6. General Discussion
The aim of this thesis was to study the course of peer victimization in 4- to 5-year old children, and to examine the links with parenting and parent-child relationships. Victimization is highly common as a stressor for children, starting already during preschool. However, in the early school years the role of victim does not constitute a stable role. Most children are exposed to victimization transiently, with only few remaining as stable victims over time. Parenting plays an important role in the development of social competence, especially when children make the transition to school (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 1998). Therefore, risk and protective factors within the family system were identified in order to explain the course of peer victimization. First, risk factors within the school system were examined in order to identify types of classes and schools in which the risk of becoming a victim of peer aggression is heightened. Next, we examined how direct parental influences, in the form of three types of parental strategies of response to victimization, were predictive of the course of peer victimization once a child was actually being victimized. Furthermore, we examined if parenting style and attachment security were associated with the course of victimization, because these two factors have been identified as indirect parental influences on the development of social competence (Ladd & Pettit, 2002). In addition, we investigated the validity of a new procedure that would allow the assessment of attachment security through the Attachment Q-Sort and the separation/reunion procedure in a semi-structured setting for preschool-aged children.

In this chapter, we summarize and discuss the findings of the four studies. Next, we will address the strengths and limitations of the present thesis followed by a general conclusion. In the final part of this chapter, we will discuss possible practical implications.

**Summary and Conclusions**

**Victimization in context**

The first study (Chapter 2) made use of a sample of 2,003 children (4-5 years) recruited from 98 classes in 23 elementary schools in the Netherlands. These children were both victims and non-victims. All children were assessed with respect to exposure to victimization on the basis of teacher reported victimization during the fall period.

The first study focused on testing a multilevel model in which school-context factors (i.e., school size, neighborhood SES) as well as school-climate factors (i.e., social climate of the school, antibullying policies) were investigated as potential risk or protective factors for the incidence of peer victimization. Results revealed that gender and social climate of the school were directly related to peer victimization. Boys were more likely to be victimized than girls and appeared more vulnerable when school-context factors were more negative. Furthermore, an association with SES of the neighborhood and anti-bullying policies was found. Children who attended schools in lower-SES neighborhoods
experienced less victimization when these schools had implemented a school wide social skills training. Surprisingly, the reverse effect was found for schools in higher-SES neighborhoods. Finally, results of this study demonstrated that most of the variance in peer victimization in young children is situated at the class level, and to a much lesser degree at the school level. Variance between classes, however, could not be further explored, because most study variables were situated at the school level. It was concluded that the contribution of factors at the individual level to the course of peer victimization, such as parenting, always need to be viewed as a result of an interplay with factors at the class and school level.

**Parenting and victimization**

The second, third, and fourth study were based on a sub-sample from the original 2,003 children. This sub-sample included 73 victimized children with one of their parents. In order to determine for whom victimization was stable, teachers were asked to complete the questionnaire on exposure to victimization twice more, for all 73 children, during the school year (in the Winter and Spring period). During a laboratory session in the form of a children’s party, we observed attachment quality using both the Attachment Q-sort (Waters, 1995) and the separation/reunion procedure based on the protocol of Cassidy and Marvin (1992). Furthermore, parenting style was assessed by presenting parent and child a series of four tasks that allowed the observation of intrusive-demandingness and responsiveness. These two dimensions of parenting style were coded afterwards using the coding system developed by Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd (1998). One or two weeks after the children’s party, we assessed parental strategies by presenting them hypothetical vignettes describing various forms of victimization. Parents were interviewed by phone and their responses were coded afterwards using an adapted version of a coding scheme developed by Mills and Rubin (1990).

The second study (Chapter 3) focused on direct parental influences by examining three types of strategies that parents claimed they would use when they had to respond to a situation in which their child was victimized (i.e., autonomy supporting, autonomy undermining, and autonomy neutral), and testing the links with the course of peer victimization. Results revealed that autonomy neutral strategies were mentioned the most by parents in order to help their child facing peer problems. Autonomy supporting as well as autonomy neutral strategies were associated with a decrease of victimization, but only in the first semester of the school year. Protective effects of parental strategies were not sustained in the second semester. This finding may reflect the process of group formation as the social dominance structure in the peer group may become more established throughout the school year. Autonomy undermining strategies were mentioned most often by parents in the case of physical aggression and the least often in the case of
relational aggression, indicating that the situation facing their children determines the extent to which parents are tempted to respond in ways that actually undermine the emerging autonomy of the child in solving social problems. Surprisingly, no support was found for the hypothesis that autonomy undermining strategies would increase the vulnerability for peer victimization. This is not in line with prior research conducted among older children. It is possible that directive ways of intervening in case of peer victimization may be more normative in this young age group than in older children. A child who is protected, accompanied, or guided by his or her parent may not necessarily be labelled by peers as weak or immature. These findings should be seen as first links between direct parenting factors and victimization, as a specific corollary of social competence.

