Emotional Maltreatment, Peer Victimization, and Depressive Versus Anxiety Symptoms During Adolescence: Hopelessness as a Mediator


The interpersonal stressors of emotional abuse and neglect and peer victimization (as predictors of depression and anxiety symptoms) were assessed in adolescents (n=225) over three time points, namely at initial assessment, and 9 and 18 months later. Emotional abuse predicted increases in adolescent depression and total, social, and physical anxiety. Emotional neglect did not predict increases in teen anxiety or depression. Peer victimization predicted increases in adolescent depressive symptoms.

Key Findings:

- Emotional abuse and peer victimization predicted increases in depressive symptoms over time.
- Emotional abuse predicted increases in symptoms of anxiety (including social and physical anxiety) over time.
- Emotional neglect did not predict changes in depressive or anxiety symptoms.
- Hopelessness mediated the relationships between emotional abuse and increases in depressive and social anxiety symptoms. Specifically, emotional abuse predicted hopelessness after 9 months, which predicted social anxiety and depression over time.

Implications for Programs:

- Programs could offer classes for families on how to recognize and combat bullying.
- Programs could collaborate with schools to help identify and support military children who experience bullying in school.

Implications for Policies:

- Police could recommend that youth be regularly screened for a range of mental health and broader wellness dimensions, and that appropriate services are accessible and affordable for families.
- Policies could allocate funding to train family workers on how to recognize and intervene with families dealing with emotional abuse.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Future research could use multiple informants to assess emotional maltreatment and peer victimization. Research could also use interviewer-based assessments of anxiety and depression.
- Additional studies could assess additional types of victimization such as relational and reputational victimization.

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12-13 year old Caucasian and African American adolescents were recruited from Philadelphia public and private schools through newspaper advertisements and school mailings.

At baseline, adolescents completed depression and anxiety questionnaires, and their mothers completed stressful life events questionnaires.

9 months later, participants completed questionnaires about emotional abuse and neglect, relationally oriented peer victimization, and hopelessness. At time 3 (9 months later), participants completed depression and anxiety measures.

74% of families who participated at Time 1 also completed Time 3 assessments.

Multiple hierarchical linear regressions were used to predict depression and anxiety symptom over time.

225 adolescents participated

59% of the youth were female.

Average youth age = 12.84 years (SD=0.60 years).

45% of participants were eligible for free lunch; 35% had household incomes between $30,000-60,000, 23% under $30,000, and 25% over $90,000.

Racial/ethnic composition: 55% African American, 45% Caucasian or Biracial

All measures were self-report; using multiple informants may strengthen the findings.

Anxiety and depression symptoms were assessed, but not whether youth met criteria for a disorder.

The hopelessness scale had low internal reliability and may have not produced accurate results.

The limitations of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question were... ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐

The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were... ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐

The limitations of this study are... ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐

The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are... ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐

Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications