to actions by others), and one that involves both direct and indirect behaviors, which are targeted repeatedly at an individual or group, perceived to be weaker (Elinoff, Chafouleas, & Sassu, 2004). While bullying has likely occurred throughout human history, it has been a growing concern of teachers, clinicians, and researchers, particularly since the publication of Olweus's (1978) book *Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys*. In line with this publication, concerns about school-based bullying have traditionally emphasized physical aggression and those externalizing behaviors that are easily recognized as being hurtful, such as hitting, pushing, taunting, and name calling. Since this time, however, a new form of bullying has been identified in the literature, one that encompasses the many subtle and covert ways that peers can inflict harm on others. This form of bullying has been coined relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), and refers to behaviors that harm others through damaging their relationships, feelings of acceptance, and inclusion in social groups (Crick et al., 1999). The extant literature on bullying, including overt and relational forms, has linked those individuals involved (both the aggressor and victim) to a number of psychosocial difficulties (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, 1996; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1992).

In recent years, the portrayal of relational aggression in the popular press, in both books such as *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002) and the movie *Mean Girls* (Messick, Michaels,

Fey, & Waters, 2004) has inadvertently sent the message that these behaviors are primarily perpetrated and received by girls. Research on relational aggression has not found this to be the case, however, and has instead confirmed that these types of behaviors are common among both boys and girls. The literature shows that relational aggression is more prevalent than overt aggression among females (Crick, 1996; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999; Cunningham et al.; 1998; Rys & Bear, 1997; Werner & Crick 1999), while boys have been found to engage in both types of aggression equally (Rocker Phelps, 2001; Rys & Bear, 1997).

The present study focused on victims of peer aggression, specifically victims of relational forms of aggression. Past literature shows that from preschool through adolescence, being a target of relational aggression is associated with a number of difficulties such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, lower rates of self-worth, school avoidance, attention difficulties, and peer rejection (Crick et al., 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). These findings imply that being a target of bullying can interfere with healthy development. However, there is evidence to suggest that even though many school-age youth experience some degree of bullying, the majority of those children were relatively unaffected by the abusive encounters (Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992). One likely explanation for this may be the students' ability to cope with this negative treatment by their peers. The ways in which children and adolescents cope with stress can be important mediators and moderators in terms of the impact that stress can have on their current and future adjustment (Compas et al., 2001).

Coping has been defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), pioneers of the work on coping and its relation to stress, as the act of “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural

efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). Embedded in this definition is the idea that coping is a dynamic process, as it continuously adapts to fit the demands of the particular situation. There are two main frameworks that have been used in the literature to describe the ways that people cope with stressful situations. The first theory, which was conceptualized by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), classifies coping responses as falling within either a problem-focused or emotion-focused dichotomy. Problem-focused coping involves attempts by an individual to manage or alter the stressor using specific problem-focused strategies, such as confronting the source of stress, seeking information, and planful problem-solving. Emotion-focused coping involves attempts to regulate negative emotional reactions to a stressor, such as expressing one’s emotions, seeking support from others, controlling one’s thoughts, and distancing one’s self from the source of stress (Causey & Dubow, 1992; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The second theory on stress and coping, which has been described by Roth and Cohen (1986), makes a distinction between approach and avoidance coping. These two basic modes of coping with stress have to do with behavioral, cognitive, or emotional activities that are oriented either toward (i.e., approach) or away from (i.e., avoidance) the stressor. According to Roth and Cohen, approach strategies, such as seeking information, are believed to be direct attempts at altering the stressful situation and allow for appropriate action and the possibility for noticing and taking advantage of changes in a situation that may make it more controllable. On the other hand, avoidant strategies are considered ways of managing one’s emotional reactions and thus may be useful if they reduce stress and prevent anxiety from becoming overwhelming (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Examples of these include cognitive

attempts to minimize or deny threat, behavioral attempts to escape or avoid confronting the situation, and relieving tension by expressing emotions (Ebata & Moos, 1991). These two frameworks of coping, which are both very similar, make a distinction between coping strategies that are aimed at affecting the stressor more directly (i.e., problem-focused or approach) and those that involve efforts to manage the negative emotions associated with the stressful event (i.e., emotion-focused or avoidance) (Fields & Prinz, 1997).

Research generated over the years has identified a number of personal and situational factors as influencing the way people manage stressful situations. Personal factors have to do with one's age or developmental level and gender as well as individual differences in temperament, while situational factors describe appraisals of the characteristics and conditions of the particular problem being dealt with (Ebata & Moos, 1994).

In terms of the personal factors, the literature demonstrates that as children mature, their repertoire of strategies to help them deal with difficult situations expands (Fields & Prinz, 1997). For instance, as children advance toward middle childhood, their advanced language and metacognitive skills allow for the use of more diverse means of stress reduction, such as cognitive reframing or restructuring a problem situation, use of self-talk to calm anxious feelings, and generation of alternative solutions (Normandeau & Gobeil, 1998). The most consistent findings regarding gender, are that males tend to approach and deal with problems by using more direct action while females are more likely to seek support from others (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991). A person's disposition or temperament has been found to play a role in several important ways. First, temperament affects one's level of sensitivity to environmental stimuli, and second, it may help explain why children react the way they do when feeling threatened or aroused (Ebata & Moos, 1994).

Research focused on the situational determinants that influence coping, has found some similarities in the way people cope with specific types of stressors. According to the literature, problem-focused coping tends to be used when one feels a sense of control over the negative event and emotion-focused coping is used more when it is believed that nothing can be done to modify the threatening or challenging environmental conditions (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Roth & Cohen, 1986). A person's cognitive appraisal of the stressful situation has also been found to impact his or her adjustment to the problematic circumstance. Studies with both adults and children have found that psychological symptoms were related to the degree of fit between appraisals of control and the relative amount of problem- and emotion-focused coping used (Compas, Malcarne, & Fondacaro, 1988; Forsythe & Compas, 1987).

While the coping strategies used in response to bullying have been found to vary by both gender and bully-victim status type, there seems to be an overall preference toward the use of avoidance strategies (Roecker Phelps, 2001). The particular type of avoidance strategy has, however, been found to differ depending upon the form of bullying that is experienced. For instance, children faced with relational aggression have been found to generate more Internalizing and Distancing strategies, while more Externalizing strategies tend to be employed in the face of overt aggression (Roecker Phelps. 2001).

Although some investigators have sought to discover the ways that victims respond to peer aggression, very little is known about the types of strategies that may work to moderate the effects of peer harassment. Previous work in this area has found Problem-Solving to be beneficial for non-bullied students, but seems to exacerbate the difficulties for those students who are bullied (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). The goal of this study was to explore how coping impacts the adjustment of children experiencing conflict with their peers,

specifically in the form of relational aggression. Past research on stress and coping has speculated that frequent peer harassment may place some children at greater risk for dysfunction than others because of individual differences in a) the appraisal of such stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), b) responding to aggressive peers (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997), or c) coping with the stressful encounters (Fields & Prinz, 1997). It could also be hypothesized that even infrequent experiences of peer harassment could be associated with maladjustment if the coping mechanisms that children choose to use are inadequate in managing the particular situation (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002).

Given the difficulties that have been found associated with being a target of relational aggression, the primary goal of this study was to understand how victims cope with this type of behavior and whether there are certain strategies related to healthier adjustment. To address this concern, the study evaluated the nature of the relationship between victimization (overt and relational), coping and several adjustment indices on third through fifth grade students. The first set of hypotheses examined the impact that overt and relational forms of bullying have had on victims' school and peer adjustment. It was hypothesized that students who experienced more frequent bullying would report poorer school and peer adjustment. The second set of hypotheses used an approach-avoidance conceptualization to examine the students' coping responses to relational aggression. In line with previous findings on children's coping responses to bullying (see Roecker Phelps, 2001), this study hypothesized that students who experienced more frequent peer victimization, would report greater reliance on "avoidance" ways of coping and less reliance on "approach" strategies. The final set of hypotheses was an attempt to support earlier findings, which have identified approach coping to be related to better outcomes (e.g., Ayers, Sandler, West, & Roose, 1996). This

third set of hypotheses stated that greater reliance on “avoidance” coping, or less reliance on “approach” coping would be associated with poorer school and peer adjustment.

Path analysis was used to statistically analyze the relationships among the variables in this study. Results confirmed some of the hypotheses, but not others. Specifically, relational aggression was found to be related to peer adjustment, but not school adjustment. The relationships between victimization and coping style were not confirmed, however, full support was found for the third set of hypotheses. Avoidant coping was found related to lower rates of school and peer adjustment while approach coping was found related to higher rates of adjustment in these areas. Overt and relational victimization were also found to be moderately related to one another, as well as to follow a similar pattern in the way they relate to school and peer adjustment. These findings suggest that the two victimization variables were indeed related and thus, overt victimization was included in all the analyses.

Findings are discussed in terms of the (1) relatively small amount of victimization reported by this sample, (2) a student’s cognitive appraisal, or perceived controllability over the stressful situation, and (3) ability to adapt a coping strategy to fit the demands of the situation.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

This chapter is divided up in two main sections. It opens with an overview of the literature on bullying and then summarizes the relevant research in the area of stress and coping. Included in the section on bullying is a discussion of its prevalence, definitions, and types. The gender differences in bullying behavior and the social-psychological adjustment of its perpetrators and victims are reviewed last.

The second section is devoted to reviewing the stress and coping literature. It begins with a summary of two prominent coping frameworks used in research, which are the problem/emotion focused dichotomy by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and the approach versus avoidance coping framework, developed by Roth and Cohen (1986). The personal and situational factors that have been found to impact the way people cope with stress is reviewed next, followed by a brief discussion on coping and adjustment. This section concludes by summarizing the ways that youth have been found to cope with bullying. Following the review of the literature on bullying and coping, this chapter ends with a rationale for the study, the research hypotheses and the educational implications.

### **Bullying Literature**

#### **Prevalence and Conceptualization of Bullying**

Peer aggression or bullying, although not a new phenomenon, continues to be a relevant topic in the field of psychology. While the media has covered the more serious incidents of peer aggression that have occurred nationwide over the past few decades, this type of behavior is seen in a less severe form in schools on a daily basis. Peer aggression is not just a problem experienced here in the US; countries such as Norway (Olweus, 1993),

Finland (Rauste-von Wright, 1989), England, Italy, Canada, Japan, and Australia (Espelage & Swearer, 2003) have also recognized peer aggression to be an issue of concern. In terms of prevalence, peer aggression has been found to occur quite frequently among school children. In a study surveying over 15,000 students across the U.S. in grades 6 through 10, nearly 30% of the students reported involvement in bullying behaviors (Nansel et al., 2001). Not only does peer aggression occur worldwide on a frequent basis, but more importantly, the effects of being involved in peer aggression have been found to be detrimental, particularly to those children who occupy the role of either bully and/or victim over an extended period of time.

While the literature base in this area is quite large, there is a lack of consensus regarding the way bullying has been defined. According to Olweus (1993), who is one of the leading and most often cited researchers on bullying, a student is bullied when he or she is exposed repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students. These negative actions, which are really aggressive acts, can be carried out verbally, physically, or even nonverbally via the use of facial gestures. Implied in this definition of bullying is the idea of intentionality, where the perpetrator acts with the intent to inflict harm on his or her victim. Another commonly agreed upon characteristic of bullying has to do with an imbalance of power. Whether the feelings of helplessness against the harasser are real or perceived, they make it difficult for the victim to defend him or herself against the harasser (Elinoff et al., 2004; Olweus, 1993). Elinoff et al. (2004) provide a more modern definition of bullying, which accounts for the idea that bullying involves repeated exposure, that there is an intent to harm, and that its perpetrators and victims can occupy different roles.

According to these researchers, bullying is a form of aggression that is hostile (directed at inflicting harm), proactive (in the absence of provocation rather than in response to actions

by others), and that involves both direct and indirect behaviors, which are targeted repeatedly either at an individual or a group perceived to be weaker.

Much of the research in this area has assessed these behaviors by categorizing students into distinct groups (bully or victim), implying that they are homogenous in nature and that their behaviors are static rather than dynamic and changing. The behavioral characteristics that are used to describe these students may be partly to blame. For instance, Olweus (1978) found that amongst boys, bullies tend to be characterized by an aggressive reaction pattern that is combined with physical strength, while victims are seen as having an anxious reaction pattern, which is combined with physical weakness. There are, however, some students who do not fit neatly into one of these two categories. This has prompted researchers to begin conceptualizing these roles as existing along a continuum, and incorporating the role of bully-victim into the spectrum of bullying behaviors in which students may become involved (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). Bully-victims, also known as provocative victims, are characterized by a distinct personality, and one that partly overlaps with those of bullies and victims (Kristensen & Smith, 2003). These children are believed to provoke antagonism amongst their peers and have been found to be at highest risk for a number of behavioral problems (Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000). Bully/victims have been found to be both anxious and aggressive, suffer from low self-esteem, and may be hyperactive in some cases (Andreou, 2000; Olweus, 1993).

### **Types of Bullying Behavior**

In line with Elinoff et al.'s (2004) definition of bullying, aggression among peers can be distinguished between acts that are overt and those that are more subtle and covert in nature. The majority of research on children's aggressive behavior has focused primarily on

the more overt behaviors, (i.e., physical and verbal aggression or those necessitating face-to-face confrontation) including hitting, pushing, shoving, threatening, teasing, and name-calling. Defining indirect aggression, however, is not as straightforward. As per Buss (cited in Underwood, 2003), indirect aggression consists of acts that are intentionally carried out behind the victim's back, which allow the identification of the perpetrator to remain unknown. Olweus (1993) provides a more general definition, by depicting indirect bullying as any act of aggression that is less visible, such as isolating a peer from a social group.

The term relational aggression was devised by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), to describe a type of indirect aggression that encompasses the many subtle and covert behaviors that are meant to be damaging to others. The term 'relational' is used to signify a type of bullying where the intent is to harm or manipulate one's friendships. This type of bullying can encompass a range of emotionally hurtful behaviors, including social exclusion; isolation or alienation; gossiping; writing notes or talking about someone; stealing friends or a romantic partner; threatening to withdraw one's friendship or support to hurt or control another child; and intentionally ignoring another peer (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; 1996; Crothers, Field, & Kolbert, 2005). For example, students may spread rumors about a close peer as a means of retaliation or a relationally aggressive youth may threaten to exclude a friend from a social activity if he or she does not go along with the aggressor (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

### **Gender Differences in Bullying Behavior**

The literature on aggression has historically considered males to be the more aggressive sex. In a review on this topic, Coie and Dodge (1998) reported findings from a number of studies that have found boys to exhibit significantly higher levels of aggression

than girls. More recent investigations in this area, however, do not support these earlier claims. This discrepancy in the literature may be due in part to a flaw in the way aggression has previously been assessed, which was in line with the traditional conceptualization of aggression that viewed aggressive acts as those consisting of physical and overt types of behaviors. For instance, earlier studies on peer aggression have tended to exclude girls from the sample and to define aggression as being overtly physical or verbal (Crick & Rose, 2001). In the more recent literature, when the definition of peer aggression has been expanded to include more indirect and relational forms, the differences between males and females has become less pronounced (Odgers & Moretti, 2002). Thus, females are no longer seen as less aggressive, but instead just believed to express their anger in different ways.

Interest in relational aggression has increased substantially in recent years. This interest is evident from both the large number of research studies published in scholarly journals over the past two decades, and in the popular press where relational aggression was portrayed in the successful Hollywood film *Mean Girls* (Messick et al., 2004) and in several popular books such as *And Words Can Hurt Forever* (Garbarino & deLara, 2002) and *Odd Girl Out* (Simmons, 2002). This portrayal of relational aggression in the public eye has inadvertently sent the message that these behaviors are primarily perpetrated and received by girls. Research on relational aggression has not found this to be the case, but instead, has confirmed that these types of behaviors are common among both boys and girls (Crick, Casas, et al., 1999; Crick, 1996; Rys & Bear, 1997). As discussed in an article by Crick et al. (2001), while the initial studies of relational aggression were conducted to increase the knowledge base of girls' peer interactions, findings have rarely yielded significant gender differences. Studies of preschool aged children through adolescence have found that when

gender differences exist, while they do tend to favor girls, what seems to be more meaningful, is the significance that each gender attaches to this type of peer harassment. For instance, as suggested in several lines of research, females seem to become more distressed than males when exposed to relationally aggressive acts (Crick, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997).

