Sticks and Stones and Broken Bones:
The Influence of Parental Verbal Abuse on Peer Related Victimization

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Abstract. *Prior research on the effects of childhood maltreatment has focused primarily on the relationship between physical abuse and its impact on delinquent behavior. Although researchers have recently begun to recognize the importance of and to explore the detrimental effects which psychological maltreatment has on children, little empirical attention has been paid to the possibility that maltreatment may also increase the likelihood of future victimization among children. Drawing on the tenets of differential oppression theory, this study examines whether students who are victims of emotional and/or verbal abuse by their parents are more likely to adapt through the use of passive acceptance, as evidenced by low self-esteem, and subsequently become targets for further victimization at the hands of their peers. Findings indicate that parental emotional and verbal abuse is a significant predictor of peer-related victimization.*

Keywords: peer victimization; parental maltreatment; emotional abuse; differential oppression.

Introduction

Despite growing social prohibitions against cruelty to children, child maltreatment continues to be a serious, albeit low profile, problem in the United States. Child maltreatment can take various forms including neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and lower-level forms of aggression such as verbal and emotional abuse. Because acts of maltreatment typically take place indoors, away from the prying eyes of neighbors and public officials, measuring the true extent of the problem is difficult at best. While many studies have examined the effect of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect, very few studies have investigated the impact of psychological maltreatment, such as verbal and emotional abuse on children. In fact, the true extent of this type of maltreatment is more difficult to document than physical and sexual abuse (Hussey, Chang, and Kotch 2006). However, a study by Straus and Field (2000) found that 10 to 20 percent of toddlers and 50 percent of teenagers have experienced severe psychological aggression by parents, which included acts such as cursing, threatening to send the child away, calling the child dumb, or otherwise belittling them. Given these numbers, it is disturbing that this type of maltreatment is understudied.

Historically, when measures of verbal and/or emotional abuse have been examined, they commonly get lumped into a battery of independent variables rather than isolated as specific topics of interest (see Loos and Alexander, 1997; Finkelhor et al., 2005). Because different types of maltreatments tend to occur simultaneously, that is, they are bundled together as a package, it becomes important for researchers to unravel the specific effects of verbal abuse from other sources of trauma (Browne and Finkelhor, 1986; Finkelhor et al., 2005). It is this type of research that will help to unravel the true effects of verbal and emotional abuse on children, and upon which this study focuses.

The present study is designed to build on current knowledge about child maltreatment by exploring the impact that emotional/verbal abuse has on childhood experiences. Drawing on differential oppression theory (Regoli and Hewitt, 2003), the study seeks to understand whether children who are victims of emotional and/or verbal abuse by their parents are more likely to adapt to the oppression through the use of internalization. The study examines whether these children passively accept their inferior status, suppress their hatred for the abuser, and internalize the hatred. Specifically, the study focuses on examining the common internalizing disorder of low self-esteem to determine the impact of the emotional and verbal abuse; the impact being measured by whether these children are more likely to be victimized by their peers.

Previous Research

A review of the extant literature indicates that a linkage between parental maltreatment and the development

of emotional and behavioral problems among children has been established (Brown, 1984; Duncan, 1999; Gross and Keller 1992; Hart, Binggeli and Brassard, 1998; Heck and Walsh, 2000). For example, Felitti et al. (1998) and Dube et al. (2003) found that adverse experiences during childhood increase the risk for depressed affect, suicide attempts, multiple sexual partners, sexually transmitted diseases, smoking, and alcoholism. Burgess, Hartman, and McCormack (1987) found that maltreated children often exhibit psychosocial ailments such as bed-wetting, stomachaches, fear of being alone, sleep problems, poor self-concept ratings, distrust of others, and psychological withdrawal (Kaufman and Ciccheti, 1989). Hart et al. (1998) found that maltreated children often experienced anxiety, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, emotional disorders, antisocial disorders, learning impairments, and poor physical health. In addition to internalizing disorders such as these, child maltreatment has also been associated with delinquent behavior. Trickett and Kuczynski (1986) as well as Paperny and Deisher (1983) found that maltreated children were more likely than non-maltreated children to exhibit higher levels of aggression towards both persons and property.

While there is a documented link between parental verbal abuse and a negative impact on children, identifying this abuse and its impact on children is a daunting task for several reasons. Though many people assume that they "know it when they see (or rather, hear) it," researchers have been unable to reach an agreed upon definition of what constitutes verbal abuse. In the absence of precise definitions, it is difficult to isolate the detrimental effects of this specific type of abuse (Vissing et al., 1991). Second, bystanders often dismiss incidents of verbal abuse as a private matter or as normal parental discipline (Davis, 1996).[1] Third, given its low-profile nature, existing data on parental verbal abuse is often limited to the most egregious cases. Fourth, due to problems of under-reporting, official estimates of the extent of verbal abuse are widely assumed to be speculative and unreliable (Straus and Gelles, 1986). Additionally, Zingraff et al. (1993) noted that prior research has also been confounded by methodological limitations (particularly the use of cross-sectional data), which may help to over-exaggerate the maltreatment-delinquency relationship (see Heck and Walsh, 2000).