The third study (Chapter 4) focused on indirect parenting factors. We studied the linkages between two dimensions of parenting style, controlling parenting (i.e., intrusive-demandingness) and autonomy support (i.e., responsiveness) and the course of peer victimization in young children. As expected, the findings revealed that children were less likely to remain stable victims during the school year when their parents showed higher levels of responsiveness. However, no support was found for the hypothesis that higher levels of parental intrusive-demandingness were associated with continued victimization. This was not expected on the basis of a previous study by Ladd and Kochenderfer Ladd (1998), who found that higher levels of parental intrusive-demandingness increased the risk of becoming victimized at the beginning of kindergarten. Therefore, it seems that although an earlier study demonstrated that intrusive-demandingness was predictive of the onset of peer victimization in young children, this need not lead to continuation of the victim status.

The fourth study (Chapter 5) reported on the course of victimization, linking the role of concurrent attachment security as a second form of indirect parental influences besides parenting style. Attachment security to parents has been found to be an important foundation for social competence with peers. It was unknown, however, whether attachment security might also function as a source of support when children become victimized at school. The results did not reveal that concurrent attachment security was related to the course of peer victimization. In our view, secure attachment would increase the likelihood of seeking emotional support from parents as well as getting it, and that this support would help these children to solve their problems. However, the group of children under investigation was very young and maybe not yet verbally capable of translating feelings of stress in the school context into a clear signal for help in the family context. This non finding does not rule out the possibility of other protective effects of attachment security, for example serving as moderator of emotional consequences of victimization. Interestingly, we found that most children who were identified as victims at the beginning of the school year were securely attached. This is not in line with findings in older children,
suggesting that peer victimization in preschool may be part of the transition period from home to school which is characterized by the formation of a new group in which victims of peer aggression might be relatively random chosen by their aggressive class mates.

Furthermore, the fourth study examined the validity of a new procedure that allowed observation of attachment security in a semi-structured setting. Both the AQS and preschool attachment classifications based on the separation-reunion procedure were conducted, allowing convergent validity of these measures in the preschool period to be assessed. Results revealed a relatively strong association between security-insecurity on the AQS and separation/reunion. The results suggest that a children’s party, as a semi-structured laboratory setting for preschool-age children, is a promising methodological innovation that allows the observation of the AQS and separation/reunion procedure at one and the same time.

**Strengths and Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The current thesis has yielded new findings regarding the linkages between parenting and stability and change of victimization status in 4- to 5-year-old children. Until now, most research on victimization has focused on children from age eight years. Parenting factors studied have remained quite global and not specific to the problem of victimization. Only a small number of studies focused on parental influences in peer victimization at a younger age (Barker et al., 2008; Ladd & Kochenderfer Ladd, 1998). This thesis contributes to the field of victimization research by showing that direct and indirect parental influences are not only related to the onset of peer victimization (e.g., Ladd and Kochenderfer Ladd, 1998), but also to the course of these problems. Furthermore, studying direct parenting influences has led to the identification of strategies for responding as a parent to victimization, that are likely to be helpful for young children faced with the problem of victimization.

Another contribution of the current thesis was the development of the children’s party which appeared to be promising as a methodological innovation. This semi-structured laboratory procedure for preschool-age children was the first to allow the assessment of the AQS and the separation/reunion procedure in one time. The relatively strong association between the two measures of attachment security provided evidence for convergent validity in the age group of 4- to 5-year old children. Furthermore, the children’s party also allowed the observation of parenting style as a third measure in one and the same procedure. This means a significant reduction of time needed for an intensive data collection based on observations of parent-child interactions. It should be noted that using this procedure requires care to mask observational raters for information on other associated factors, and the efficiency of conducting observations has to be
balanced against the time and technical resources needed for editing video footage from several static cameras.

Finally, the teacher questionnaire on peer victimization which was constructed and validated in the current thesis showed that teachers appear to be reliable informants in this young age group. Given the importance of early prevention and intervention, teachers may use this questionnaire to become and stay aware of victimization in their classroom throughout the school year.