Physical aggression in children can be identified as early as 18 months, and preschool children as young as age 3 have been found to engage in relational aggression (Caplan et al., as cited in Underwood, 2003; Crick, Casas, et al., 1999). Around the same developmental period that relational aggression emerges, gender differences in anger expression also become evident, with girls engaging in less physical aggression than boys (Loeber & Hay, 1997). Studies of pre-school children (Crick, Casas, et al., 1999), middle-age children (Crick, 1996; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Cunningham et al, 1998; Rys & Bear, 1997), and young adults (Werner & Crick 1999) show that relational aggression is more common than overt aggression in girls. The literature suggests that as girls mature, their peer interactions become characterized by increasingly more relationally aggressive behaviors, with boys engaging in both, relational and overt aggression (Rocker Phelps, 2001; Rys & Bear, 1997). Even though very young children have been found to engage in relational aggression, it is considered to be most prominent during middle childhood (age 6 to 12) and thus much of the research to date has focused on this age range (Nansel et al., 2001; Underwood, 2003).

### **Explanations of Gender Differences in Anger Expression**

As discussed by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), the gender differences in expression of aggression emerge because of fundamental differences between the social goals of males and females; where males' social goals emphasize

instrumentality and physical dominance, females' goals are more focused on interpersonal issues. A longitudinal study by Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, and Garipey (cited in Underwood, 2003) found that girls were involved in many more acts involving social manipulation compared to expressions of overt aggression. This corresponds with past findings that relationship quality and maintaining social harmony is more important to girls than to boys (Block, 1983; Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992). Gilligan (as cited in Crothers et al., 2005) proposed that a female's morality and sense of self are based on feelings of connectedness and interdependence with others and that affiliation with and acceptance by other girls often become essential elements of identity formation. As girls become adolescents, these relationships assume an increasing amount of importance, potentially assisting with adjustment and a sense of well-being (Crothers et al., 2005).

Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) term 'relational aggression' depicts a way that children can inflict harm by attacking in ways that will hinder or damage the goals most relevant for their gender group. Since girls' tend to be more emotionally intimate in their friendships than boys, they are able to use their strong desire for connectedness as leverage against each other (Talbot, 2002). Thus, as a means of expressing their hostility, girls may be more likely to inflict harm in the area they believe will be the most hurtful – one's friendships.

### **Involvement in Bullying and Adjustment**

**Social-psychological adjustment of bullies.** Dan Olweus' book, *Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys*, published in 1978, can be considered one of the seminal references in the extant literature on bullying. As discussed, the majority of research in this area consists of work with boys and focuses on the type of bullying that is most prominent

among them (i.e., physical and verbal forms). Findings in this area have consistently linked physical aggression to conduct problems, peer rejection, poor school achievement, and depression (Olweus, 1991; Parker & Asher, 1987; Roland, 2002). In a large survey study, Nansel et al. (2001) collected self-report data from over 15,000 students in grades 6 through 10, and found that those students who bullied others were more likely to consume alcohol, smoke, and have both lower academic achievement and perceptions of school climate. Results from several other studies found a link between clinically elevated depression levels and students who bully their peers (Austin & Joseph, 1996; Slee, 1995). Further, as per Nansel, Haynie, and Simons-Morton (2003), youth who were classified as bullies during the sixth grade reported poorer school adjustment the following year.

The recent literature on relational aggression has begun to shed light on the deleterious impact that this form of aggression can have. Much of this research, however, has not isolated relational aggression from the more overt forms when examining the causes and consequences of bullying among youth, thus making it difficult to separate any unique contributions that relational aggression may have on those involved. The available evidence does suggest though that some of the same difficulties linked to perpetrators of physical aggression may also affect youth involved in relational aggression. For instance, Crick and Grotpeter (1995) found relational aggression to be related to social-psychological maladjustment independent of overt aggression. To assess this relationship, Crick and Grotpeter administered a peer nomination and several self-report surveys, including scales that measured loneliness, social anxiety, depression, and ones' perception of his or her peer relations, to a total of 491 third through sixth grade students. Similar to overtly aggressive children, Crick and Grotpeter found that relationally aggressive children also experience

significant social problems. Specifically, in this study, relationally aggressive youth were more disliked and rejected than other children. Relational aggression was also found to be significantly related to maladjustment, particularly depression, loneliness, and social isolation.

In a follow-up investigation, Crick (1996) found that in addition to an increased risk for concurrent adjustment problems, perpetrators of relational aggression were also at risk for future social maladjustment. Using a longitudinal design, 245 third through sixth graders from two Midwestern elementary schools, filled out a peer nomination scale three times during the course of the school year. The peer nomination instrument, which was developed in prior research by the author, measured both relational and overt aggression as well as prosocial behavior. Social adjustment was assessed by asking the students to nominate several liked and disliked peers, which then determined whether they were considered “accepted” or “rejected”. A teacher rating measure of children’s social behavior and social adjustment was also constructed for use in this study to parallel the scales represented in the peer nomination. Findings suggest a gender difference in terms of the impact of relational aggression. For instance, for those students who engaged in relational aggression, there was a tendency for girls to become more rejected as the school year progressed. Compared to their peers, relationally aggressive children have also been found to exhibit significantly more internalizing and externalizing (impulsivity, defiance, and blaming others) problems as rated by their teachers (Crick, 1997).

**Social-psychological adjustment of victims.** Like aggressors, victims of peer aggression also experience significant psychosocial distress. Past research suggests that children who are repeatedly targeted for peer harassment are at risk for a number of

adjustment problems. Beginning early in a child's school career, being a victim of peer aggression has been found to be linked to feelings of loneliness and school avoidance (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). In addition, victims of chronic peer aggression are believed to be at greater risk for exhibiting externalizing behaviors, attention difficulties, delinquency, anxiety, depression (Hanish & Guerra, 2002), and lower rates of global self-worth (Mynard, Joseph, & Alexander, 2000). While not all studies have determined whether victimization was a cause or consequence of the maladjustment, several longitudinal studies have confirmed that many of these adjustment difficulties are at least partly a consequence of the experience of being a victim (Egan & Perry, 1998; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Past research also suggests that the extent of the peer harassment affects the duration of the adjustment difficulties. For instance, in a longitudinal study by Olweus (1992), a group of chronically bullied boys were followed into adulthood, and even though the boys were no longer harassed as adults, they still evidenced higher rates of depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem. In terms of depression, the group that seems to be most affected are those students who both bully and are bullied (bully-victims), as these students have been found to suffer from higher rates of depression than both bullies and victims alone (Austin & Joseph, 1996; Swearer, Song, Cary, Eagle, & Mickelson, 2001). It is important to note again, that the majority of the studies investigating the effects of being victimized by one's peers have not attempted to isolate the type of peer aggression, and instead have just focused on children who are victims of bullying in general.

In contrast to research on victims of peer aggression, relatively few studies have sought to examine youth victimized specifically by relational aggression. As per the few studies that have examined the unique affects of relational victimization, evidence does

suggest that this form of victimization is also associated with social-psychological maladjustment. A study by Crick, Casas, et al. (1999) examined this relationship as well as addressed a gap in the literature by assessing this type of behavior among preschool aged children. The majority of the knowledge on peer victimization has either focused largely on school-aged children and adolescents or included young children but focused on aggression rather than victimization (e.g., Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997). In this study, Crick and colleagues investigated the association between relational victimization and social/psychological adjustment problems among a group of 129 three- to five-year-old children. Due to the age of the participants, information was primarily gathered by the students' teachers, who completed measures of aggression, victimization, and social-psychological adjustment. A peer nomination scale was also used to evaluate the student's perceptions of their peers' social adjustment. Results from the teacher ratings and the peer nomination suggested that like victims of physical aggression, victims of relational aggression experienced poorer peer relationships, peer rejection, and prosocial skills as well as more internalizing problems.

A more substantial body of research has been conducted that investigates the affects of relational victimization on middle-school aged children. Crick and Grotpeter (1996) were the first to examine this particular relationship and did so on a group of 474 third through sixth grade students attending public school in the Midwest region of the United States. To address this research goal, Crick and Grotpeter developed a self-report measure of children's treatment by their peers, called the Social Experience Questionnaire (SEQ), which aimed to assess both overt and relational victimization as well as more positive aspects of children's social experiences, such as helping, supportive, or caring acts towards others. Prior to this

pioneering study, a peer nomination had typically been the measure of choice in the assessment of relational aggression due to lack of alternative means to tap this particular form of bullying. To evaluate students' social-psychological adjustment, self-report measures of loneliness, depression, and social anxiety and avoidance were administered in addition to a peer nomination, which gathered information about the students' sociometric status amongst their peers (i.e., popular, average, neglected, rejected, and controversial). Results from this investigation confirmed that relational victimization, overt victimization, and the receipt of prosocial acts were separate aspects of peer treatment, further validating relational aggression as a unique form of maltreatment by peers. These assessments revealed that similar to overt victimization, relational victimization was significantly related to both internalizing and peer problems, such as loneliness, depression, social anxiety, and social avoidance. It was further found that while overt and relational victimization were experienced most often by 'rejected' children, children of 'average' status also reported receiving considerably more relational compared to overt forms of aggression. This may suggest that some forms of relationally aggressive behaviors occur more often, and are considered to be typical of the social interactions of elementary school children.

In another study exploring the impact of relational victimization on children's adjustment, a multi-informant method was used to gather data from 383 fourth and fifth grade students attending several Illinois public elementary schools (Crick & Bigbee, 1988). Crick and Bigbee chose to assess a number of social-psychological adjustment domains, those examined in the study discussed above as well as several that have previously been found related to aggressors and victims of overt aggression. Two measures were administered to assess victimization, the Social Experience Questionnaire – Self Report (SEQ-S; Crick &

Grottpeter, 1996) and the Social Experience Questionnaire – Peer Report (SEQ-P), a peer nomination scale developed specifically for use in this study. Both peer and self-report measures were also used to gather information regarding the students' social-psychological adjustment. Peer nominations were used to assess peer relationship problems (peer rejection and acceptance) and submissive behavior, while self-report measures were used to assess aspects of internalizing difficulties (loneliness, social anxiety, social avoidance, and emotional distress/depression) and self-restraint.

In support of past findings, Crick and Bigbee (1998) also found that the experience of relational victimization was significantly related to maladjustment. Specifically, in this study, youth who encountered relational aggression were more likely to be rejected by their peers, perceived as being submissive, suffer from emotional distress, and have more difficulty controlling their behavior. Crick and Bigbee further tested the unique predictive value of relational victimization status, examining the contribution that relational victimization had on social-psychological maladjustment above and beyond both overt aggression and victimization and relational aggression. This analysis showed that relational victimization offered additional information to the prediction of peer rejection, submissive behavior, loneliness, social avoidance, and emotional distress for both boys and girls. For girls, relational victimization also added to the prediction of lower levels of peer acceptance and self-restraint.

By studying girls, Putallaz, Kupersmidt, Grimes, and DeNero (as cited in Crick et al., 2001) also found an association between relational victimization and peer rejection. Similar to the results found by Crick and Grottpeter (1996), rejected children were higher than all other status groups on their peer-nominated relational victimization scores. The authors also

noted that rejected children tended to more often view themselves as targets of relational aggression and were rated as more relationally victimized by both their peers and teachers. It is not clear, however, whether being rejected by one's peers, acts as an influence or determinant of relational victimization. Due to the nature of relational aggression, which seeks to damage one's peer relationships, perhaps being targeted by this type of aggression over time acts to isolate its victims from the larger social group, contributing to their rejection.

With the goal of replicating and extending prior work on relational aggression, Prinstein et al. (2001) examined this form of bullying among an ethnically diverse group of adolescents. All data were collected in the form of self-report surveys, from a group of 566 ethnically diverse high-school students (ninth through twelfth graders). To assess aggression and victimization, a revised version of the Peer Experiences Questionnaire (Vernberg, Jacobs, & Hershberger, 1999) was administered, while separate measures were used to assess social-psychological adjustment indices, specifically depression, loneliness, self-esteem, and externalizing symptoms. As demonstrated in previous work, relational forms of aggression were reported with comparable frequencies across sexes. Results also supported previous findings, that relational victimization is uniquely associated with concurrent social-psychological adjustment. The adolescents targeted with relational aggression, reported higher levels of internalizing symptoms (i.e., depression, loneliness, self-esteem) compared with their non-victimized peers. This finding, which was true for both boys and girls, supports the view that relational aggression is troubling to all children, regardless of gender.

Investigations into the most relevant stressors from the child's perspective have consistently identified fear of negative evaluation by peers and adults, parental conflict or

loss, conflict with an adult, and feeling socially excluded to be among the most frequently identified by children (Atkins, 1991; Fields & Prinz, 1997). Being a target of bullying may be considered such a stressful event for school-aged children, as their need to “fit in” and be accepted by their peers becomes increasingly more salient to their social development. As demonstrated by past research, involvement in bullying behaviors can interfere with healthy development and lead to a number of adjustment difficulties for all those involved (i.e., bully, bully/victim, victim).

There are also findings, however, which indicate that even though a large number of school-age youth experience some degree of peer aggression, most of those children seem to be relatively unaffected by the abusive encounters. For instance, Hoover et al. (1992) found that while over 75% of middle to high school students reported being bullied at some point during their school years, fewer than 15% felt that they had been severely affected as looked at in terms of their social, emotional, or academic functioning. Past research has yielded several explanations for why this may be the case. First of all, longitudinal research in this area has tended to link being a victim in childhood to adjustment measures in adolescence, without accounting for the stability of their role as victim (Scholte, Engels, Overbeek, de Kemp, & Haselager, 2007). Even though isolated or periodic incidents of victimization can be extremely hurtful, it makes more sense that those students consistently victimized by their peers are at increased risk of experiencing the psychosocial difficulties associated with their abuse. The literature examining the factors that contribute to a stable pattern of peer victimization has found links between dysfunctional interactional styles and prolonged victimization, even after changes in social environment (Scholte et al., 2007).

Support for this premise, that children’s interactional style is related to their

victimization experience, has been supported in several longitudinal investigations. First, by following a group of 266 students throughout their kindergarten and first grade years, Snyder et al. (2003) observed that some of these children seemed to acquire a trait-like status as a victim, whereas others did not. Specifically, by use of a playground behavior coding system, these researchers found that while some of the children experienced harassment with increasing regularity, others appeared to respond more effectively to the aggression and in such a way that their harassment experiences became more intermittent and situational. Data indicated that for both boys and girls, growth in victimization status was related to parent and teachers reports of antisocial and depressive behaviors.

In another study, Dempsey, Fireman, and Wang (2006) also found support for the idea that interactional style influences victimization experience. These researchers used a very large sample of third through sixth grade students (over 3,000), to compare the characteristics of children who remained consistently peer victimized to those who transitioned out of their victimization status. Data was collected two times over the course of one year, in the form of a 24-item peer nomination scale on the students': relational and overt peer aggression and victimization, sociometric status (i.e., rejected, popular, or average), prosocial behavior, and impulsivity. Results indicated, in comparison to the victims transitioning out of their victimization status, consistently victimized boys were lower in prosocial behaviors while consistently victimized girls were found to be higher in impulsivity.

### **Stress and Coping Literature**

There are a number of variables that may impact the degree to which children are affected by bullying. The two studies discussed above, Snyder et al. (2003) and Dempsey et al. (2006) alluded to one likely explanation, which is their ability to cope with this kind of

treatment by their peers. Major stressful life events have long been considered predictive of adverse adjustment in adults (Fields & Prinz, 1997). However, research into the importance of minor life events or daily hassles in the prediction of distress has found an accumulation of these small negative events to be more predictive of problems than the occurrence of major life events (Rowlison & Felner, 1988). The ways in which children and adolescents cope with stress can be important mediators and moderators in terms of the impact that stress can have on current and future adjustment (Compas et al., 2001). In support of this, coping has been associated with physical and psychological adjustment in adults (Folkman & Lazarus, 1986) and with emotional and behavioral adjustment in children and adolescents (Compas et al., 1988).

### **Definitions and Conceptual Frameworks of Stress and Coping**

The construct of *stress*, which has been defined in numerous ways depending upon the field in which it is being used, provides a framework where the interplay between environmental, psychological, and physical factors can be seen (Aldwin, 1994). According to The American Institute of Stress, *stress* is considered to be an unpleasant threat or a feeling that is experienced when one perceives that the situational demands exceed one's personal and social resources. 'Motivation', which is related to 'stress' is often thought of as being a feeling, such as a desire or need. In the field of psychology, however, 'motivation' is regarded as a process that both energizes and directs goal-oriented behavior (Weber, 1991). In line with this view, 'stress' can be conceived as a process of motivation, as it requires some sort of adaptation (i.e., coping) to a demand or set of demands. Stress itself is not considered to be a particular emotion, but is related, as emotions are experienced when stress arises (Naughton, 1997).

Until relatively recently much of the work on stress and coping has been conceived through work with adults. Lazarus and Folkman (1984), pioneers of the work on coping and its relation to stress, argued that *stress* consists of three processes: primary appraisal, secondary appraisal, and coping. Primary appraisal is the process of perceiving a threat and the meaning that is assigned to it while secondary appraisal is the process of bringing to mind a potential response to the threat through an evaluation of the available coping responses (Lazarus & Launier, 1978). *Coping* has to do with executing a response to the perceived threat and has been defined by Lazarus and Folkman as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). Lazarus and Folkman point out that coping is not limited to only those efforts that are successful but also includes all purposeful attempts to manage stress, regardless of their effectiveness. Coping is further considered to be a process that continuously adapts in response to the demands of the stressful situation, and is thus believed to be one that is dynamic, not static.

Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) framework of coping, which has received wide recognition, classifies coping responses as falling within either a problem-focused or emotion-focused dichotomy. Problem-focused coping involves attempts by an individual to manage or alter the stressor using specific problem-focused strategies, such as confronting the source of stress, seeking information, and planful problem-solving, while emotion-focused coping involves attempts to regulate negative emotional reactions to a stressor, such as expressing one’s emotions, seeking support from others, controlling one’s thoughts, and distancing one’s self from the source of stress (Causey & Dubow, 1992; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

A similar theory on stress and coping that has generated much research, particularly with children, is Roth and Cohen's (1986) distinction between approach and avoidance coping. These two basic modes of coping with stress have to do with behavioral, cognitive, or emotional activities that are oriented either toward (i.e., approach) or away from (i.e., avoidance) the stressor. According to Roth and Cohen, approach strategies, such as seeking information, are believed to be direct attempts at altering the stressful situation and allow for appropriate action and the possibility for noticing and taking advantage of changes in a situation that may make it more controllable. On the other hand, avoidant strategies are considered ways of managing one's emotional reactions and thus may be useful if they reduce stress and prevent anxiety from becoming overwhelming (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Examples of these include cognitive attempts to minimize or deny threat, behavioral attempts to escape or avoid confronting the situation, and relieving tension by expressing emotions (Ebata & Moos, 1991).

Even though the coping frameworks by Lazarus and Folkman and Roth and Cohen are similar, as pointed out by Moos (as cited in Roecker, Dubow, & Donaldson, 1996) they differ slightly in their conceptualization. In the model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman, the emphasis seems to be on the focus of coping. For instance, one either deals directly with the situation or one's reactions or emotions to it. Conversely, in Roth and Cohen's model the emphasis seems to be more on the method that is used to cope - ways to either approach or avoid the situation. Despite this subtle difference between these approaches, they both make a clear distinction between two broad groups of coping strategies, those aimed at affecting the stressor more directly (i.e., problem-focused or approach) and those that involve efforts to manage the negative emotions associated with a stressful event (i.e., emotion-focused or

avoidance) (Fields & Prinz, 1997). These processes of coping then involve procedures that are directed at managing the stressor or managing the self in relation to the stressor (Losoya, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 1998).

### **Factors that Affect Coping with Stress**

Research generated over the years on how people cope with stress has found that the strategies people use are largely influenced by personal and situational factors (Ebata & Moos, 1994; Fields & Prinz, 1997). Personal factors have to do with one's age or developmental level and gender as well as individual differences in temperament, while situational factors describe appraisals of the characteristics and conditions of the particular problem being dealt with (Ebata & Moos, 1994). Evidence also suggests that most stressors elicit a number of coping responses, and thus when faced with stress, people tend to use strategies from both the problem-focused or approach category and those from the emotion-focused or avoidance category (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989).

Past literature further supports the assertion by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that coping is a dynamic process, which is sensitive to situational and temporal changes. In other words, a person's coping mechanism may change as the stressful encounter unfolds. For instance, at the initial encounter of a stressful situation, one may decide to seek support from others or seek more information in the case of ambiguity. However, after the individual has had time to process the situation, he or she may decide to handle it differently, such as using direct problem solving. Even though people may rely on different strategies over time and across situations, coping behaviors seem to be more dependent upon the specific event and the demands of that event, as opposed to personality or disposition. Accumulated evidence has found weak correlations between people's descriptions of how they "typically" respond

to stress and the ways that they actually cope in particular situations (Wethington & Kessler, 1991).

**Personal factors: Developmental level.** Of the personal factors that influence coping, the one that has received considerable attention in the empirical literature is a person's age or developmental level. As children mature both cognitively and experientially, their repertoire of strategies to help them deal with stressful situations expands (Fields & Prinz, 1997). Previous work on emotion regulation in infancy has found support for the notion of predictable developmental changes in the coping strategies that are used to regulate emotional arousal (Kopp, 1989). Early infant behaviors such as crying, thumb-sucking, looking at hands, head turning, and reliance on caregivers all serve as ways for the infant to avoid and relieve excess tension. As infants turn into toddlers, they become much more adept at self-soothing. For instance, 12- to 18-month-olds have been found to use more self-calming and self-distraction as opposed to the fussing and gaze aversion behaviors that are more common among 6-month-olds (Mangelsdorf, Shapiro, & Marzolf, 1995). As toddlers mature into young children, their attempts at reducing negative emotions expand and are accomplished through more direct behaviors such as avoidance, seeking support and soothing from others, behaviorally withdrawing from threat, and using tangible objects for soothing and security (Fields & Prinz, 1997; Gunnar, 1994).

At the same time as children's coping skills become more complex, so do the stressful situations that they encounter. In early to middle childhood, stressors range from issues related to separation from caregivers to parental control, entrance into school and peer relations (Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992). During these years, children's increasingly more complex language and metacognitive skills allow for the use of more diverse methods of

stress reduction, such as cognitive reframing or restructuring a problem situation, cognitive representations of absent caregivers, using self-talk to calm negative feelings, and generating alternative solutions to solve problems (Normandeau & Gobeil, 1998). During adolescence, greater diversity and flexibility in the range of coping responses available are again expected to emerge and along with the adolescent's increasing metacognitive skills, a greater ability to match coping efforts to the perceived or objective characteristics of stress is expected (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001).

**Personal factors: Gender.** There is also evidence to suggest that coping style is in part dependent upon a person's gender. In the adult literature, a number of studies have found there to be stereotypical notions with regard to the strategies that people use to cope with stress. For instance, in a large national sample of men and women, when asked how they handled worries and periods of unhappiness, men reported significantly more problem-solving efforts or ignoring, compared to women who were more likely to seek help from others or turn to prayer (Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981). In another study, which sampled how adults between the ages 35 to 45 and 65 to 74 dealt with daily hassles, men reported using emotional self-control and planful problem solving while women were more likely to seek social support and engage in positive reappraisal to cope with hassles (Folkman, Lazarus, Pimley, & Novacek, 1987).

The picture becomes more complex, however, when respondents were asked how they deal with specific kinds of difficulties as opposed to just stress in general. For example, in a study by Folkman and Lazarus (1980), gender differences were not found in the use of people's emotion-focused coping (i.e., attempts to regulate their emotional reactions to a stressor) responses for work, health, and family related problems. In this and other studies,

however, men were found to be more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies compared to women in response to problems having to do with work, whereas women were more likely to use problem-solving strategies, such as negotiation, and to seek advice and support when experiencing marital and parenting difficulties (Fleishman, 1984; Menaghan, 1982). In general, however, the bulk of the research on gender differences and coping supports the notion that males tend to approach and deal with problems by using more direct action than females, who are more likely to seek support from others (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991).

These seemingly preferred ways of coping among men and women have also been empirically supported with children. By surveying 650 Australian adolescents (ages 16 to 18), Frydenberg and Lewis (1991) were able to gain a better understanding of how children in this age range cope with their concerns. Information regarding how these participants coped with stress was gathered in two separate ways. First, each student was asked to identify a main concern in his or her life and then to describe how it was coped with. This open-ended question was then followed up with the administration of Folkman and Lazarus's (as cited in Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991) Ways of Coping Checklist, which is a self-report measure based on their problem-solving versus emotion-focused coping paradigm. In comparison to boys, girls were found to rely more on seeking social support and wishful thinking, such as fantasy, daydreaming, and wishing that a miracle would happen.

In another study, Ebata and Moos (1994) used a longitudinal design to examine the influence of personal factors such as age, gender, and temperamental disposition, in addition to situational and contextual factors in predicting adolescents coping responses to stressors. In this study the participants, who ranged between 12 and 18 years of age, were asked to

complete questionnaires at two separate points in time (one year apart). Coping was assessed by use of the Coping Responses Inventory-Youth Form (CRI-Y; Moos, 1993), a self-report survey that reflects Roth and Cohen's (1986) approach/avoidance conceptualization of managing a problem. In terms of gender, this study found that girls reported using more guidance and support seeking as well as emotional discharge, logical analysis, and positive reappraisal. Even though in these and other studies additional differences have been found regarding the way males and females cope with stress, the only consistent finding amongst youth seems to be that girls are more likely than boys to seek social support (Patterson & McCubbin, 1987).

The finding that females tend to seek more social support than males when coping with distress is similar to the notion discussed earlier regarding the differences in anger expression between the genders. As described, due to the inherent discrepancies between males' and females' social goals, they behave differently when angry, with males' emphasizing instrumentality and physical dominance and females' focusing more on interpersonal issues (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). For females, this focus on relationships and feelings of connectedness also seems to influence the way they cope with stress. Thus, when experiencing difficulty, females are more likely to reach out and seek connection and support from others.

**Personal factors: Temperament.** Temperament is another factor that holds particular relevance to an understanding of how youth cope with stress and has been identified as playing a role in moderating the effects of stress during childhood (Lerner & East, 1984). Children tend to differ in degree of sensitivity to their environment, with some showing signs of arousal and distress in a wider array of situations and stimuli than others (Compas, 1987).

Compared to children who are less responsive, those with a higher degree of sensitivity will be more likely to encounter situations that necessitate a coping response. Buss and Plomin's (1984) popular theory of personality, which is based on three broad dimensions that are believed to be present early in life and relatively stable across time are: emotionality (the tendency to become easily distressed), activity, and sociability. Although limited, there is some research to suggest that these dimensions may be related to coping efforts. For example, Werner and Smith (as cited in Ebata & Moos, 1994) found that differences in children's activity level and sociability distinguished resilient youth from those who developed significant problems from the experience of stressful developmental circumstances. As children, those youth described as resilient were able to elicit more positive social responses from their environments.

Temperament also comes into play in terms of describing the way one will react when feeling threatened or aroused. This idea found support in the study mentioned above by Ebata and Moos (1994), where personal, situational, and contextual correlates of coping were used to predict approach and avoidance type responses amongst a group of adolescents. These researchers found that those adolescents who reported greater amounts of distress, tended to use more avoidance type strategies such as: cognitive avoidance (attempts to avoid thinking about a problem), resigned acceptance (attempts to react to a problem by passive acceptance), and emotional discharge (attempts to reduce tension by expressing negative feelings), compared to the adolescents rated as more active, who relied on more approach type strategies such as: positive reappraisal (attempts to construe a problem in a positive way while still accepting the reality of the situation), guidance/support, and problem solving.

**Situational factors: Event specific stressors.** Based on the importance of situational

determinants when examining coping and coping effectiveness, the more recent research in this area has focused on specific stressors as opposed to just stress in general. While validating their newly developed Self-Report Coping Measure, which is based on Roth and Cohen's (1986) approach/avoidance conceptualization and consists of the following five domains: Seeking Social Support, Problem Solving, Distancing, Internalizing, and Externalizing, Causey and Dubow (1992) found support for both gender and cross-situational consistency in coping. Specifically, they found that when coping with either an academic or social stressor (i.e., getting into an argument with a friend), girls tended to use more "problem solving" and "support seeking" coping than boys, whereas boys used more "distancing" and "externalizing" strategies. Externalizing strategies are considered to be a type of avoidance coping and consist of those responses that are turned outward such as, taking it out on others or yelling to let off steam. It was also found that for all participants Seeking Social Support and Problem Solving were more likely to be used for coping with a poor grade and Externalizing strategies were more often applied when coping with peer arguments.

In a meta-analytic review on coping and adjustment in youth, Fields and Prinz (1997) learned that the coping strategies children prefer to use become more stressor-specific as they age. In this review, the authors described the ways in which youth have been found to cope with commonly occurring stressors in their lives. The information in this review has been clearly delineated, however, some of the findings are difficult to decipher due to differing methodology and conceptualizations of coping. Regardless of these limitations, Fields and Prinz found that children cope differently depending upon the situation. For instance, when dealing with medical stressors, preschool and primary school children tended to use more

avoidance compared with approach type strategies (Fields & Prinz, 1997). The older children in this age group, however, tended to employ more cognitive avoidance and less problem-focused avoidance (Fields & Prinz, 1997). In other words, even though the older children were more actively involved in problem solving, they also tried to avoid thinking about their difficulty. Results of similar studies with adolescents found that they tend to use more emotion-focused strategies, including positive self-talk and diverting their attention away from the stressor. While these investigations with adolescents did not use the approach/avoidance framework as did those with the younger children, it can be implied from the findings that adolescents prefer approach-oriented strategies when coping with medical stressors, especially those aimed at managing their emotions as opposed to directly trying to solve the problem (Fields & Prinz, 1997). In terms of coping with academic stressors, children and adolescents tended to use more problem-focused strategies, particularly direct problem solving (Fields & Prinz, 1997).

### **Coping and Adjustment**

Even though the terms *coping* and *resilience* are often used interchangeably, they reflect distinct aspects of successful development and adaptation (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Coping consists of behaviors and thoughts that are implemented when an individual is faced with stress without regard to its efficacy, whereas resilience refers to the results of the coping responses of individuals who have faced stress and coped with it in an effective and adaptive manner (Compas et al., 2001). These concepts demonstrate that while there are many ways to cope with difficulty, they are not all considered equal in terms of successful adjustment.

The literature on coping in childhood and adolescence indicates positive relationships

between the more direct forms of coping (i.e., problem-focused and approach) and desirable developmental outcomes. In general, the evidence suggests that problem-focused or approach coping is negatively related to emotional and behavioral problems, social problems, and adolescent health-risk behaviors (Ayers et al., 1996; Compas et al., 1988; Herman-Stahl, Stemmler, & Petersen, 1995; McCubbin, Needle, & Wilson, 1985). There is also evidence that those children who are less adept at generating problem-focused strategies to deal with difficulty, experience more adjustment problems (Dubow, Tisak, Causey, Hryshko, & Reid, 1991). In addition, the literature demonstrates that more use of emotion-focused coping is related to higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems (Hoffman, Levy-Shiff, Sohlberg, & Zarizki, 1992).