One of the few rigorous studies that sought to isolate the main effects of parental verbal abuse on delinquency was a study conducted by Vissing et al. (1991). These authors defined parental verbal/symbolic aggression as "communication intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or a communication perceived as having

that intent" (Vissing et al., 1991:224). The communicative act may be active or passive, and verbal or nonverbal. Examples include name-calling or nasty remarks (active, verbal), slamming a door or smashing something (active, nonverbal), and stony silence or sulking (passive, nonverbal; Vissing et al., 1991).

Vissing et al.'s (1991) data showed that nearly two-thirds of maltreated children experienced some form of verbal aggression, with an average of 12.6 verbal attacks occurring across the 12-month study period.[2] Results also indicate that verbal aggression by parents was significantly related to childhood problems with aggression, delinquency, and interpersonal relationships even after controlling for gender, age, and socioeconomic status. More importantly, Vissing and her colleagues found that parental verbal abuse was most strongly related to higher levels of childhood aggression irrespective of whether parents themselves were physically aggressive.

Further research suggests that children who are verbally abused by parents also tend to experience negative outcomes such as academic failure (Hart et al., 1998; Kinard, 2001; Wodarski et al., 1990), early experimentation with drugs and alcohol (Perez, 2000), low self-esteem (Briere and Runtz, 1988; Hart et al., 1998), and loneliness and social isolation (Loos and Alexander, 1997). If these studies are indeed correct, then it is safe to assume that the popular childhood saying, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," is largely incorrect.

Differential Oppression

The detrimental effect of verbal and emotional abuse is deeply rooted in the theoretical literature. Specifically, Regoli and Hewitt (2000) offer a relatively new theory, differential oppression theory, which provides an appropriate explanation for the various pathways that such abuse may have on children. These theorists suggest that acts of delinquency and self-defeating behaviors often arise out of power struggles between children and adults (e.g., parents, teachers).

According to these theorists, compared to adults, children have little power in today's society and few resources with which to exercise control over their social environments. Kids who perceive themselves as constantly "under the thumb" of adults often become resentful, particularly when they are made to submit to the will of adults in social settings. While power differentials between parents and children are common in many households, Regoli and Hewitt (2000:157) feel that parental authority is oppressive, particularly when par-

ents exercise their power in ways that "prevent children from developing a sense of self as a subject rather than an object," which is often the case in verbal and emotional abuse situations.

Clearly, some degree of parental controls, particularly at an early age, is necessary in order for children to develop self-control. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990:97), for example, have argued that in order for children to develop self-control, parents must "(1) monitor the child's behavior; (2) recognize deviant behavior when it occurs; and (3) punish such behavior." Monitoring and oversight of children's behaviors are considered critical parental functions insofar as they help children to understand when they have crossed the boundaries of acceptable behavior. However, Regoli and Hewitt (1994) argue that some parents have a tendency to accomplish these tasks in a demeaning manner and under the guise of "knowing and doing what is good for them" (Miller, 1984). While some degree of parental oversight and guidance is necessary, even beneficial for conventional socialization, Gottfredson and Hirschi's own theory implies that parents must, at some point, relax these controls. Yet, Regoli and Hewitt's differential oppression theory suggests that some parents never treat their children as individuals, but rather as objects to be controlled. Further, such parents rarely learn to "lighten up."

The theory of differential oppression is organized around four guiding principles (Regoli and Hewitt, 2006). First, children are easy targets for adult oppression because of their lack of power. Second, oppression of children by adults occurs in various contexts and the degree of oppression to which a child is exposed occurs along a continuum. Third, oppression can lead to various childhood adaptations, including passive acceptance, exercise of illegitimate coercive power, manipulation of one's peers, and retaliation. Fourth, the use of adaptive reactions by children reinforces adults' views that they are "inferior, subordinate beings and as troublemakers" (Ferguson, 2001).

Oppression can occur at both the macro and micro levels, yet it is the oppression that occurs within the micro levels, especially the family, that has the greatest effect on the child's use of delinquent adaptations. As previously mentioned, the theory identified four specific ways in which children adapt to oppression. The first adaptation is passive acceptance of one's status as inferior. According to Regoli and Hewitt (2006), passive acceptance is a form of obedience that is grounded in fear. Although children "learn to hate" their oppressors, they remain fearful of them and thus suppress the hatred. This adaptation, according to the authors, typically leads

to internalizing disorders such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and low self-esteem. Passive acceptance is the most common adaptation to oppression and is more common in females.

A second adaptation to oppressive parenting is the exercise of illegitimate coercive power. By participating in delinquent activities, children are able to establish a sense of control or power over their own lives. These acts are simply maladaptive expressions of a desire for autonomy and control. Low-level adaptations may include challenges to parental authority (e.g., sassing, back-talking), defiant body language, sexual misbehavior, illicit drug use, and criminal acts (Ferguson, 2001; Regoli and Hewitt, 2006).

A third adaptation is manipulation of one's peers or siblings in an attempt to enhance social power. To some extent, this adaptation can be seen as a natural extension of deviant role-playing learned from one's own parents (e.g., might makes right). That is, oppressed children may feel the need to manipulate others, such as bullying weaker children, in an attempt to regain a sense of empowerment or control over their own lives (Regoli and Hewitt, 2006).

A fourth adaptation (e.g., retaliation) suggests that some children react to their oppressive environments by lashing out either directly at one's own parents or indirectly at other symbols of their oppression (e.g., school vandalism). While this adaptation may be manifested in outward acts of aggression such as assaulting or even killing one's own parents, anger and resentment may also be directed inwards through acts of self-mutilation, depression, or suicide (Regoli and Hewitt, 2006).

The use of retaliation seems highly plausible since so much of the prior research on child maltreatment suggests that oppression leads to violence. But is it possible that the opposite reaction is just as valid? Clearly, children react to stress in a variety of different ways. Some 70 years ago, Robert Merton (1938) argued that some individuals adapt to stressful situations (e.g., strain) by withdrawing or "retreating" into a world of drugs, alcohol, and low self-esteem. In a similar manner, Regoli and Hewitt (1994) note that the first reaction, passive acceptance, involves identifying with the oppressor. "Oppressed people frequently internalize the image of their oppressors and adapt their guidelines: they become fearful of freedom" (Regoli and Hewitt, 1994:210). In extreme cases, it may be possible for some individuals to develop an acute sense of self-hatred, leading them to engage in behaviors that enhance the odds of further victimization, or as Regoli and Hewitt suggest, to simply become fearful of a world in which they are not oppressed. If these

possibilities exist, then parental verbal abuse is not as benign as it first appears. In fact, it suggests that verbal and emotional abuse may increase the odds that a child will be picked on throughout adolescence and perhaps even into early adulthood.

The Current Study

The broad research question addressed in this study is whether there is a relationship between parental emotional and/or verbal abuse, self-esteem, and victimization by peers. The first research question asks whether children who are victims of emotional and/or verbal abuse are more likely to adapt to oppression through the use of passive acceptance as evidenced by low self-esteem. The second research question asks whether those individuals with low self-esteem resulting from parental emotional and/or verbal abuse are more likely to be victimized by their peers.

It is important to note that because different types of maltreatments tend to occur simultaneously, that is, they are bundled together as a package, the use of multivariate analysis can help to obscure important relationships. Thus, unraveling the specific effects of verbal abuse requires researchers to treat this category of maltreatment separately in order to disentangle the various sources of trauma (Browne and Finkelhor, 1986; Finkelhor et al., 2005). It is this type of research that will help to unravel the true effects of verbal and emotional abuse on children and upon which this study focuses.

The study contributes to the literature in a number of ways. First, the study furthers the work of Vissing et al. (1991) in examining the effect of parental emotional abuse on children. Specifically, it is the first study to examine the effects of such abuse on both verbal and physical victimization by peers. Second, much of the current literature has lumped measures of verbal and/or emotional abuse into a battery of independent variables. The current study seeks to unravel the specific effects of verbal abuse by examining its effect separately in order to disentangle the various sources of trauma. Third, the study provides an empirical examination of differential oppression theory. Although first offered in 1991, this theory has not been subjected to many empirical examinations (Regoli and Hewitt, 2006).

Methods

Data for this study were taken from a needs assessment administered to 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students at four public school districts in a rural southern

county during the 2001-2002 school year. All students enrolled in these grades during the specified time period were invited to participate; students were not randomly selected to participate in the study. While the sample may appear to be somewhat of a convenience sample, it should be noted that all students in the designated grades were given equal opportunity to participate in this study and as such it can be described as a purposive sample. Further, after obtaining Human Subjects approval and school board consent in each of the four school districts, passive consent forms were utilized. Therefore, only those students whose parents returned a consent form indicating they did not want their children to participate in the study were excluded; students who did not return a consent form were allowed to participate in the study.[3] A total of 3,654 surveys were administered to students.

However, not all students who participated in the survey were included in the sample. Validity in self-report measures relies on respondents' honesty and candor (Hagan, 1993). Therefore, attempts were made to eliminate from the sample those individuals who did not tell the truth when answering the survey. The current study employed a method of eliminating cases based on invalid data that is consistent with the suggestions of Brown and Zimmerman (2004), who found that youth who indicated they were not honest were more likely to provide inconsistent responses than those who indicated they had been honest. Through the use of an honesty question, as suggested by Brown and Zimmerman (2004), the decision was made to eliminate the responses of those students who indicated they did not tell the truth on the survey. Specifically, students were eliminated from the sample if they responded that they "never" told the truth or told the truth only "once in awhile" or "sometimes." While this may seem a drastic step, if students' self-reported delinquency is to be believed, then their self-reported dishonesty should also be believed (see Brown and Zimmerman, 2004, for a complete discussion of the use of honesty questions as a method of eliminating inaccurate self-report responses).[4]

Another significant source of missing data can be attributed to the instrument design. Questions assessing demographic information were included at the end of the survey instrument. As a number of students did not complete the entire survey and, as a result, failed to complete any item on the last page, this created a large amount of missing demographic data. Because race and gender are two of the most influential predictors of juvenile delinquency, all respondents who did not indicate their race or gender were excluded from the analysis. To determine whether the missing data affected