There are also some limitations that should be noted. One limitation of the current thesis concerns the issue of differences between maternal and paternal parenting factors. Because of the small number of fathers involved in the study (23%), we could not examine differences between mothers and fathers with sufficient statistical power. However, mothers and fathers may have different roles and different effects on the socialization of children (e.g., Ladd & Pettit, 2002; Verhoeven, Junger, Van Aken, Dekovic, & Van Aken, 2010). Furthermore, in our sample only one parent for each child was observed. Therefore, the combined effect of both maternal and paternal influences could not be examined. Future research may expand on the present findings by examining the relative and combined effects of maternal and paternal influences on the course of peer victimization.

Another limitation may be that this study did not examine gender differences. In the current thesis, gender of the child was not significantly related to the parenting factors under investigation and therefore we did not further explore this issue. In a number of studies linking parental styles or family functioning and bullying/victimization, it transpired that such links could be different for boys and girls (Finnegan, Hodges, & Perry, 1998; Olweus, 1993). Results, however, are not consistent across studies (Ladd & Kochenderfer Ladd, 1998). Future studies should focus on further identifying gender specific outcomes in relation to parental influences and stability in victimization status, especially because prevention and intervention programs should be sensitive to these differences.

A final limitation referred to the cross-sectional character of the current thesis. Schneider, Atkinson and Tardif (2001) ended their meta-analytic study on attachment security and peer relations with the conclusion that probably many factors influence children’s peer relationships and therefore the relative and combined contributions of multiple family factors should be evaluated. Therefore, future research should focus on testing a causal model in which the stability of victimization is moderated by a specific configuration of attachment quality, parenting style and parental strategies. However, in the context of the current thesis, such a research design was not feasible due to the size of the sample. As a consequence, the statistical power needed for testing a complex moderation model was too low.
General conclusion

This thesis indicated that parenting partly explains the course of peer victimization in young children. Responsive and autonomy supporting parents seem to support children’s competence in dealing with victimization. Findings, however, do not support concerns that parents may actually make the situation of young victimized children worse by active, autonomy undermining parental involvement or a controlling parenting style. At this point, the role of attachment is less clear. Although no support was found for the link between concurrent attachment security and the course of peer victimization, it cannot be ruled out that the parent-child attachment relationship had a more indirect influence on victimization problems by buffering the impact of emotional consequences. Overall, the current thesis supports a broadening of focus beyond the individual child, class, and school factors in order to understand the underlying processes and mechanisms of peer victimization.

Practical Implications

The findings of this thesis support involvement of parents as partners in tackling victimization problems in school. Thus far, studies on bullying and victimization have focused mainly on predispositions of children, peers, and teachers. This has resulted in school-based interventions which have had some success (Olweus, 1993; Ttofi & Farrington, 2010), but no studies so far report complete elimination of the problem. At best, schools can contain such behavior. Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij, and Van Oost (2002) even argue that the relative neglect of family factors in bullying and victimization might contribute to the maintenance of this problem in schools. Therefore, anti-bullying interventions at school should include a family component. It is not sufficient to only organize general information sessions to inform parents on the subject of victimization problems, the school policies, and anti-bullying rules. Until now, this is the most common strategy for involving parents in interventions at school (Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Van Oost, 2001).

For parents, victimization is a great worry, and they often do not know how to help their child when it is actually victimized. The results of this thesis add to the reasons for informing and educating parents, right at the start of the school year, on the important contribution they can make to the success of the transition period from home to school by employing a responsive parenting style. For parents whose children actually become victimized, more specific parental training sessions may be developed in order to educate them on the specific parental behaviors and strategies which were identified in the current thesis as being helpful in case of peer victimization in young children.
Evidence for the effectiveness of such training sessions was reported by Ttofi and Farrington (2010). They found in a meta-analytic study that parent training and meetings as part of anti-bullying interventions were significantly related to a decrease in victimization. In addition, our finding that active parental involvement does not seem to make the situation of young victimized children worse may be a great relief to parents who are dealing with this issue, and may be an important argument for teachers and schools who may hesitate to discuss victimization with parents out of concern that parents may make things worse for the child.

It is important to note, however, that schools should not suggest that parents can completely solve the problems on their own. On the contrary, our findings plead for a joint approach considering the significant influence of class and school factors on peer victimization problems. If teachers and parents teach, demonstrate and reinforce the same social skills that victimized children may need to learn, the help may be more successful.
References


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