**Situational factors: Impact of cognitive appraisal.** While these have been the general trends in the literature in terms of coping style and adjustment, it is one's cognitive appraisal of the stressful situation that seems to be the influential factor in determining how one copes with and adjusts to problematic circumstances. As mentioned earlier, people will often try to match their coping responses to the perceived demands of the situation. In the adult literature, problem-focused coping has been found to prevail in situations that are appraised as being changeable or under the person's control while emotion-focused coping tends to be used more often when the situation is believed to be out of the person's control or unchangeable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980; Roth & Cohen, 1986).

Forsythe and Compas (1987) found a similar pattern during their investigation of the interactions between college students' cognitive appraisals of, and coping with, stressful life events and their relationship with psychological symptomology. To gather their data, Forsythe and Compas asked 84 college students (mean age of 19) to select the most

distressing major life event they had encountered within the past six months, from a generated list of over 70 major events (such as death of a relative). The participants then completed several self-report questionnaires, measuring: their cognitive appraisal of the negative event, specifically their appraisal of the controllability of the event; how they coped with the stressful event (using Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1985; Ways of Coping Checklist); and their psychological symptomology, which was assessed using the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL; as cited in Forsythe & Compas, 1987). The findings supported the premise that psychological symptoms were related to the degree of fit between appraisals of control and the relative amount of problem- and emotion-focused coping used. Specifically, psychological symptoms were higher when subjects used more emotion-focused coping with events they perceived as controllable and more problem-focused coping with events that were perceived as being out of their control.

This relationship between coping and cognitive appraisals has also been investigated with children. In a study by Compas et al. (1988), 130 children between the ages of 10 and 14, were asked to report the alternative solutions that they generated and the strategies that they used to cope with recent academic and interpersonal events. Participants completed an open-ended instrument, which was developed for use in this study to assess coping, by describing one particularly stressful interpersonal and academic event. All student responses were later classified as being problem-focused or emotion-focused coping. To gather information on emotional and behavioral adjustment, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; as cited in Compas et al., 1988) was administered to the participants as well as to their parents. In this study, subjects perceived the causes of the academic stressor to be more controllable than the causes of the social stressors, and in line with past findings, tended to

generate more problem-focused alternatives for coping with this type of stress. In terms of a fit between appraisals of the situation and coping efforts, Compas et al. (1988) found that behavioral problems were highest when the students mismatched their coping and appraisals of control by either generating few problem-focused alternatives when they believed they had control over the stressful situation or by generating many problem-focused alternatives when they believed they did not have control over the stressor. Thus, beliefs of control over stressful events that occur seem to play a major role in the type of coping mechanism used and the degree of adaptation to the difficult situation.

Overall, the literature on stress and coping among youth suggests that as children mature, they tend to move toward greater differentiation and specificity of coping strategies based on the type of stressor they are facing (Fields & Prinz, 1997). As reported by Fields and Prinz (1997), avoidance coping tends to be used for medical issues, which are typically considered to be out of a person's control, while more active problem-solving efforts are initiated for academic problems, which tend to be viewed as being more controllable. The research also highlights the importance of being able to adapt one's coping strategy to fit the demands of the stressful situation. A strategy that may be adaptive for dealing with one type of stressor may be maladaptive when used in a different context or at a different point in time in response to the same stressor (Compas, 1987). Effective coping efforts then reflect attempts to address specific situational demands and appraisals (i.e., perceptions of control) of these demands. These demands may also vary at different points in the process, and thus the efficacy of one's coping response may differ as demands and appraisals change (Osowiecki & Compas, 1999).

Given the fact that children face a variety of stressors in a number of different

domains, it is not only important to understand how their coping responses differ across situations but also what types of strategies have been found to be adaptive for a specific stressor at a given point in development (Roecker et al., 1996). Since children have reported fear of negative evaluation by their peers and adults, parental conflict or loss, conflict with an adult, and feeling socially excluded as being the most salient stressors in their lives, it may be suitable to gain a better understanding of how children cope with these particular stressors in order to understand why some children adjust better than others to these stressful events.

### **Coping with Bullying**

As discussed earlier, the bulk of the literature describing the nature and extent of bullying has found that it is common among school-aged children, considered to be an extremely stressful experience for those who encounter it, and is associated with negative psychological consequences. The literature focused on the coping strategies used in response to bullying has generally found that they vary by both gender and bully-victim status type. Bijttebier and Vertommen (1998) applied Causey and Dubow's (1992) Self-Report Coping Measure (SRCM) to examine the relationship between bully/victim problems and the coping strategies 8- to 13- year-old Flemish children used when confronted with a peer argument. The participants were grouped along gender lines (168 boys, 161 girls) and by classification as a bully, bully/victim, victim of direct bullying, or victim of social isolation (defined by those children who reported spending recess alone). In this study, male victims (of both types) reported using more Internalizing strategies, such as isolating one's self from the group and worrying, while male bullies and bully/victims used more Externalizing strategies, such as throwing or hitting something or taking their feelings out on another person. Findings for females were less clear, with Internalizing being high in female victims of direct bullying

but not in female victims of social isolation.

Several theorists have extended this research by attempting to identify responses that were associated with reductions in bullying over time. Kochenderfer and Ladd (1997) investigated this concept by gathering data from 199 children in the fall and spring of their Kindergarten year. Both self-report and peer nomination instruments were used to assess personal experience with peer victimization, to determine how the children responded to acts of aggression, and to measure the children's peer group acceptance. Several instruments were also administered to obtain information regarding the student's psychosocial adjustment; specifically a self-report measure of loneliness and teacher-ratings of aggressive and pro-social behaviors to be used as indices of social competence. Kochenderfer and Ladd found that "fighting back" was the most common overall response by boys to peer victimization, and was related to their subsequent victimization. In other words, those boys who were perceived as "fighting back", experienced more prolonged bullying in comparison to the boys who elicited a friend to help them deal with the situation. In this study, while girls were found more likely to "walk away" in response to being a target of bullying, their coping behaviors did not have a significant impact on their future role as a victim.

Salmivalli, Karhunen, and Lagerspetz (1996) were also interested in those responses that provoke or reduce continued victimization, but investigated this relationship among a group of 573 adolescents attending schools in Finland. The three main categories of victim responses that were established on the basis of peer-evaluations were "counteraggression", "helplessness", and "nonchalance". In this study, girls tended to use "nonchalance" and "helplessness" when encountering bullying while boys tended to react with "counteraggression" or "nonchalance". The behaviors that were identified as being related to

provoking or prolonging the victimization were “helplessness” and “conteraggression” for girls and “counteraggression” for boys.

Using a longitudinal design with a group of adolescents, Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, and Chauhan (2004), provided further insight into how continuing victims (those experiencing bullying over a period of at least two years) differed from students who were no longer targets of bullying. Among all victim types (those who had escaped the bullying, new victims, and continuing or persistent victims) the most common overall coping response was “talking to someone about it”, although it was the escaped victims who were found to use this approach most often. Escaped victims, compared to the other victim groups also cited trying to have more or different friends, or be more popular. In both of these cases, the escaped victim’s responses were similar to those behaviors in the Seeking Social Support category in Causey and Dubow’s (1992) Self-Report Coping Measure.

The findings reported by Kochenderfer and Ladd (1997), Salmivalli et al. (1996) and Smith et al. (2004), imply that there are both constructive and counterproductive ways to deal with bullying. By responding to aggressive behavior via aggression, the victim may be inciting the provocation and thus prolonging his or her harassment. However, if the victim is instead able to remain calm and not respond, elicit help from a peer, and seek to extend his or her circle of friends, the chances of changing his or her victimization status seem to be greater.

Olafsen and Viemerö (2000) sought to understand the connections between the roles that 10- to 12-year-old children occupy in bullying (i.e., victim, bully, bully-victim, those not involved) and their coping mechanisms for dealing with stressful encounters at school. To identify coping responses, the Life Events and Coping Inventory (Dise-Lewis, 1988) was

used, which contains five coping factors, two considered to be negative ways of responding to stress (aggression and self-destruction), and the other three (distraction, endurance, and stress-recognition) regarded as positive ways of responding. In general, girls were found to use significantly more “stress-recognition” strategies while boys tended to rely more on “self-destruction” strategies. In line with their main purpose, Olafsen and Viemerö also found differences between bullying involvement and coping mechanisms. Specifically, they discovered that bully-victim boys used more aggressive and self-destructive strategies compared to boys in any of the other roles.

In line with preliminary findings that children’s response to peer provocation may be related to the form of harassment they encounter (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997), Roecker Phelps (2001) examined the strategies that a group of 491 third through sixth graders used when coping with overt versus relational aggression. Data were gathered through the administration of two self-report surveys, the Social Experience Questionnaire (SEQ; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996), which was designed to assess overt and relational victimization by peers and the Self-Report Coping Survey (SRCS; Causey & Dubow, 1992), which was derived from Roth and Cohen’s (1986) approach/avoidance topology. The SRCS was administered two times to reflect the type of stressor situation, (e.g., overt or relational aggression). While findings pointed toward an overall trend in the use of avoidance strategies when dealing with peer aggression, the type of avoidance strategies differed depending upon the form of bullying that was encountered. When faced with relational aggression, more Internalizing and Distancing strategies were used, and more Externalizing strategies were endorsed when coping with overt aggression. To cope with both types of aggression, girls reported greater reliance on Problem-Solving, Seeking Social Support, and Internalizing strategies while boys

overall preferred to use Externalizing strategies.

The findings by Roecker Phelps (2001) highlight those found in previous research, as well as reflect several prevalent themes that have been discussed throughout this paper. First, taking into consideration all of the findings presented, it appears that while students employ a combination of approach and avoidance strategies to deal with peer harassment, the majority are avoidance type measures. This may lead back to the idea that coping is related to one's appraisal of the situation and approach strategies were thus employed by those students who felt a higher sense of control. Initial evidence that approach strategies are beneficial for helping students escape their victimization status has been demonstrated by Kochenderfer and Ladd (1997) and Smith et al. (2004), who both found that eliciting help from others and finding new friends was related to subsequent drops in victimization.

Roecker Phelps (2001) also found support for the idea that coping efforts are adapted to fit the demands of the particular situation, as the strategies that were used differed depending upon the form of bullying experienced. Perhaps children choose strategies that they feel best lend themselves to protection against the particular type of bullying experienced. For instance, Externalizing coping, which is used more often in cases of overt bullying, both matches that type of bullying and allows for protection from the abuse. As an example, if a child is pushed and called a name, and responds by pushing and yelling back, he is both matching his aggressor's behavior and attempting to protect himself. On the other hand, the strategies used to deal with relational aggression (e.g., Internalizing and Distancing), match more closely the subtle behaviors of that type of bullying. As an illustration, if a child is informed that she is no longer welcome to sit with a particular group of students, by going off alone and trying to forget that the event happened, she is protecting

herself from further victimization by matching more closely the behavior of her aggressors.

### **Rationale**

The goal of this study is to explore more thoroughly how coping impacts the adjustment of children who are experiencing conflict with their peers. Past research on stress and coping has speculated that frequent peer harassment may place some children at greater risk for dysfunction than others because of a) individual differences in the appraisal of such stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), b) responding to aggressive peers (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997), or c) coping with the stressful encounters (Fields & Prinz, 1997). It could be hypothesized, however, that even infrequent experiences of peer harassment are associated with maladjustment if the coping mechanisms that children choose to use are inadequate in managing the particular situation (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002).

While it seems likely that coping strategies work to moderate the effects of peer aggression, this premise has only been investigated in one known published study. To explore this idea, Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) gathered self-report data on victimization experiences (Kochenderfer and Ladd's Peer Victimization Scale, as cited in Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002), coping strategies (Self-Report Coping Scale, Causey & Dubow, 1992), and loneliness from a group of 356 ethnically diverse fourth grade students. Peer nominations of social preference and teacher ratings of the children's anxious-depressed behaviors, and social problems were also obtained. Based on Causey and Dubow's (1992) five categorizes of coping, Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner found Problem-Solving to be beneficial for non-bullied students, but it exacerbated difficulties (loneliness, anxious-depressed, social problems, and peer preference) for those students who were bullied.

Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner also reported that coping moderated the relationship between victimization and maladjustment differently for fourth grade boys and girls. For instance, while the use of Seeking Social Support was found to be associated with increased levels of loneliness and low peer preference for boys, asking for help and advice seemed to protect victimized girls against further social problems. As seen in the previously discussed studies on children's responses to peer harassment, girls have overwhelmingly preferred the use of social support when experiencing problems with their peers. This consistent significant difference between the genders suggests that there may be some intuitive understanding among children that Seeking Social Support is a norm-violating strategy for boys. Perhaps boys feel that reliance on others conveys a sense of weakness or lack of confidence in dealing effectively with peers. For girls, however, who are more motivated to maintain their interpersonal ties (see Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992), Seeking Social Support is likely to be considered more socially appropriate.

Problem-Solving and Internalizing strategies were also identified as placing victimized boys at greater risk for adjustment difficulties (e.g., lower peer preference). Though previous research has implied that the use of Distancing may be productive for victimized children (see: Salmivalli et al., 1996), Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) found it to be associated with anxiety for boys. It may be possible that even though Distancing acts as a buffer for more frequent bullying, the act of behaving as if one doesn't care, may be anxiety provoking for boys if they feel this behavior portrays feelings of weakness. Distancing was also found to have a negative impact on victimized girls, by exacerbating their feelings of loneliness and social problems. This finding may again be rooted in the idea that for girls, a fundamental social goal is to maintain interpersonal

relationships. And thus, the use of Distancing strategies may serve to further isolate girls from their peers.

Similar to Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner's (2002) investigation, this study examines the potential moderating relationship of coping on the adjustment of victims of bullying. Instead of looking at how children cope in general with different types of peer victimization, the current study focuses solely on coping with relational aggression. Past literature has found that relationally aggressive behaviors are common among both boys and girls (see, Crick et al., 1999; Crick, 1996; Rys & Bear, 1997), and thus, the effect of coping on the adjustment of its victims was investigated amongst both genders. The children in this study are between the ages of 8- to 11 (third through fifth grade), as these are the developmental periods when relationally aggressive behaviors have been found to be most prevalent (Nansel et al., 2001; Underwood, 2003).

Previous work on coping with stress suggests that children and adolescents tailor their use of specific coping responses to the demands of the particular situation (Fields & Prinz, 1997; Roecker et al., 1996). And, since overt and relational aggression have been found to be distinct constructs, it makes sense that children will cope with these in different ways. In fact, as noted in the study discussed above by Roecker Phelps (2001), students endorsed greater use of internalizing and distancing strategies when coping with relational aggression and greater use of externalizing strategies for coping with overt aggression. While there has been a limited amount of research focused on the ways that children cope with relational aggression, this initial evidence suggests that coping is, at least in part, dependent on the type of bullying experienced.

Given the difficulties associated with being the target of relational aggression, it is

important to understand how children cope with this type of bullying and whether there are certain strategies related to healthier adjustment. In this study, an approach-avoidance conceptualization was used to examine children's coping responses to relational aggression. Factor analyses of children's self-reported coping responses support the approach-avoidance framework (Causey & Dubow, 1992). Approach strategies include both active problem solving (i.e., "change something so things will work out") and seeking social support (e.g., "ask a friend for advice") while avoidance coping entails distancing (e.g., "tell myself it doesn't matter"), internalizing (e.g., "worry too much about it"), and externalizing (e.g., "get mad and throw or hit something").

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the nature of the relationship between relational victimization, coping, and several adjustment indices. It was hypothesized that peer victimization places children at risk due to the coping strategies that are adopted by the children involved. Victims of relational aggression were anticipated to exhibit poorer adjustment in terms of school and peers due to their tendency to rely more on maladaptive ways of coping (Avoidance strategies) and less often on adaptive ways of coping (Approach strategies).

### **Hypotheses**

H1a: Students, who perceive themselves as being more frequent "victims" of relational aggression, will exhibit poorer school and peer adjustment.

H1b: Students, who perceive themselves as being more frequent "victims" of overt aggression, will exhibit poorer school and peer adjustment.

These hypotheses are addressed by correlating the Children's Social Experience Questionnaire with the Behavior Rating Profile, Student Rating Scales.