Table 1. Inter-correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Peer victimization	Ability to succeed	Parental emotional abuse	Positive self-worth	Grade	Race
Ability to succeed	-.284 **					
Parental punitiveness	.275 **	-.302 **				
Positive self-worth	-.210 **	.099 **	-.198 **			
Grade	-.153 **	.083 **	.107 **	.090 **		
Race	-.049 **	.042	-.055 **	.014	.017	
Gender	.133 **	-.039	-.032	.002	-.006	.005
Mean	5.35	15.93	6.17	13.70		
SD	7.13	5.31	5.76	5.40		
Range	0–40	0–20	0–24	0—0		
Cronbach's α	.74	.87	.88	.89		

p < 0.01.   ** *p* < 0.001 (two tailed).

the findings, respondents in the sample were compared to district representations of gender and race. Relative to the district, the sample was disproportionately female and white.[5] Further, the model under study was estimated after excluding gender and race and the results indicated that neither the strength nor the direction of associations changed.

After accounting for missing data on the dependent variables, the final sample consisted of 2,126 respondents with the following demographic characteristics. Fifty-eight percent of the respondents were female and twenty-seven percent were nonwhite. Sixth graders accounted for 26 percent of the sample; eighth graders accounted for 32 percent; tenth graders for 19 percent; and twelfth graders for 23 percent.

Measures

The reliability of the constructs and measures utilized in this study has been well established in previous studies. In addition, a pilot test of the survey was conducted with seventh graders in a local after school program.[6] Prior to analyses, students' responses to index items were summed to create indices. Additionally, principal component analyses were run for each of the indices and the results were analyzed. The range of factor loadings for the study indices was 0.67 to 0.89. In each of the indices, all of the inter-item correlations were statistically significant. Reliability measures, specifically Cronbach's alpha, were then calculated for each index (See Appendix A for item constructs, reliability measures, and factor loadings).

Independent Variables

This study used two independent variables (parental punitiveness and self-esteem). Students' levels of self-esteem were measured using an index originally devel-

oped by Rosenberg (1965). This ten-item index sought information regarding students' feelings of self-worth, perceptions regarding their ability to achieve, and satisfaction with themselves. Two dimensions surfaced from the factor analysis of these ten items: positive self-worth and ability to succeed. Positive self-worth consisted of five items and ranged from 0 to 20 with a mean of 13.70 and a standard deviation of 5.40. High scores were indicative of increased self-esteem. Ability to succeed consisted of five items and ranged from 0 to 20 with a mean of 15.93 and a standard deviation of 5.31. Responses for these five items were recoded in reverse numerical order to reflect a positive image of ability to succeed. High scores were indicative of increased perceptions of ability to succeed. Students' experiences with parental emotional abuse were measured along a five item index and ranged from 0 to 24 with a mean of 6.17 and a standard deviation of 5.76. High scores were indicative of high levels of parental punitiveness (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

To determine the extent to which students had experienced parental emotional abuse, frequencies were run. Table 2 shows the results of the specific types of parental emotional abuse experienced by students. The

Table 2. Student Experiences with Parental Emotional Abuse

Frequency of experience(s)	Type of emotional abuse				
	Ignore	Blame	Yell	Nag	Threaten to slap
Never	49 %	36 %	27 %	45 %	66 %
Seldom	24 %	22 %	24 %	18 %	15 %
Sometimes	18 %	21 %	27 %	16 %	9 %
Often	5 %	11 %	12 %	11 %	5 %
Almost always	4 %	10 %	11 %	10 %	6 %

most reported type of parental maltreatment was yelling (73 percent), followed by being blamed by their parents when the student was not at fault (64 percent). Over half of the students also indicated that their parents yelled at them or ignored them.

Dependent Variable

Students' experiences with peer victimization within the last year were measured along five items taken from Kaufman et al. (1999) and ranged from 0 to 40 with a mean of 5.35 and a standard deviation of 7.13. A high score on this index was indicative of an increased level of victimization by peers. Dependent variable frequencies were initially run to determine the extent to which students experienced victimization by their peers at school. Table 3 shows the extent to which students experienced such behaviors.

Data reveal that a majority of students had been yelled at, cursed, insulted, or teased by another student at least once during the last year. The majority of students had also been the victim of theft at least once during the last year. Approximately 40 percent of students indicated that they have been hit, kicked, pushed, or shoved at least once during the last year. Almost 60 percent of the students indicated that they had been the victims of verbal abuse by their peers at least once during the last year. About one-quarter of the students indicated that they had been threatened (without a weapon) by another student during the last school year. One-tenth of the students indicated that they had been the victims of a forceful theft attempt during the last year.

Control Variables

In an effort to account for social inequality, three socio-demographic control measures were utilized: race,

gender, and grade level. Responses to the question concerning race and gender were originally coded as string values. The answers were converted to numeric values and dummy coded. Race was defined as 0 for non-white and 1 for white. Gender was defined as 0 for female and 1 for male. Responses for grade level were coded as 1 for 6th grade, 2 for 8th grade, 3 for 10th grade, and 4 for 12th grade.