H2a: Students who perceive themselves as being more frequent “victims” of relational aggression will report greater reliance on “avoidance” ways of coping (i.e., distancing, internalizing and externalizing) than students who perceive themselves as experiencing less frequent victimization.

H2b: Students who perceive themselves as being more frequent “victims” of relational aggression will report less reliance on “approach” ways of coping (i.e., problem solving and social support seeking) than students who perceive themselves as experiencing less frequent victimization.

H2c: Students who perceive themselves as being more frequent “victims” of overt aggression will report greater reliance on “avoidance” ways of coping than students who perceive themselves as experiencing less frequent victimization.

H2d: Students who perceive themselves as being more frequent “victims” of overt aggression will report less reliance on “approach” ways of coping than students who perceive themselves as experiencing less frequent victimization.

These second sets of hypotheses were investigated by correlating responses on the Children’s Social Experience Questionnaire with those from the Self-Report Coping Survey.

H3a: Greater reliance on “avoidance” coping will be associated with poorer school and peer adjustment.

H3b: Less reliance on “approach” coping will be associated with poorer school and peer adjustment.

These third sets of hypotheses were investigated by correlating responses on the Self-Report Coping Survey with those from the Behavior Rating Profile, Student Rating Scales.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Participants and Setting

The participants in this study consisted of 88 third ( $n = 20$ ; 23%), fourth ( $n = 24$ ; 27%) and fifth ( $n = 44$ ; 50%) grade students, who were drawn from two private schools in the greater metropolitan New York City area. The students in this study could be classified as high functioning in terms of their academic ability and resided in high socio-economic status homes. All of the students who were given parental permission (100%) agreed to participate. The students were distributed relatively evenly between boys ( $n = 42$ ; 48%) and girls ( $n = 46$ ; 52%) and ranged in age between 8 and 11 years ( $M = 9.34$ ;  $SD = .90$ ). These particular grades were chosen as relational aggression has been found to be most prominent during middle childhood and its literature base has focused largely on this age range (Nansel et al., 2001; Underwood, 2003). Demographic information collected from the students at the time of survey administration revealed that the majority of the sample had at least one sibling ( $n = 73$ ; 83%) and considered themselves to be primarily White/Caucasian ( $n = 47$ ; 53%). (See Table 1 for complete ethnic makeup of the sample).

Most of the participants ( $n = 66$ ) were drawn from a K-8<sup>th</sup> grade independent “lab school” (school #1), which serves a diverse ethnic, cultural, and economic student body. Out of the 487 total students, 18% are African American, 8% are Asian/Pacific Islander, 40% are Caucasian, 12% are Latino, 2% are Middle Eastern, and 20% consider themselves to be Multi-ethnic. The average class size consists of 14 students, and there are about 56 students per grade. Approximately, half of the student body are children of a nearby university’s faculty and professional staff, with the balance coming from the larger community by lottery.

The remaining participants ( $n = 22$ ) were fifth grade students attending an independent college preparatory school (school #2), which is comprised of Preschool through grade 12. The school consists of roughly 1,000 students, with approximately 70 students per grade. The fifth graders are part of the middle school, which entails grades five through eight, and has an average class size of 18 students. The ethnic makeup of the middle school is considered to be 75% Caucasian, 10% multi-racial, 5% African American, 5% Latino and 5% Asian.

A total of 18 teachers ( $n = 12$  in school #1;  $n = 6$  in school #2) also contributed to this study by completing a questionnaire for each of their students who participated. School #1 has four classrooms along with four teachers per grade. Thus, four teachers in grade three; four teachers in grade four; and four teachers in grade five completed the questionnaires in school #1. The organization of the fifth grade is different in school #2. Here, the students are considered to be part of the middle school and thus do not spend the majority of the day with one lead teacher as they do in school #1. The teachers chosen to participate in school #2 played the role as both the student's advisor as well as one of their main subject teachers. For both schools, each teacher evaluated between two and nine students.

Table 1

*Ethnic Composition of Total (N = 88) Study Participants*

	Frequency	Percent
White/Caucasian	47	53
African-American	4	4.5
Caribbean	1	1.1
Middle Eastern	3	3.4
Asian	6	6.8
Latino	9	10
Multi-Ethnic	18	21
Total N	88	100

**Measures**

A short demographic questionnaire, three self-report measures as well as a teacher questionnaire were used to gather all of the data in this study (see Appendix A through E and Table 2 for summary of core measures).

**Demographic Information.** Students were asked to respond to five questions that asked about their age, gender, grade level, sibling status, and ethnicity. (Appendix A).

**Children's Social Experience Questionnaire.** The Social Experience Questionnaire (SEQ; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996) (Appendix B), which was titled: Things That Happen To Me on the student handout, is a 15-item self-report measure developed specifically to assess the

frequency that children experience overt and relational victimization by their peers. The questionnaire has three factor analytically derived subscales: overt victimization, relational victimization, and recipient of prosocial behavior, and each subscale consists of five questions. Participants answered a total of ten questions, the five items that make up the relational victimization subscale and the five items that make up the overt aggression subscale. Examples of the questions on the relational aggression subscale are: “How often does a kid try to keep others from liking you by saying mean things about you?” and “How often do other kids tell you they won’t like you unless you do what they say?” Examples of the questions on the overt aggression subscale are: “How often do you get hit by another kid at school?” and “How often does a kid who is mad at you try to get back at you by not letting you be in their group?”. Each item is rated on a 5- point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never), 2 (a little), 3 (sometimes), 4 (most of the time), to 5 (all of the time). Children were told that “other kids” should refer to peers at school. The SEQ was developed using children in Grades 3 through 6 and is therefore appropriate for use with elementary school-aged children. Research has found that the internal reliability for each subscale of the SEQ is good, with coefficient alphas ranging from .77 to .80 (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996).

The student’s score was derived by taking a count of the total number of “victimization” types (either of the “relational” or “overt” variety), in which the students responded at least “sometimes” (greater than or equal to three). As seen in Table 3, the victimization variables ranged from no victimization types to a maximum of four such types of the overt type and five such types of the relational type. As indicated by the mean values of these two variables, most students did not report victimization types of either variety.

**Self-Report Coping Survey.** The original Self-Report Coping Survey (SRCS;

Causey & Dubow, 1992) (Appendix C) is a 34-item measure that assesses the degree to which children utilize different coping strategies. The questionnaire has five factor analytically derived subscales assessing coping strategies in relation to a specific stressor situation provided by the principal investigator. Each item presents a specific coping response with a lead phrase describing a particular stressor situation. For the purposes of this investigation, the lead phrase described one of the core relationally aggressive acts: “When other kids leave me out on purpose, I...” All responses are based on the approach-avoidance conceptualization of coping (Roth & Cohen, 1986). For this study, the principal investigator eliminated a total of three items (two Approach and one Avoidance) from the original scale on the basis of repetition or low factor loadings as found by Causey and Dubow (1992). For instance, “ask a friend for advice” was eliminated as the item, “get help from a friend” is similar. The other two items “decide on one way to deal with the problem and I do it” and “ignore it when people say something about it” were eliminated due to low factor loadings (.41 and .25 respectively). Approach responses include problem solving (7 items; e.g., “change something so things will work out”) and support seeking (7 items; e.g., “get help from a family member”); avoidance responses include distancing (6 items; e.g., “tell myself it doesn’t matter”), internalizing (7 items; e.g., “cry about it”), and externalizing (4 items; e.g., “get mad and throw or hit something”). Each item is rated along a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never), 2 (hardly ever), 3 (sometimes), 4 (most of the time) to 5 (always).

The SRCS was developed using children in Grades 4 through 6 and is thus appropriate for use with elementary school-aged children. The subscales of the SRCS have been found to have adequate internal reliability. In response to an academic stressor, coefficient alphas were found to range from .69 to .82; they ranged from .68 to .84 across

subscales in response to a peer stressor (Causey & Dubow, 1992).

Student's scores were derived in a similar manner as in the victimization measure; a count of the total number of the instances of either type of coping (Approach and Avoidance) to which the students responded at least "sometimes" (greater than or equal to three) operationally defines the level, or degree that each type of coping is used. As shown in Table 3, both types of coping range from a minimum of no endorsements of a particular type of coping to a maximum of fourteen such endorsements. On average, nearly six (out of 17) types of Avoidant coping were endorsed ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 3.30$ ) and more than nine (out of 14) types of Approach coping were endorsed ( $M = 9.38$ ,  $SD = 3.86$ ).

**Behavior Rating Profile, Second Edition, Student Rating Scales.** The Behavior Rating Profile, Second Edition (BRP-2; Brown & Hammill, 1990) (Appendix D), which was titled Things About Me on the student handout, is a battery of six instruments designed to evaluate students' between the ages of 6 to 18, on their adjustment at home, in school, and in interpersonal relationships. Five of the instruments are rating scales; the Student Rating Scales: Home, School, and Peer; the Teacher Rating Scale; and the Parent Rating Scale. The sixth instrument is a Sociogram or Peer Nomination Scale. For the purposes of this study, only part of this battery was used, the Student Rating Scales, School, and Peer, to gather information about students' school and interpersonal adjustment.

The Student Rating Scales, School, and Peer are filled out by the students, and consist of 20 items each that are answered as either "True" or "False". The items on the Student Rating Scale: School (SRS:S) contain items that describe behaviors usually observed at school such as: "My teachers give me work that I cannot do" and the items on the Student Rating Scales: Peer (SRS:P) include items that describe social skills or interpersonal

relationships, such as “Other kids don’t seem to like me very much.” The SRS has been found to have adequate internal consistency, with coefficient alphas ranging from .77 to .98.

Higher scores on each measure of adjustment indicate better psychological adjustment. As seen in Table 3, on average, these students report themselves to be quite well adjusted in both of the areas of adjustment measured (School:  $M = 17.60$ ,  $SD = 2.91$ ; Peer:  $M = 17.45$ ,  $SD = 3.30$ ).

**Teacher Questionnaire.** The Teacher Questionnaire was created for the purposes of this study to measure the teacher’s perception of the student’s school and peer adjustment (Appendix E). The questionnaire consisted of two questions; one that asked the teachers to rate their perception of the student’s adjustment to school and one that asked the teachers to rate their perception of the student’s adjustment to his/her peers. For each question, a brief definition of adjustment (school or peer) was provided as a guide for assessing the student in this area. Information to create these definitions was gathered from the Teacher Rating Scale of the BRP-2. Teacher’s rated the student’s level of adjustment along a five point Likert scale, with one being least adjusted to five being the most adjusted. This measure was used to cross-validate the students’ report of their own level of school and peer adjustment.

Table 2

*Description of Measurement Instruments Completed by Students*

	Children's Social Experience Questionnaire (SEQ)	Self-Report Coping Survey (SRCS)	Behavior Rating Profile, Student Rating Scales (BRP, SRS)
Name Referenced In Text	Things That Happen To Me	Self-Report Coping Measure	Things About Me
Variable Measured	Overt & Relational Victimization	Approach & Avoidance Coping	School & Peer Adjustment
Question Format	Likert Scale	Likert Scale	True/False
# of Items	10	34	40

Table 3

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Range of Scores in Sample for Victimization, Coping, and Adjustment Measures*

	Victimization		Coping		Adjustment	
	SEQ		SRCS		BRP, SRS	
	<i>Overt</i>	<i>Relational</i>	<i>Avoidant</i>	<i>Approach</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Peer</i>
Mean	.56	.73	5.93	9.38	17.60	17.45
SD	.929	1.04	3.30	3.86	2.91	3.30
Range	0 - 4	0 - 5	0 - 14	0 - 14	8 - 20	4 - 20

*Note.* Each measure had a different possible range of scores. Possible responses on the victimization measure ranged from 0 to 5, on the coping measure 0 to 17, and 4 to 20 on the adjustment measure.

### **Procedure**

Institutional review board approval was obtained from the City University of New York Graduate School and University Center prior to any contact between the principal investigator and the participants. Participating schools were selected based on demographics, geography and willingness to become involved. Schools were initially contacted via email to propose conducting the study and a written summary of the proposed study was sent along with the email (see Appendix F). A meeting with the school's principal was set up for those schools that expressed interest and more specific details of carrying out the study were discussed at that time (i.e., specifics about how the study would be carried out). The sessions were scheduled to best accommodate the students' schedule and minimize interruptions in learning, such as during recess or a free period.

All parents of third through fifth grade students attending school #1 and fifth grade students attending school #2 received two pieces of correspondence about the study: a letter from an official at the participating school introducing the study (the director of the research committee in school #1, and the middle school principal in school #2) as well as a parental consent form (see Appendix G through I). The parents in school #1 received this information in the mail while the parents in school #2 received this information electronically. The channel of communication was dependent upon the individual preferences of each school, and followed in line with their typical means of communicating with parents. Interested parents were instructed to sign the consent form and return it to either the principal investigator in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope (school #1) or to an official at the school (school #2). A total of 66 out of 177 third through fifth grade students in school #1 and 22 out of 70 fifth grade students in school #2 were given permission to participate.

Surveys were administered in a small group setting (between 2 to 22 students at a time) by the principal investigator in a classroom that had been reserved for this purpose. To protect student privacy, students were asked to spread out in the classroom, or to make sure there was adequate space surrounding their workspace. Each participant was handed a packet that contained a student assent form (see Appendix J), the five demographic questions as well as the three separate self-report surveys: Children's Social Experience Questionnaire; The Self-Report Coping Survey; and the Behavior Rating Profile, Student Rating Scales: School and Peer. To maintain confidentiality, each student was assigned an identification number and their names appeared only on the student assent form. Prior to administering the surveys, the principal investigator described the study to the students and requested that they sign the assent form if willing to participate. Students were informed that they had the opportunity to

decline participation at anytime. Once the assent forms were signed, they were collected as a means of keeping the participants' names separate from their completed surveys. Survey instructions as well as individual items were read aloud, as the students followed along answering each question. Students were requested to make sure they answered every question and to be as honest as possible, as this would contribute to the validity of the results. The principal investigator briefly reviewed the completed surveys before letting the participants leave the room to confirm all items had been filled out. Administration took approximately 25 minutes.

After the students completed the surveys, the teachers/advisors were contacted separately via email by the principal investigator to schedule a time to fill out the questionnaire (see Appendix K for Teacher Consent Form). The length of administration time was dependent upon the number of students that the teachers had to report on; however, it took approximately 30 seconds per student. To maintain confidentiality, only the student's identification number appeared on the teacher questionnaire. The teachers were verbally told the name of the student they were reporting on as they filled out the questionnaire.

Students in school #1 received a small gift for their participation (they got to choose between two small games). School #2 specifically requested that the students not be rewarded for their participation. Teachers in both schools were given a \$5.00 gift certificate to Starbucks for their participation.

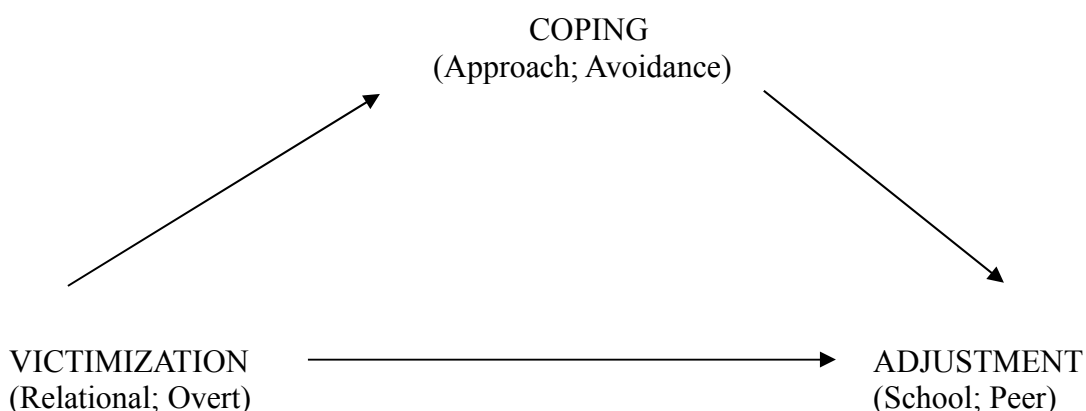
### **Data Analysis**

The current study used a mediational model to examine the effects of relational and overt victimization on school and peer adjustment via approach and avoidance coping (See Figure 1). In this model, overt and relational victimization were the independent variables,

coping type (either approach or avoidance) were the intervening or process variables and adjustment, both school and peer, were the outcome variables. Path analysis, a statistical procedure used to examine the strength of the direct and indirect relationships among variables (Lleras, 2005), was the method employed to empirically evaluate this model.