Results

To examine the relationship among study variables, bivariate and diagnostic analyses were run. All of the study variables, except grade level, were significantly correlated with the dependant measure (peer victimization). Inter-item correlations among the independent variables ranged from 0.00 to 0.30, which suggests that multicollinearity did not present a significant problem (see Grimm and Yarnold, 2000). The highest correlation existed between ability to succeed and parental maltreatment ($r = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$). Further, the highest variance inflation factor in the regression models was 1.25 and the lowest tolerance figure was 0.79, which also indicates few problems with multicollinearity (Fox, 1991).

Regression Models

To examine the central tenets of differential oppression theory, a series of step-wise regression analyses were conducted, which focus on assessing four relationships: (1) the relationship between parental emotional abuse and self-esteem; (2) the relationship between self-esteem and peer victimization; (3) the relationship between parental emotional abuse and peer victimization; and (4) the relationship between parental emotional abuse and peer victimization, controlling for self-esteem. In all models significance was measured at the 0.05 level.

Table 3. Student Experiences with Peer Victimization At School During the Last Year

Frequency of experience(s)	Verbal victimization	Physical victimization	Victimization by theft	Victimization by force	Threatened without weapon
Never	41 %	61 %	50 %	90 %	77 %
At least once during last year	25 %	18 %	32 %	5 %	13 %
Once every 3 months	5 %	4 %	4 %	1 %	2 %
Once every 2 months	2 %	2 %	2 %	1 %	1 %
Once a month	3 %	2 %	3 %	1 %	1 %
Two or more times a month	3 %	2 %	2 %	1 %	1 %
Once a week	4 %	2 %	2 %	1 %	1 %
Twice a week	5 %	2 %	1 %	0 %	1 %
Once a day	11 %	6 %	3 %	1 %	2 %

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of oppression, specifically emotional and verbal abuse by parents, and self-esteem on peer-related student victimization. The effects of abuse were examined regarding both verbal and delinquent victimization by peers.

Model 1 examines the relationship between self-reported levels of parental emotional abuse and self-esteem. The two self-esteem indices were regressed on the parental emotional abuse index and the socio-demographic variables. The results (see Table 4) indicate that the socio-demographic variables and parental verbal and emotional abuse account for seven percent of the variation in students' levels of positive self-worth ($F = 38.97$, $p < 0.001$). Model 2 results (also in Table 4) indicate that the socio-demographic variables and parental and verbal emotional abuse account for 10 percent of the variation in students' feelings regarding their ability to succeed in life ($F = 31.30$, $p < 0.001$).

Prior to examining the effect of self-worth and ability to succeed on peer victimization, the first model includes only the demographic variables. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5 (Model 3). Results show that demographic variables account for four percent of the variation in peer victimization ($F = 33.23$, $p < 0.001$). The second research question examined the significance of the relationship between self-esteem and peer victimization. To answer this question, the peer victimization index was regressed on the two self-esteem indices, as

well as the socio-demographic variables. The results are also shown in Table 5 (Models 4 and 5). After accounting for the socio-demographic indicators, positive self-worth explained an additional six percent of the variation in students' victimization by peers ($F = 60.61$, $p < 0.001$). Males, younger students, and those students who had a negative perception of their self-worth were more likely to be victimized at the hands of their peers. The ability to succeed explained an additional eight percent of the variation, after accounting for the socio-demographic indicators ($F = 39.70$, $p < 0.001$). Similar to previous results, males, younger students, and those who had a negative perception of their ability to succeed were more likely to be the victims of verbal or delinquent activities by their peers.

The third research question examined whether there is a relationship between parental emotional abuse and peer victimization. To answer this question, the peer victimization index was regressed on the parental emotional abuse index. The results are shown in Table 6 (Model 6). After accounting for the socio-demographic indicators, this model explained an additional ten percent of the variation ($F = 90.39$, $p < 0.001$). Males, younger students, and those who had experienced emotional and/verbal abuse by their parents were more likely to be emotionally and/or verbally abused by their peers.

The final research question examined whether there is a relationship between parental emotional abuse

Table 4. OLS Regression: Positive Self-Worth and Ability to Succeed Regressed on Parental Emotional Abuse and Demographic Controls

	Model 1: Experience with parental emotional abuse and positive self-worth		Model 2: Experience with parental emotional abuse and ability to succeed	
	B (se)	Beta	B (se)	Beta
Constant	13.627 *** (.496)		14.575 *** (.662)	
Male	-.050 (.218)	-0.005	-.502 (.296)	-.048
White	-.153 (.240)	-0.013	.499 (.324)	1.538
Grade	.224 *** (.050)	0.095	.316 (.067)	.133
Parental emotional and verbal abuse	-.231 *** (.019)	-0.255	-.285 (.027)	-10.390
F (df)	38.977 (4) ***		31.302 (4) ***	
R^2 (adjusted R^2)	.068 (.067)		.099 (.095)	

* $p < .05$.   ** $p < .01$.   *** $p < .001$ (two tailed).