As outlined above and displayed in Figure 1, victimization status was hypothesized to have both direct and indirect effects on school and peer adjustment. Direct effects refer to the “unmediated” influence of relational and overt victimization on both school and peer adjustment. Indirect effects refer to that portion of the effects, which are “transmitted” indirectly via the intervening or process variables (i.e., approach and avoidant coping). These coping variables serve as “conduits” for the indirect effects of the victimization measures as well as being hypothesized to have direct effects of their own as stated in the third set of hypotheses (H3a and H3b).

Figure 1  
*Mediation Model*



## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

This chapter reviews the data analyses that were performed and the results acquired from the analyses. It first discusses the reliability analysis that was conducted for each of the three main measures. Results from the validity analysis are reported next and then a discussion of the main analysis that was used to test the hypotheses and mediational model is presented.

#### **Reliability Analysis**

For each of the three measures (Children's Social Experience Questionnaire SEQ; The Self-Report Coping Survey SRCS; and the Behavior Rating Profile, Student Rating Scales: School and Peer BRP:SRS) that assessed the study's six variables (overt victimization, relational victimization, avoidant coping, approach coping, school adjustment and peer adjustment), internal consistency reliability analyses were conducted. With regard to the victimization measure (SEQ), the Cronbach alpha coefficients for overt victimization and relational victimization are ( $\alpha = .69$  and  $.68$ , respectively). Estimates at the lower bound of "acceptable" reliability (i.e.,  $\alpha = .70$ ), may be explained by the fact that there are only five items in each scale. Modest amounts of victimization among the student sample could also explain the reason for the lower SEQ estimates. Regarding the SRCS, the reliability coefficients for the two coping variables, avoidant and approach coping are ( $\alpha = .79$  and  $.90$ , respectively). Finally, the reliability coefficients for the two adjustment variables (school and peer), which were assessed by the BRP:SRS are ( $\alpha = .81$  and  $.85$ , respectively).

#### **Validity Analysis**

For the two outcome measures under investigation, peer and school adjustment, the

student reports were cross-validated against the teachers report of the student's adjustment in these areas. In terms of school adjustment, there is a positive, moderate and statistically significant correlation between the student and teacher reports ( $r = .31, p < .01$ ). No significant relationship was found between the two reports of peer adjustment ( $r = .10, p < .37$ ), teacher and student.

### **Data Analysis**

Using SPSS 15, path analysis was employed to empirically evaluate the nature of the relationship between victimization, coping and adjustment with respect to school and peers. The simple bi-variate correlations among these measures are presented in Table 4. The path model (see Figure 2) was estimated using multiple regression to estimate the standardized path coefficients that link each of the "causal" variables in the model to the other variables they are assumed to affect. Path coefficients ( $\beta$  Beta weights) were calculated from the correlations between the main measures (victimization, coping and adjustment). A series of four ordinary least squares regression models were created that correspond to each of the endogenous variables in the model. The first of these equations predicted avoidance coping from each of the two victimization measures, overt and relational. The second equation predicted approach coping from these same victimization measures. The third and fourth equations predicted each of the two adjustment measures, school and peer, from the two "exogenous" predictors (i.e., overt and relational victimization), as well as from the two mediators, avoidance coping and approach coping.

It was initially proposed to examine how children cope in regards to relational aggression. However, the two victim variables (overt and relational) were found to be positively related to each other ( $r = .38, p < .001$ ). Further, the direction and magnitude of the

correlations between overt victimization and adjustment were similar to those found between relational victimization and adjustment (see discussion below). Given these findings, overt victimization was included in the path model, which is the specific model under investigation (see Figure 2). The magnitude, direction and statistical significance of the direct and indirect effects of the model's variables are summarized in Table 5.

To address the first set of hypotheses (H1a and H1b), which collectively state that victims of aggression (both relational and overt) will exhibit poorer school and peer adjustment, the Children's Social Experience Questionnaire was correlated with the Behavior Rating Profile, Student Rating Scales. The second set of hypotheses (H2b through H2d), examined the relationship between victims of peer aggression and the coping mechanism (approach or avoidance) used to deal with the type of aggression. These hypotheses predicted that victims of relational and overt aggression would rely on more avoidance (and less approach) ways of coping, and were examined by correlating the students' responses on the Children's Social Experience Questionnaire with those from the Self-Report Coping Survey. Taken together, the final set of hypotheses (H3a and H3b) predicted that greater reliance on avoidance (and less reliance on approach) coping would be associated with poorer school and peer adjustment. These relationships were evaluated by correlating the student's responses on the Self-Report Coping Survey with those from the Behavior Rating Profile, Student Rating Scales.

### **Relationship between Victimization and Adjustment (H1a and H1b)**

There is partial support for the first set of hypotheses (H1a and H1b) as seen by the findings displayed in Table 4. H1a, was examined by correlating the relational victimization scale on the SEQ with the school and peer form of the BRP, SRS. This analysis found that

relational victimization was significantly related to peer adjustment ( $\beta_{\text{relational}} = -.29, p > .05$ ) but not to school adjustment ( $\beta_{\text{relational}} = -.09, p < \text{or} = .10$ ). In other words, those students who experienced more frequent relational aggression also perceived themselves as being more poorly adjusted in terms of their peers. Higher rates of relational victimization, however, were not found related to impaired adjustment in school.

H1b was examined by correlating the overt victimization scale on the SEQ with the school and peer form of the BRP, SRS. Similar to the findings of H1a, overt victimization was also found significantly related to peer adjustment ( $\beta_{\text{overt}} = -.25, p < .10$ ). Some statistical support was additionally found for the hypothesis that more frequent victims of overt aggression exhibited poorer rates of school adjustment. Both of these findings, however, can only be considered suggestive since they fall at the more liberal statistical significance level of  $p < \text{or} = .10$ .

### **Relationship between Victimization and Coping Type (H2a through H2d)**

The second set of hypotheses, which examined the relationship between victimization status and coping type was analyzed by correlating the SEQ with the SRCS. Significance was not found to support any of these relationships (avoidance coping:  $\beta_{\text{relational}} = .10, \beta_{\text{overt}} = .09$  both  $p > .05$ ; approach coping:  $\beta_{\text{relational}} = .07, \beta_{\text{overt}} = -.06$  both  $p > .05$ ). Thus, a student's victimization status does not seem to impact the type of coping strategy that is chosen to deal with the bullying.

### **Relationship between Coping Type and Adjustment (H3a and H3b)**

The third hypothesis (H3a) predicted the relationship between avoidance coping and adjustment (school and peer), and was tested by correlating the SRCS with the BRP, SRS. As anticipated, evidence was found to suggest a moderately strong, negative relationship

between a student's reliance on avoidant coping and school adjustment ( $\beta_{\text{avoidant}} = -.33, p < .05$ ). The relationship between avoidance coping and peer adjustment was also found to be significant ( $\beta_{\text{avoidant}} = -.27, p < .05$ ). Accordingly, these findings indicate that greater reliance on avoidance coping is related to lower rates of both school and peer adjustment.

H3b, which predicts the relationship between approach coping and adjustment (school and peer), was similarly examined by correlating the SRCS with the BRP, SRS. Results suggest that approach coping also has a direct influence on adjustment. Specifically, evidence was found for a moderately strong, positive relationship between reliance on approach coping and school adjustment ( $\beta_{\text{approach}} = .23, p < .05$ ) and approach coping and peer adjustment ( $\beta_{\text{approach}} = .18, p < .05$ ). Greater reliance on approach coping then, appears to be related to higher rates of school and peer adjustment.

#### **Indirect Effects/ Mediated Effects**

The results indicate that none of the hypothesized mediated effects are statistically significant (see Table 5). Substantively, these findings suggest that the relationships between relational victimization and school/peer adjustment are not mediated by avoidance or approach coping. Coping type does, however, have a direct impact on both of the adjustment variables.

Table 4

*Intercorrelations Among Measures of Student's Victimization, Coping and Adjustment*


---

Variable	SEQ: O	SEQ:R	SRCS:Av	SRCS:Ap	BRP:S	BRP:P
SEQ: Overt	--					
SEQ: Relational	.41***	--				
SRCS: Avoidant	.14	.15	--			
SRCS: Approach	-.04	.04	.25*	--		
BRP: School	-.30**	-.20	-.32**	.15	--	
BRP: Peer	-.43***	-.48***	-.30**	.10	.54***	--

---

Note. \* p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

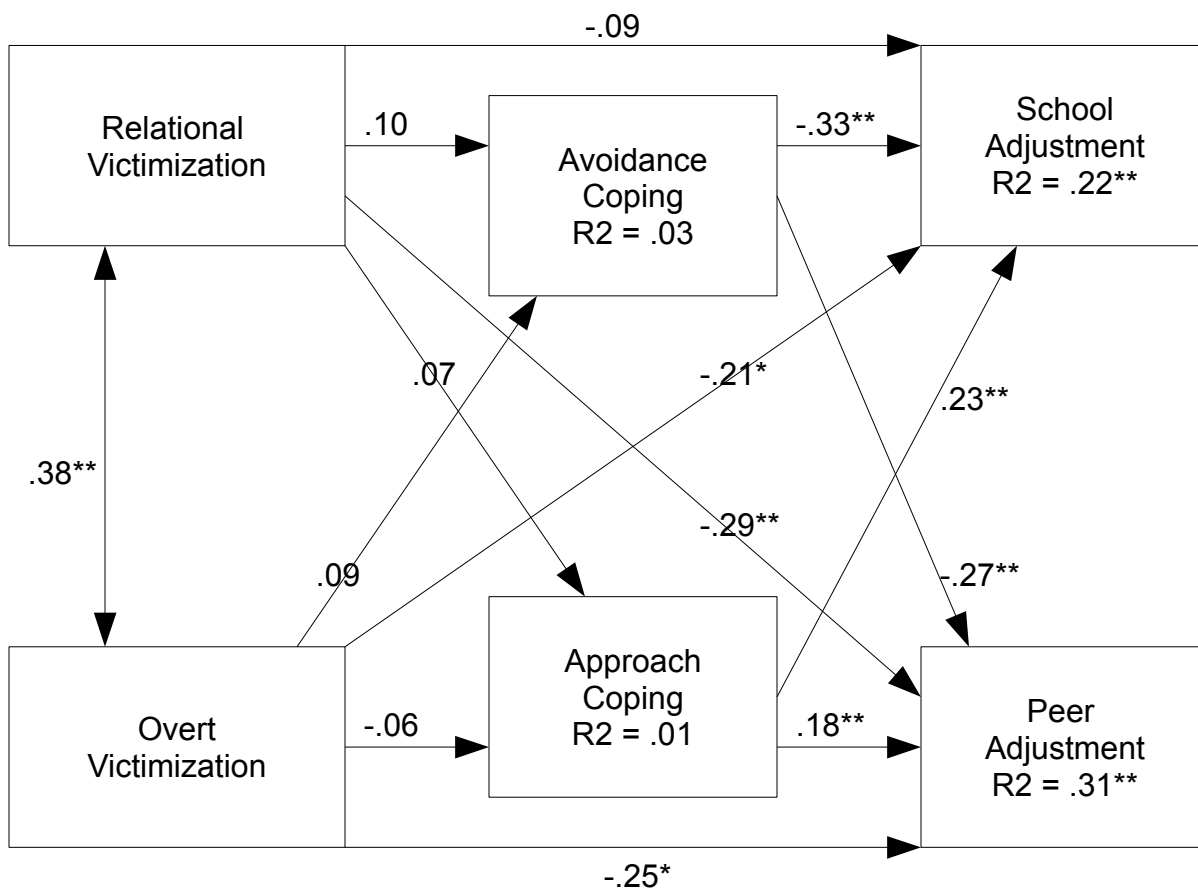
Table 5

*Path Analysis Coefficient Estimates for Direct and Indirect Effects of Victimization and Coping on Adjustment*

	Dependent Variable	Standard Error	Indirect Effects	
			Via Avoidant Coping	Via Approach Coping
Predictor(s):				
Overt Victimization	Avoidance Coping	.09	--	--
Relational Victimization	Avoidance Coping	.10	--	--
Overt Victimization	Approach Coping	-.06	--	--
Relational Victimization	Approach Coping	.07	--	--
Overt Victimization	School Adjustment	-.21*	-.03	-.01
Relational Victimization	School Adjustment	-.09	-.03	.02
Avoidance Coping	School Adjustment	-.33**	--	--
Approach Coping	School Adjustment	.23**	--	--
Overt Victimization	Peer Adjustment	-.25*	-.02	-.01
Relational Victimization	Peer Adjustment	-.29**	-.03	.01
Avoidance Coping	Peer Adjustment	-.27**	--	--
Approach Coping	Peer Adjustment	.18**	--	--

Note. \*  $p \leq .10$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .05$

Figure 2: Path Analysis Diagram: Effects of Victimization and Coping on Adjustment



\*  $p \leq .10$

\*\*  $p \leq .05$

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The present study investigated the role that coping has on the adjustment of children victimized by their peers. In line with past research, students who experience bullying are at greater risk for maladjustment, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, school avoidance, and peer rejection (Crick, Casas, et al., 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Prinstein et al., 2001). While there are a number of factors that likely contribute to these negative outcomes, growing evidence suggests that children's coping mechanisms play an important role in their ability to overcome stressful situations (Compas et al., 2001). The way children respond when bullied has also been found to influence their likelihood of being victimized in the future (Smith et al., 2004; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Salmivalli et al., 1996). This line of research, however, has not differentiated between the type of bullying that the victims experience. To account for this gap in prior research, the current study set out to examine how children cope with relational aggression. In support of previous findings, it was hypothesized that relationally victimized children would be at greater risk for maladjustment in light of the coping strategies they used to deal with the aggression. Even though this study sought to highlight the coping mechanisms of relationally victimized children, results found that the two victimization types (i.e., overt and relational) were moderately related. Overt and relational victimization were also found to follow a similar pattern in the way they were related to school and peer adjustment. These findings suggest that overt and relational victimization are related, and thus, even though overt bullying behaviors were not directly examined in terms of coping, overt victimization was included in the path model (see Figure 2).

Results from this study confirmed some of the hypotheses, but not others. Partial support was found for the first set of hypotheses (H1a and H1b), which predicted that more frequent victims of bullying would exhibit poorer school and peer adjustment. Specifically, it was found that relational victimization was related to lower rates of peer, but not school adjustment. In terms of overt victimization, there was a trend suggesting that it was also related to lower rates of adjustment, both peer and school.

Even though it was anticipated that victims would experience impaired functioning in school and with their peers, it was not surprising that only peer adjustment was negatively impacted. This finding supports prior research on victimization and adjustment, which shows that victims are primarily affected in the areas of internalizing and peer problems, such as loneliness, depression, social anxiety, lower self-esteem, peer rejection, and poorer peer relationships (Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Mynard et al., 2000). While it could be implied that children who experience distress in the above areas would also be impaired academically, (e.g., if feeling anxious and rejected by one's peers, one would likely find it more difficult to concentrate in school), there are a variety of reasons why this relationship may not have been supported in this study. One plausible explanation may be that the current sample was relatively "healthy" (in that they tended to experience very low rates of victimization). Perhaps, if the sample had been more diverse in terms of their social interactions and experiences with their peers, the trend toward lower rates of school adjustment would have become more pronounced. It is also possible that the degree to which peer adjustment was impacted for victims was not severe enough to impinge upon other areas of the student's life. In other words, if the negative impact of being victimized were large enough in one particular area (i.e., peer adjustment), it would be more

likely to disturb other areas in the child's life (i.e., school adjustment).

No support was found for the second set of hypotheses (H2a through H2d), which examined the relationships between victimization and coping style. It was expected that the more victimized children would rely on avoidance ways of coping and the less victimized children would favor approach coping strategies. These hypotheses follow results of previous research, which have identified clear differences between the ways victims and nonvictims tend to cope with being bullied (Smith et al., 2004; Roecker Phelps, 2001; Olafsen & Viemerö, 2000). Past research has also linked approach strategies to reductions in peer victimization and avoidance behaviors such as "fighting back" have been shown to increase a student's risk for peer victimization (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997). The lack of a significant relationship between victimization and coping style in the current study may also have been due to the relatively small amount of victimization that was reported by the current sample.

Full support was found for the third set of hypotheses, which explored the relationships between coping style and adjustment. Specifically, approach coping was found to be significantly related to higher rates of school and peer adjustment, while avoidant coping was found to be significantly related to lower rates of both school and peer adjustment. These results suggest that students who use more approach strategies to deal with bullying behavior are better adjusted in school and with their peers than are those students who tend to rely on avoidance strategies. These findings are consistent with past literature, which has suggested that using direct, problem-focused techniques to deal with stress is more adaptive than letting one's emotional responses dictate behavior (Carver et al., 1989). This relationship also follows common sense, as it seems more likely that individuals who are able to employ strategies directed at alleviating their stress would be better adjusted than those

who tend to cope with difficulty by dealing with their own feelings instead of the situation. Likewise, approach coping has been found to be negatively related to a number of maladjustment indices such as emotional and behavioral problems, social problems and adolescent health-risk behaviors (Ayers et al., 1996; Compas et al., 1988; Herman-Stahl et al., 1995; McCubbin et al., 1985).

These findings could be understood, both in terms of a person's cognitive appraisal, or perceived controllability over the stressful situation, as well as his or her ability to adapt a coping strategy to fit the demands of the situation. For instance, students have been found to employ higher levels of approach coping to deal with academic and social difficulties when they felt they had more control in these areas (Causey & Dubow, 1993). Youth have also reported using more active, problem-solving techniques when involved in conflict with their friends as opposed to with their parents (as per Laursen, cited in Roecker et al., 1996). This line of research suggests that adjustment may not be as dependent upon the type of coping that is used, but instead, on the way the situation has been perceived. Adjusting to stressful situations may also have more to do with a person's ability to match his or her coping responses to fit the demands of the particular situation (see Compas et al., 1988). For instance, using approach strategies (typically used when feeling in control of the situation) to deal with parental divorce has been found to be maladaptive (Sandler, Tein & West, 1994). Since these strategies are typically used when feeling a sense of control over the stressful situation, and children usually do not have control over their parents marital status, the use of such strategies would imply that the child lacks some basic understanding of the social complexities of the situation or has an unrealistic impression of his or her ability to make a real impact in the situation. In this study, perhaps those students who reported lower rates of

adjustment mismatched their coping strategy with their cognitive appraisal of the situation. In other words, the students may have employed approach (i.e., problem-focused) alternatives when feeling a lack of control or used avoidance (i.e., emotion-focused) alternatives when feeling they could do something to change the outcome.

### **Educational Implications**

Along with increasing public and media awareness of the harmful effects of conflict and violence in schools, there is an intrinsic understanding of the need for positive and safe school environments. According to Baker (1998), students consider their physical and psychological safety to precede academic engagement and adjustment. In order then, for students to be fully available for learning, they need to feel safe in school. According to current findings, as well as those in previous research, peer victimization has been connected to a number of poor adjustment indices (e.g., academic and peer maladjustment, peer rejection, lack of pro-social skills, and internalizing and externalizing problems) (Crick, Casas, et al., 1999; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; 1996). Past literature also suggests that there are some ways of coping with bullying that can either lessen or exacerbate the abuse (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Salmivalli et al., 1996). Approach strategies, which have typically been found associated with better outcomes, are considered to be more direct ways to deal with stress and include attempts to solve the problem through self-reliance or by seeking out help or support from others. Avoidance strategies, on the other hand, are regarded as attempts at alleviating one's own feelings of stress that were caused by the problem such as avoidance, or taking out one's negative feelings on one's self or others. These types of coping strategies have not generally been found helpful to victims.

The goal of the current study was to examine specific ways of coping with peer

aggression that may either help or hinder a child's school and peer adjustment. While differences in the way students coped with bullying were not identified, the findings highlighted the importance of a bully-free school environment. Research in this area has consistently linked bullying to a number of negative outcomes. The present study contributed to this research by measuring adjustment specifically as it applies to the school setting. This notion that children need to feel safe in order to succeed socially and academically seems clear. In order to help children feel safe, schools need to support and nurture differences while sending the message that bullying will not be tolerated. While it is unrealistic to expect all students to be friends with one another, it is not unrealistic to expect students to treat their classmates with respect. There are a number of school-wide bully prevention programs available, however, they typically do not include relationally aggressive behaviors in their definition of bullying. As demonstrated by research, relationally aggressive behaviors can be just as hurtful as other types of bullying. This is not to say that schools should avoid these bully prevention programs, but instead, they should make an effort to incorporate relationally aggressive behaviors into the program. Many school personnel are not aware that relationally aggressive behaviors are considered bullying, and thus, may be hesitant to intervene when they come across it happening in their school.

Findings from this study also stress the importance of differentiating between constructive and maladaptive coping mechanisms when dealing with peer difficulties. In support of previous research, this study also found "approach" coping techniques to be related to better outcomes. As educators, it is important to have knowledge of the types of strategies that have been found related to better adjustment so they can teach them to students. Similar to offering support groups, such as social skills, anger or stress

management, it would be worthwhile to teach academically or socially at-risk children constructive ways of managing difficulty.

### **Limitations of Study**

One limitation of this study is that the bulk of data was generated by the children's self-report. Self-reports have been the preferred method in investigating a number of personal experiences such as internalizing symptoms (i.e., depression, anxiety, self-esteem) as well as such variables like coping skills (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Prinstein et al., 2001; Roecker Phelps, 2001). One of the main advantages of using self-reports is that they allow for the observation of experiences that are most accurately observed by the person experiencing the situation (Merrell, Buchanan, & Tran, 2006). Self-reports have also commonly been used to assess peer victimization, since the victims experience the abusive interactions more directly than any other informant, and are thus believed to provide the most valid report (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). This may be additionally true in the case of relational aggression where most of the abusive behaviors are subtle and often exist without knowledge of the teacher or peers who are not directly involved. While all of the self-report measures used in this study have proven adequate validity and reliability in previous research, there are questions about the validity and reliability of children's self-report in general and whether using children as the sole reporters can result in inaccurate findings (Roecker Phelps, 2001).

To increase the validity of some of the current study's findings, teachers were asked to provide a brief assessment of the students' level of school and peer adjustment. As discussed above, there were significant correlations between the student and teacher's reports but only with regard to school adjustment. This finding may support the presumption that students are more valid reporters of their own social adjustment. Conversely, it could also be argued that

teachers, who are in a position to observe the group dynamics of their classroom, acquire a more objective view of the way their students are perceived by others.

Another limitation of this study has to do with the size and diversity of the sample. On a whole, as well as in comparison to other studies on peer victimized children, the current sample reported low rates of victimization. All students who were asked agreed to participate, although, parental permission was necessary prior to meeting with any of the students. Included in the information provided to parents about the study was a statement indicating that the study was concerned with how students deal with difficulties they have with their peers. Perhaps, parents who thought this may have been too sensitive a subject for their child, opted to not grant their permission. If this were the case, the resulting subject pool would be one that experiences little conflict with their peers. In order to better understand whether the coping behavior of victimized children influences their school and peer adjustment, future studies may want to use either a larger sample, attempt to identify a more victimized population, or collect information about the students in a more applied approach. For instance, by gathering local norms or more specific information about bullying behaviors among the students in the setting that is being studied, the victimization measure could be refined to match those behaviors.

A third limitation of this study has to do with the way the coping measure was adjusted to assess relational victimization. Specifically, the lead statement in this measure was created to reflect only one of the five types of relationally aggressive behaviors that are described in the Self-Report Coping Survey. The decision to include only one of the five types was made as a means of overcoming confusion that could occur if a child finds his or her response would depend upon the particular type of relationally aggressive behavior

experienced. For instance, a student may cope differently if experiencing lies being spread about herself then if she were to be purposely left out of an activity. Conversely, by asking the students to report how they would cope with only one type of relational aggression, eliminates information about those students who may experience other forms of relational aggression, but not necessarily being left out on purpose.

### **Directions of Future Research**

While several important relationships examined in this study were found to be significant, it did not support previous findings that have identified certain coping behaviors to be associated with a particular type of peer aggression (i.e., relational or overt), (see Roecker Phelps, 2001). In light of the literature, however, that suggests coping behavior to be specific to the situation (see Fields and Prinz, 1997) and relational and overt bullying to be distinct types (see Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), it is anticipated that with modifications, future research would be more successful in parceling out this relationship. First of all, the use of a substantially larger sample size would naturally create a more diverse (in terms of social experiences), student population. An additional modification could be to administer the coping scale two separate times with different lead phrases, both describing different types of relationally aggressive behavior. Future research should also include additional cross-informant data, such as peer nominations, to identify which students are frequently targeted and determine how students rate each other in terms of their social adjustment. Self-report measures are not as effective in assessing social skills or social competence (Merrell, 2001). Thus, a more accurate assessment of student's social standing (in terms of adjustment and role as a victim) could be gained with the use of a peer nomination. Unlike adults, peers tend to be privy to unsupervised contexts where victimization often occurs such as in school

bathrooms and on playgrounds (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). To improve the validity of the victimization measure, particularly for younger children, it may also be useful to use video taped segments that depict various types of bullying behaviors. This would provide children with a clearer idea of the variable being measured, as well as increase the developmental appropriateness of the assessment.

Previous research has found the social and emotional effects of relational victimization to be greater for females compared to males (Crick et al., 1996; Paquette & Underwood, 1999). While the sample size in the current study was not large enough to support this type of analysis, future research may find it worthwhile to investigate the gender differences in this area. Given that girls may experience more negative effects from relational aggression, it would seem plausible that their level of adjustment as well as the ways they cope with the bullying would also differ.

Future research may also want to explore whether there are differences in the ways that children cope with relational aggression with respect to their age. Past research has identified relationally aggressive behaviors to start as early as three years (Crick, Casas, et al., 1999) and that children change their repertoire of coping strategies as they mature (Fields & Prinz, 1997). A particular way of coping with relational aggression then, may be dependent upon a child's age or grade. Using the approach strategy, seeking social support as an example, younger students may be more likely to turn to a parent or teacher for help compared to older students, who would be more likely to seek advice from a friend.

Along these lines, it may also be interesting to understand if age has an influence in the way students are impacted by this type of bullying. For instance, older children may perceive relational aggression more negatively than younger children. As students progress

through school and navigate their peer relationships, individual dispositions play important roles in the way the student is perceived by his or her peers. Students who tend to be targeted for bullying will often continue to be victimized as they advance through school. Thus, when a younger child is bullied, he or she may not interpret the episode as negatively as an older child who may have a longer history of being victimized. Also, as children mature, friendships begin to play a much more critical role in their development. As a result, a child who is eight years old may not perceive being left out as damaging to his or her self-esteem than would a thirteen year old.

Previous research has shown that coping responses are often tailored to meet the specific demands of the situation (Compas et al., 1988). In addition to being demonstrated in the current study, there is also evidence to suggest that in general, approach strategies are considered to be more adaptive ways of coping with stress. Future research may want to investigate more thoroughly which approach strategies work best for children in certain situations.

## **Conclusion**

This study was conceptualized with the goal of contributing to the literature on improving the academic and social success of victimized students. The probability that children will become the target of peers' aggressive behaviors is believed to increase as children progress through the primary grades (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Bullying has often not been taken seriously, as it has been considered akin to a 'rite of passage' of childhood (Elinoff et al., 2004). As demonstrated in the body of literature on bullying and adjustment, this misconception understates the impact that peer aggression can have on its victims. While we know that not all victims experience negative outcomes, it seems logical

that more consistent and pervasive bullying would place a child at greater risk of concurrent difficulties. Relational aggression, which has been found to create as much damage as physical aggression (see Crick & Grotpeter, 1996), has only in the past several decades become acknowledged as being a form of bullying. However, it is not yet at the forefront of educational intervention (Young, Boye, & Nelson, 2006).

In order to help victims of bullying, research should strive to understand what qualities lead to greater resiliency. Coping skills play a role in one's ability to overcome difficulty, which in turn, contribute to resiliency (see Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). In light of previous findings, this study sought to uncover if coping could act as a mediator to the adjustment of children who are victimized by relational aggression. While this study did not find victimization to be directly related to coping; the way in which peer victimized children cope was found to be related to adjustment. Contributing to the bullying literature, it was also demonstrated that lower levels of school and peer adjustment were associated with peer victimization. These results highlight the need for the inclusion of relational aggression in empirically supported bully prevention programs as well as teaching coping skills to at-risk youth.

**Appendix A**

Please answer the following 5 questions about yourself.  
Do not write your name on this sheet.

1. I am \_\_\_\_\_ years old
  
2. I am a:      Boy    Girl
  
3. My grade is: 3<sup>rd</sup>    4<sup>th</sup>    5<sup>th</sup>
  
4. Do you have any brothers or sisters?    Yes    No  
If yes, how many older brothers or sisters do you have? \_\_\_\_\_  
How many younger brothers or sisters do you have? \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. I think of myself as:  
White/Caucasian  
African American  
Caribbean  
Middle Eastern  
Asian  
Latino  
Multi-ethnic  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### THINGS THAT HAPPEN TO ME

**DIRECTIONS:** Here is a list of things that sometimes happen to kids your age at school. How often do they happen to you at school?

1. How often do other kids leave you out on purpose when it is time to play or do an activity?

1 NEVER	2 ALMOST NEVER	3 SOMETIMES	4 ALMOST ALL THE TIME	5 ALL THE TIME
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2. How often do you get hit by another kid at school?

1 NEVER	2 ALMOST NEVER	3 SOMETIMES	4 ALMOST ALL THE TIME	5 ALL THE TIME
------------	----------------------	----------------	-----------------------------	----------------------

3. How often does a kid who is mad at you try to get back at you by not letting you be in their group?

1 NEVER	2 ALMOST NEVER	3 SOMETIMES	4 ALMOST ALL THE TIME	5 ALL THE TIME
------------	----------------------	----------------	-----------------------------	----------------------

4. How often does another kid yell at you and call you mean names?

1 NEVER	2 ALMOST NEVER	3 SOMETIMES	4 ALMOST ALL THE TIME	5 ALL THE TIME
------------	----------------------	----------------	-----------------------------	----------------------

5. How often does a classmate tell lies about you to make other kids not like you anymore?

1 NEVER	2 ALMOST NEVER	3 SOMETIMES	4 ALMOST ALL THE TIME	5 ALL THE TIME
------------	----------------------	----------------	-----------------------------	----------------------

6. How often do you get pushed or shoved by another kid at school?

1 NEVER	2 ALMOST NEVER	3 SOMETIMES	4 ALMOST ALL THE TIME	5 ALL THE TIME
------------	----------------------	----------------	-----------------------------	----------------------

7. How often does another kid say they won't like you unless you do what they want you to do?

1 NEVER	2 ALMOST NEVER	3 SOMETIMES	4 ALMOST ALL THE TIME	5 ALL THE TIME
------------	----------------------	----------------	-----------------------------	----------------------

8. How often does another kid kick you or pull your hair?

1 NEVER	2 ALMOST NEVER	3 SOMETIMES	4 ALMOST ALL THE TIME	5 ALL THE TIME
------------	----------------------	----------------	-----------------------------	----------------------

9. How often does a kid try to keep others from liking you by saying mean things about you?

1 NEVER	2 ALMOST NEVER	3 SOMETIMES	4 ALMOST ALL THE TIME	5 ALL THE TIME
------------	----------------------	----------------	-----------------------------	----------------------

10. How often does another kid say they will beat you up if you don't do what they want you to do?

1 NEVER	2 ALMOST NEVER	3 SOMETIMES	4 ALMOST ALL THE TIME	5 ALL THE TIME
------------	----------------------	----------------	-----------------------------	----------------------

## Appendix C

### Self-Report Coping Measure

Please answer all the questions by using the bolded scenario below. Circle never, hardly ever, sometimes, most of the time, or always for each question. Make sure that you listen carefully to each question.