Table 5. OLS Regression: Peer Victimization Regressed on Positive Self-Worth and Ability to Succeed

	Model 3: Controls		Model 4: Positive self-worth		Model 5: Ability to succeed	
	B (se)	Beta	B (se)	Beta	B (se)	Beta
Constant			12.415 *** (.734)		12.231 *** (1.001)	
Male	1.320 *** (.190)	.140	1.929 *** (.289)	.137	1.767 *** (.388)	.126
White	-.040 (.210)	.000	-.571 (.318)	-.037	-.641 (.425)	-.042
Grade	-.390 *** (.040)	-.150	-.342 *** (.065)	-.107	-.199 * (.088)	-.063
Positive self-worth			-.346 *** (.028)	-.256		
Ability to succeed					-.401 *** (.037)	-.301
F (df)	33.23 (3) ***		60.607 (4) ***		39.702 (4) ***	
R^2 (Adjusted R2)	.04 (.04)		.102 (.100)		.121 (.118)	

* p <.05.   ** p < .01.   *** p < .001 (two tailed).

Table 6. OLS Regression: Peer Victimization Regressed on Parental Emotional Abuse, Positive Self-Worth, Ability to Succeed, and Controls

	Model 6: Parental emotional abuse		Model 7: Parental emotional abuse and positive self-worth		Model 8: Parental emotional abuse, positive self-worth, and ability to succeed	
	B (se)	Beta	B (se)	Beta	B (se)	Beta
Constant	6.728 *** (.629)		9.548 *** (.741)		11.779 *** (1.021)	
Male	1.946 *** (.278)	.138	1.969 *** (.278)	.141	1.896 *** (.358)	.136
White	-.320 (.306)	-.021	-.277 (.308)	-.018	-.447 (.393)	-.029
Grade	-.548 *** (.063)	-.172	-463.000 *** (.064)	-.146	-.282 ** (.082)	-.090
Positive self-worth			-.238 *** (.028)	-.176	-.230 *** (.032)	-.193
Ability to succeed					-.253 *** (.036)	-.189
Parental emotional and verbal abuse	.400 *** (.024)	.327	.349 *** (.025)	.286	.399 *** (.035)	.310
F (df)	90.386 (4) ***		87.453 (5) ***		68.831 (6) ***	
R^2 (Adjusted R^2)	.141 (.140)		.173 (.171)		.269 (.265)	

* p <.05.   ** p < .01.   *** p < .001 (two tailed).

and peer victimization, controlling for self-esteem. To answer this question, the peer victimization index was regressed on the parental emotional abuse index, the positive self-worth index, and the ability to succeed index. The results are shown in Table 6 (Models 7 and 8). In Model 7, parental emotional and verbal abuse and positive self-worth accounted for an additional 13 percent of the variation in peer victimization, after controlling for the socio-demographic indicators ($F = 87.45$, $p < 0.001$). Males, younger students, those who had low levels of self-esteem, and those who experienced high levels of parental emotional and verbal abuse were more likely to be victimized by their peers. The full model (Model 8) explained an additional 23 percent of the variation in peer victimization (after accounting for demographics), indicating that gender, grade level, positive self-worth, ability to succeed, and parental abuse were all important correlates ($F = 68.83$, $p < 0.001$). Parental emotional and verbal abuse demonstrated the strongest association with peer victimization ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), followed by low levels of positive self-worth ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.001$), perceived inability to succeed ($\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.001$), gender ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.001$), and grade level ($\beta = -0.09$, $p < 0.01$).

To test for robustness, the final model was regressed only on the predictor variables found to be significant in Model 8 of Table 6. All variables that were significant in the full model were also significant in the trimmed model.

Discussion

To date, only a handful of rigorous studies have been designed specifically to explore the empirical effects of parental verbal/emotional abuse on children. The few studies that do exist have typically found that children who are physically and emotionally abused by their parents are likely to grow up to become physically and emotionally abusive adults (Dube et al., 2003; Felitti et al., 1998; Paperny and Deisher, 1983; Trickett and Kuczynski, 1986; Vissing et al., 1991). Other studies have found that maltreated children also suffer high levels of emotional and behavioral problems that enhance their likelihood of engaging in delinquent behaviors (Brown, 1984; Gross and Keller, 1992; Heck and Walsh, 2000). However, no study has ever attempted to explore the opposite relationship -- the possibility that verbal and emotional abuse by parents leads to similar kinds of victimizations by one's own peers. Findings reported in this study investigate this possibility and reveal that, rather than becoming physically aggressive, some verbally abused children

may grow up to become perennial victims who suffer repeated attacks at the hands of their peers.

Data analyzed in this study suggest that parental emotional and verbal abuse, as measured by acts of rejection, condemnation, yelling, nagging, threats of violence, and slapping significantly increases the odds that a child will become the victim of similar abuse at the hands of his/her peers, both in terms of verbal victimization and physical victimization. Conversely, it appears that children, who develop higher levels of self-esteem, as measured by positive self-worth and a perceived ability to succeed, experience fewer acts of victimization by peers.