**“When other kids say mean things about me or leave me out of an their group on purpose”:**

1. I tell a friend or family member what happened...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
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2. I try to think of different ways to solve it...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
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3. I make believe nothing happened...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

4. I take it out on others because I feel sad or angry...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

5. I talk to somebody about how it made me feel....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

6. I change something so things will work out.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

7. I go off by myself....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

8. I become so upset that I can't talk to anyone.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

**“When other kids say mean things about me or leave me out of an their group on purpose”:**

9. I get help from a friend.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

10. I decide on one way to deal with the problem and I do it.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

11. I forget the whole thing...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

12. I worry too much about it.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

13. I ask a friend for advice...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

14. I do something to make up for it...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

15. I tell myself it doesn't matter...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

16. I cry about...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

17. I ask a family member for advice.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

18. I know there are things I can do to make it better.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

**“When other kids say mean things about me or leave me out of an their group on purpose”:**

19. I just feel sorry for myself.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

20. I refuse to think about it.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

21. I yell to let off steam....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

22. I ask someone who has had this problem what he or she would do.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

23. I go over in my mind what to do or say...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

24. I do something else to take my mind off of it...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

25. I worry that others will think badly of me...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

26. I curse out loud...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

27. I try to understand why this happened to me...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

28. I say I don't care.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

**“When other kids say mean things about me or leave me out of an their group on purpose”:**

29. I ignore it when people say something about it...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

30. I get mad and throw or hit something.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

31. I get help from a family member.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

32. I get mad at myself for doing something that I shouldn't have done...

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

33. I try extra hard to keep this from happening again.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

34. I talk to the teacher about it.....

Never (1)	Hardly ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Most of the time (4)	Always (5)
--------------	--------------------	------------------	-------------------------	---------------

## Appendix D

### THINGS ABOUT ME Student Rating Scales

Directions: Here are 40 sentences that describe some things that students do at school and with their friends. Some of these sentences may describe you very well. Other sentences will not describe you at all. If you think a sentence tells about something you do, then mark the line under the “True” column. If a sentence tells about something you do not do, then mark the line under the “False” column. Please answer all the questions. If you do not know the meaning of some of the words, please ask the teacher who is giving you this.

- |     | True | False |  |
|-----|------|-------|--|
| 1.  | ___  | ___   | My teacher often gets angry with me.   |
| 2.  | ___  | ___   | Some of my friends think it is fun to cheat, skip school, etc.                                   |
| 3.  | ___  | ___   | Other students don't like to play or work with me.   |
| 4.  | ___  | ___   | Sometimes I get so angry at school that I yell at the teacher and want to stomp out of the room. |
| 5.  | ___  | ___   | Other kids don't seem to like me very much.  |
| 6.  | ___  | ___   | I get into too many arguments with people I know.  |
| 7.  | ___  | ___   | I sometimes stammer or stutter when the teacher calls on me.                                     |
| 8.  | ___  | ___   | I am not interested in schoolwork.   |
| 9.  | ___  | ___   | Other people don't like to share things with me.   |
| 10. | ___  | ___   | I spend too much time playing/working by myself.   |
| 11. | ___  | ___   | My friends say that I am clumsy.   |
| 12. | ___  | ___   | The teacher doesn't choose me to run errands.  |
| 13. | ___  | ___   | Other kids don't listen to me when I have something important to say.                            |
| 14. | ___  | ___   | I don't have enough friends.   |
| 15. | ___  | ___   | I can't seem to concentrate in class.  |

- |     | True  | False |  |
|-----|-------|-------|--|
| 16. | _____ | _____ | My teachers don't listen to me.  |
| 17. | _____ | _____ | Usually, I am not interested in what my teachers have to say to me.                    |
| 18. | _____ | _____ | My teachers give me work that I cannot do.   |
| 19. | _____ | _____ | Other kids say I act like a baby.  |
| 20. | _____ | _____ | I seem to get into a lot of fights.  |
| 21. | _____ | _____ | It is hard for me to make new friends.   |
| 22. | _____ | _____ | I get real angry with the way other kids treat me.                                     |
| 23. | _____ | _____ | I sometimes play "hooky."  |
| 24. | _____ | _____ | I have difficulty sitting still in class.  |
| 25. | _____ | _____ | Often, I think about getting sick so I won't have to go to school.                     |
| 26. | _____ | _____ | I don't like it when the teacher tells me what to do.                                  |
| 27. | _____ | _____ | Teachers are often unfair to me.   |
| 28. | _____ | _____ | I get teased a lot by the other kids.  |
| 29. | _____ | _____ | I rarely get to spend the night with my friends at their homes.                        |
| 30. | _____ | _____ | People think I'm unattractive.   |
| 31. | _____ | _____ | I am dissatisfied with my progress in school.  |
| 32. | _____ | _____ | I don't like to do chores in the classroom, like erasing the board or running errands. |
| 33. | _____ | _____ | Occasionally, I get so upset at things that happen at school that I get sick.          |
| 33. | _____ | _____ | I do a lot of daydreaming in class.  |
| 34. | _____ | _____ | I don't tell anybody how I feel.   |

True    False

35. \_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_    I am rarely invited to a friend's house to eat or play.
36. \_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_    I can't seem to stay in my desk at school.
37. \_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_    Other kids are always picking on me.
39. \_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_    The things I learn in school are not as important or helpful as the  
things I learn outside of school.
40. \_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_    Some people think I am dumb.

**Appendix E**  
**Teacher Questionnaire**

Student ID # \_\_\_\_\_

School Adjustment

Please rate your perception of this student's adjustment to school. A student would be considered well adjusted to the *school setting*, if he or she generally:

- arrives to school and hands in work on time
- has a good attitude toward school and school-work
- follows rules
- pays attention
- is a responsible student

Least						Most
Adjusted	1	2	3	4	5	Adjusted

Peer Adjustment

Please rate your perception of this student's adjustment to his or her peers. A student would be considered to be well adjusted to his or her *peers* if he or she is generally:

- accepted by his or her peers
- cooperative with peers
- gets along well with others
- included in group activities
- picked to be someone's partner on an activity

Least						Most
Adjusted	1	2	3	4	5	Adjusted

## Appendix F

### Summary of Erica Maniago's Dissertation Topic & Study:

I will be investigating the possible buffering effect that children's coping mechanisms may have on their adjustment to bullying. There are a number of different types of bullying that have been identified (i.e. physical and verbal), however, I will be focusing on relational aggression, which is a type of bullying meant to damage or manipulate one's friendships. Relational aggression can encompass a range of emotionally hurtful behaviors, including social exclusion, isolation or alienation; gossiping; writing notes or talking about someone; stealing friends or a romantic partner; threatening to withdraw one's friendship or support to hurt or control another child, and intentionally ignoring another peer.

In recent years, the portrayal of relational aggression in the popular press, in both books (e.g. *Odd Girl Out* and *Reviving Ophelia*) and movies (e.g. *Mean Girls*) has inadvertently sent the message that these behaviors are primarily perpetrated and received by girls. However, research on relational aggression has not found this to be the case, but has instead confirmed that these types of behaviors are common among both boys and girls. Being a victim of bullying has been found to be associated with a number of difficulties such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, school avoidance, attention difficulties, delinquency and lower rates of self-worth. Although, there is evidence to suggest that the ways in which youth cope with stressful events can act as an important mediator, and thus buffer the negative impact that stress can have on their current and future adjustment.

For the purposes of my study, I would like to invite each third, fourth and fifth grade student to participate. I will be sending a letter to the child's home explaining my study, the child's role, and consent for participation to be signed by the parent or guardian. Only those children who are given parental consent will take part in my study. Data collection will include the administration of three separate surveys in a group format, and take approximately 25 minutes to complete. The surveys will assess the frequency that children experience relational and overt aggression by their peers, the degree to which children use different coping strategies, and students' behaviors in school and in their interpersonal relationships. The information that the children provide will be anonymous, as names will not be reported. I will also be asking the teachers of each participating student to answer two quick questions regarding their perception of the student's adjustment.

## Appendix G



October 7, 2009

Dear Parents:

One of the many valuable opportunities available to students and families at The School is the chance to participate in academic research.

I am writing today to let you know about a study in which students in The School's 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades will be participating. Your child may take part with your consent.

The principal investigator on this project is Erica Maniago, who is one of our past school psychology interns and a doctoral student in the Educational Psychology program at CUNY. Erica is interested in peer relationships and how they influence children's coping skills and adjustment. She has designed a simple study, which will consist of three surveys to be filled out by the students as well as a few questions to be answered by teachers. All information that is gathered will be completely anonymous.

The entire process will take around 30 minutes during the school day, but will not interfere with instructional time. All participating students will receive a small gift. When the study is completed, Erica will be happy to send you a copy of her findings. If you are interested, you can provide your name, mail or email address on the consent form that is included with this letter.

Please sign the attached parental consent form and return it in the envelope provided as soon as possible, and by Wednesday, October 21<sup>st</sup>, at the latest. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact me.

Warm regards,

Jessica Marshall  
On behalf of The School's Research Committee  
jmarshall@theschool.columbia.edu  
212-851-4204

## Appendix H

Dear Fifth Grade Parents,

In earlier communications, I indicated that our fifth grade students would have an opportunity to participate in a research study being undertaken by a former colleague of mine as part of her dissertation in Educational Psychology through the City University of New York. The researcher, Erica Maniago, is primarily interested in peer relationships and how they influence children's coping skills and adjustment. She has designed three surveys to be filled out by students as well as a few questions to be answered by the teachers of those students who participate. We have been able to make time available next Wednesday, December 16, for fifth grade students to participate in the study during their open period (10:44 – 11:34 a.m.). Erica will administer the surveys and will be available to answer any questions that the students have about her work, the study itself, or what it means to be an academic researcher. Erica has also agreed to share her findings at the conclusion of her study with the school, and I would be happy to make the research available to any interested families.

While I would love most or all of our students to participate in the study, it is certainly not required. The students know that the study will be taking place, and our fifth grade teachers have agreed to help facilitate the process. Please read the letter describing the study linked here:

[http://www.packer.edu/uploaded/downloads/Middle\\_School/2009\\_2010/Consent\\_Study\\_5.pdf](http://www.packer.edu/uploaded/downloads/Middle_School/2009_2010/Consent_Study_5.pdf) and if you would like your child to participate next Wednesday, sign and return it with your permission to the Middle School Office by Monday, December 14. Joan Whitlock will also have extra copies of the letter/permission slip at her desk, if it would be easier to fill one out when you come in for teacher conferences tomorrow or Friday.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

I hope your conferences go well.

My best,

Noah Reinhardt Middle School Head

nreinhardt@packer.edu 718.250.0261

## Appendix I

### **Consent for Research Participation**

My name is Erica Maniago. I am a graduate student in the Educational Psychology Ph.D. Program at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), and Principal Investigator of a research project investigating the ways that children handle difficulties they experience with their peers and its impact on current social and academic behavior.

I would like to have permission to administer several questionnaires to your child. There will be three separate surveys, one asking about your child's experiences with his or her peers, one asking about how your child copes with peer difficulties and one that asks your child about his or her feelings toward school and peers. These surveys will be administered in a small group format and separate setting from your child's classroom. The particular time will be worked out with your child's classroom teacher; however, the session will take place during a time that will not interfere with instruction. It is expected to take approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaires. All participating children will receive a small gift. I will also be asking your child's teacher two questions concerning your child's adjustment to the school setting. While the results of my study will not benefit your child directly, they will help us better understand the factors that contribute to resiliency in childhood.

All the information your child provides will be used only for the purposes of my study. Names will not be used on any document that is filled out. Some demographic information, such as gender and grade, will be used for the purposes of helping to interpret the findings. All questionnaires will be kept confidential by me and stored in a locked file cabinet, to which only I, and my advisor will have access.

Your child's participation is entirely voluntary and your child will also be asked to sign a permission form prior to filling out any of the surveys. If your child experiences any discomfort while filling out the surveys, he or she will be able to stop at any time without penalty.

I may publish results of this study, but the name of the school and any identifying characteristics will not be used in any part of the publication. If you would like a copy of the study, please provide me with your address and I will send it to you in the future.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at (917) 435-6037; [ebmaniago@hotmail.com](mailto:ebmaniago@hotmail.com) or my advisor, Dr. Marian Fish, at (212) 817-8290; [mfish@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:mfish@gc.cuny.edu). If you have any questions about your child's rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact Kay Powell, Sponsored Research, Graduate School/City University of New York, at (212) 817-7525; [kpowell@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:kpowell@gc.cuny.edu).

Please indicate whether you give permission for your child to participate in this study by filling out the information below. Your child's standing at the school will not be affected in any way if you decline to give permission.

**I give** permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix J

### Student Assent for Research Participation

My name is Erica Maniago. I am a graduate student at the City University of New York. I would like to tell you about a research study that I am doing. A research study is a way to learn information about something. I am interested in learning more about the types of relationships that elementary school students have with one another and how these relationships impact feelings about friends and school.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to fill out three forms, which ask about your friendships, feelings about school, and ways that you tend to deal with tough situations. Each question relates to your own personal experience so there are no right or wrong answers. You will fill out these forms with a small group of other students, and each question and answer will be read aloud. Filling out the forms should take about 30 minutes. Your teacher will also be asked to answer a few questions about how you get along in school. You will receive a small gift for helping me with my study.

While filling out the forms, I will be available if you have any questions. While filling out the forms, you can stop at any time and for any reason, and no one will be mad at you. Even if you decide to participate now, it is ok if you change your mind later. For the purposes of privacy, you will not be asked to write your name on any of the forms that you fill out. All information about you will only be used for this study. It will not be part of your school records. Results of the study will not give your name. I will keep the information private in a locked file cabinet.

You will not directly benefit from participation in this study, but the results may teach us how to help other kids who may be having a hard time with some of the kids in their school. If you choose to participate in the study, please sign your name and write the date below.

Thank you for agreeing to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

## **Appendix K**

### **Teacher Form** **Consent for Research Participation**

My name is Erica Maniago. I am a graduate student in the Educational Psychology Ph.D. Program at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), and Principal Investigator of a research project investigating the ways that children handle difficulties they experience with their peers and its impact on current social and academic behavior.

I would like permission to ask you two questions about each student in your class who participates in my study. I will be asking the students about their feelings toward school and peers, and I would also like to have your perception of the students' level of adjustment in these areas. Each form will consist of only two questions, where you will be asked to rate the student on a scale from 1 to 5. I anticipate this will take one to two minutes per child. While the results of my study will not benefit you or the students directly, they will help us better understand the factors that contribute to resiliency in childhood. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

All the information you provide will be used only for the purposes of my study. You will not be asked to provide names (yours or the students) on any document you fill out. Instead, each classroom and participating student will be assigned a number, which will be used on the questionnaires in place of names. All questionnaires will be kept confidential by me and stored in a locked file cabinet, to which only I, and my advisor will have access. I may publish results of this study, but the name of the school and any identifying characteristics will not be used in any part of the publication. If you would like a copy of the study, please provide me with your address and I will send it to you in the future. You will receive a \$5.00 gift card for your participation.

If you have any questions about this research, you can contact me at (917) 435-6037; [ebmaniago@hotmail.com](mailto:ebmaniago@hotmail.com) or my advisor, Dr. Marian Fish, at (212) 817-8290; [mfish@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:mfish@gc.cuny.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to contact Kay Powell, Sponsored Research, Graduate School/City University of New York, at (212) 817-7525; [kpowell@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:kpowell@gc.cuny.edu).

Thank you for your participation in the study. I will give you a copy of this form to take with you.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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