Though the data cannot speak to causality, the analysis indicates that a possible pathway leading from abuse in the home to later victimization by peers has its roots in the development of self-concept ratings. From the data, it can be posited that children who are emotionally and verbally abused by their parents develop low levels of self-esteem, which, in turn, undermines perceptions of self-worth and perceived ability to succeed in life. As suggested by differential oppression theory, children who suffer parental psychological maltreatment often identify with their adult oppressors and "become fearful of freedom" (Regoli and Hewitt, 1994:210). The effect of this identification often results in low self-worth. Children become accustomed to oppression, believe that they do not deserve anything better, and feel powerless to change their situation. As such, they become prime targets for peer victimization. Children who suffer from a perceived lack of ability to succeed may, in turn, avoid certain kinds of activities that pose a risk of additional failure and/or rejection by others. For instance, boys who avoid certain types of activities, particularly those that involve demonstrations of masculinity and physical prowess, may become targets of further ridicule, bullying, and related forms of delinquent victimization by peers.

With this said, it is important to note that gender appears to be an important determinate in the kinds of peer victimization children experience. For example, Olweus (1994) has noted that boys tend to experience more physical forms of bullying (e.g., unprovoked attacks, acts of intimidation, and threats of violence), whereas girls tend to experience more subtle forms of bullying (e.g., slandering, rumor-mongering, social exclusion, and manipulation of friendship relationships). Though boys are not exempt from psychological attacks by their peers, the aim of such attacks is often intended to raise questions about the victims' masculinity and/or their gender orientation.

Control variables employed in this study suggest that younger boys tend to suffer the highest rates of bullying and peer victimization. Similar research reported

by DeVoe et al. (2004) supports this conclusion. Their study, like the current one, also concluded that race is not a significant factor in predicting peer-related victimization.

Limitations of Data

Although the present study contributes to the literature, it is not without limitations. First, the study relies on cross-sectional data collected from students in a rural Southern state. Further, because of various issues, original data collection efforts were unable to elicit a systematic random sample and were forced to include all willing students in the study. While it may appear to some to be a convenience sample, it should be noted that all students in the designated grades were given equal opportunity to participate in this study and as such it can be described as a purposive sample. However, the method in which the data were collected does limit the findings.[7] As such, caution should be taken since the findings in the current study are not offered as ones upon which broad generalizations may be made, but rather as an exploratory study that may help guide future researchers in their attempts to examine this issue more closely.

Another important limitation in the current study is that the temporal ordering of victimization and offending could not be established (a common weakness with cross sectional designs). Future studies, however, should seek to clarify the developmental ordering of parental abuse and peer victimization.

Conclusion

The findings seem to support the tenets of differential oppression theory, especially the utilization of the passive acceptance adaptation. Specifically, the study supports the assertion that passive acceptance of oneself as inferior often leads to internalized manifestations such as low self-esteem or perceived inability to succeed. In the current study, children who experienced lower levels of self-esteem as a result of emotional and verbal abuse were more likely to be victimized by their peers. Again, although the findings do not indicate causality, they do provide an indication that self-concept is an important determinant in how children deal with parental abuse.

Findings in the current study differ from those set forth in previous studies that suggest children who experience verbal abuse by their parents are more likely to become violent or aggressive. While the results do not speak to the aggressive or violent behaviors of psychologically maltreated children, they do demonstrate that psychologi-

cal maltreatment increases the risk of peer victimization, at least within the study sample. These findings indicate that more exploration into the effects of parental verbal and emotional abuse on future peer-related victimization is needed. Of importance is an examination of the perpetrators of the peer-related victimization. Are these children also the victims of emotional and verbal abuse by adults? If so, why do some externalize the abuse, while others internalize it? Children with high levels of self-esteem were less likely to be victimized by their peers. With this in mind, the role of self-esteem should be more closely examined. Specifically, what is the effect of emotional and verbal abuse on self-esteem and how does that translate into the utilization of the various adaptive reactions by children? Also, do anger and resentment, as speculated by differential oppression theory, affect the utilization of particular adaptive reactions? Finally, given the literature that suggests different victimization patterns based on gender, further examinations should also pay close attention to the role of gender.

In conclusion, the findings reported in this study suggest several policy implications that may be helpful for parents, teachers, and school administrators to consider in their daily interactions with children.

Policy Implications

Parents should be made more aware of the harmful effects of verbal and emotional abuse. As recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), pediatricians are in an optimal position to impart such knowledge, through brochures, verbal guidance, and even home visitation (Kairys, Johnson, and the Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2002). Parents should also be encouraged to engage in more positive means of discipline such as redirection and rewarding children's successes, rather than punishing their failures and/or shortcomings. In this way, self-esteem can be built in children. Safety, acceptance, and praise are also likely to reinforce children's positive self-concept. They will learn to see themselves as capable and valued. By monitoring behavior, yet allowing children to make their own decisions when appropriate, parents can teach responsibility and help raise self-confidence.

Teachers, school counselors, and social workers who work with children are also encouraged by this study to focus on building positive feelings of self-worth in children and cautioned against using unnecessary verbal and emotional abuse as a control device. Moreover, they are encouraged to expand conventional understandings of child maltreatment to include not only incidences of

physical/sexual abuse and neglect but also acts of verbal and emotional cruelty against children. Finally, witnessing acts of verbal and emotional abuse should be grounds for reporting and/or preventing so-called "normal" acts of aggression against children by adults.

Finally, school administrators are in a powerful position to help establish a school climate or culture that is focused both on learning and community well-being. A positive school climate can extend beyond the classroom when school personnel are willing to reinforce the importance of positive, pro-social values such as tolerance, harmony, violence prevention, and the need for basic civility in everyday life. Nel Noddings (1992) of Stanford University has an entire curriculum for schools built around an ethic of care (see also Katz, Noddings, and Strike, 1999). Even without embracing Noddings' philosophy of education, administrators are cautioned through this study to attend to the issue of how adults (e.g., teachers, parents, counselors) relate to children, and the negative effects of any abuse of their relationship with children – even at the seemingly harmless level of verbal and emotional abuse.

Endnotes

1. Davis (1996) found that parental threats of corporal punishment are fairly common occurrences in public places (e.g., malls, restaurants, zoos). Given the prevalence of threats made in public places, Davis believes that similar threats of violence against children are even more common in private places, particularly in a child's own home. Yet, because verbal abuse, especially incidents such as threats and intimidation, are so pervasive, witnesses tend to ignore them as "normal" (e.g., typical, unimportant) occurrences.

2. Vissing et al. (1991) are careful to point out that estimates of both the incidence and "chronicity" of these acts are likely to be lower bound estimates given parents' reluctance to candidly divulge known instances of verbal attacks, or because some may truly have forgotten.

3. Only students whose parents signed the consent forms specifying that their children were *not* allowed to participate in the study were excluded from the survey. Thirty-two such forms were received.

4. A total of 579 surveys were excluded as a result of reporting dishonesty on the survey. In results not presented here, we examined the responses of the students who were eliminated from the sample for dishonesty against those who indicated they were honest. Our findings were consistent with those of Brown and Zimmerman (2004). Those students who reported being dishonest did, in fact, provide more inconsistent answers than those who reported being honest.

5. Males made up 51% of the students in the four school districts and 65% of the students in the four districts were White. Furthermore, in results not presented here, we utilized independent sample *t*-tests to estimate the difference in mean scores for the indices. There was no significant difference for the mean scores on the index between the two groups. For each index, those who did not indicate their race and/or gender scored significantly higher on the index than those who did (and were thus included in the sample). Additionally, we estimated Model 8 using all cases but excluding race and gender as control variables. The associations among positive self-worth, ability to succeed, emotional/verbal abuse, and peer victimization remained statistically significant and in the same direction as the associations with the sample under study here. As such, we argue that the relationships presented here are conservative estimates of the actual relationships that would have been demonstrated had we been able to include all respondents instead of only those who completed the race and gender measures.

6. A variety of issues, such as tracking, conflicts in schedules, constraints placed by school administrators prohibited a representative sample from being selected.

7. The pilot test was administered to this group for several reasons: (1) they approximated the lowest targeted grade level to be included in the study, (2) they would not be unduly biased by participating in the pilot study, as they were 7th graders who were not intended to be included in the study sample, and (3) the program specifically targeted educationally disadvantaged students. Therefore, they were the most appropriate group to provide practical and logistical information such as the determination of total time needed for the administration, the comprehension level of the intended subjects, and the appropriateness of question wording.

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Appendix A. Index Item, Reliabilities, and Factor Loadings

Variable	Categories	Response format	Factor loadings
Peer victimization (α = .74)	Another student yelled, cursed, insulted, or teased you.	Nine point Likert Scale from never (0) to once a day (8).	.71
	Another student hit, kicked, pushed, or shoved you.		.78
	Student has had something stolen at school.		.68
	Student has had money or things taken from them by force.		.67
	Another student has threatened them without a weapon.		.75
Parental emotional and verbal maltreatment (α = .88)	Feels parents ignore them.	Five point Likert Scale from never (0) to always (4).	.77
	Feels parents blame them for things not their fault.		.82
	Parents yell at students.		.84
	Parents nag student.		.79
	Parents threaten to slap student.		.81
	Parents actually slap students.		.70
Positive self-worth (α = .89)	I feel that I am as worthy as other people.	Five point Likert Scale from never (0) to always (4).	.81
	I feel that I have a number of good qualities		.88
	I am able to do most things as well as most people.		.81
	I have a positive attitude about myself.		.85
	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.		.84
Ability to succeed (α = .87)	*Responses for these five items were recoded in reverse numerical order to reflect a positive image of ability to succeed.*	Five point Likert Scale from never (0) to always (4).	
	Overall, I feel like a failure.		.84
	I don't feel like I have much to be proud of.		.70
	I wish I could have more respect for myself.		.82
	I certainly feel useless at times.		.88
	At times, I think I am no good at all.		.89
Race	Original response format was: a) white, b) African-American, c) Asian-American, d) Hispanic, and e) other. These answers were then recoded from string to numeric values.	The variables were dummy coded as follows: 0) for non-whites and 1) for whites.	
Gender	Original response format was a = female, b = male.	The variables were dummy coded as follows: 0) for female and 1) for male.	
Grade Level	Original responses for grade level were coded as numeric values as follows: 1) for 6th grade, 2) for 8th grade, 3) for 10th grade, and 4) for 12th grade.		