1. Introduction
Although most parents trust that school is a safe place for their children, and that their children will enjoy themselves at school, the risk that their child becomes a victim of harassment or abuse while at school is in fact quite high. Such victimization can be both physical as well as psychological (Crick, Casas & Mosher, 1997). Chronic victimization by peers has been shown to occur in every culture (Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano, & Slee, 1999), to start at an early age (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997), and to result in serious forms of maladjustment (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Victimization is a highly common stressor that exceeds the independent coping skills of most young children.

Several authors (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996a; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Perry, Perry, & Boldizar, 1990) argued that in the early stages of group formation victims are mostly selected at random. Using self-reports of peer victimization, Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996b) found that whereas 20.5% of the 200 participating kindergarten children were identified as victims in the Fall period, only 8.5% of the children were classified as victims both in Fall and 3 to 4 months later. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Wardrop (2001) even found that while 60% of the children reported that they had been victimized at one or more of the four yearly assessments (starting at the entrance of kindergarten through third grade) only 4-14% of the sample emerged as stable victims. These results indicate considerable instability in victimization status and presents, therefore, a clear case of multifinality. Some children are victim for a short period, and will continue to develop along normative pathways. Other children are chronic victims of bullying, and may develop along increasingly deviant pathways. An important task of the science of developmental psychopathology is to unravel these divergent pathways in terms of underlying processes and mechanisms. The aim of the present thesis was to disentangle

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pathways linking early victimization to later victimization and to non-victimization by taking into account the role of parenting. Parents are likely to respond to their child being bullied and will try to influence the course that this victimization takes. We focused on the youngest groups of primary school children\(^1\), when in terms of numbers of children affected, victimization is at its most widespread (Smith, Madsen, & Moody, 1999) and when the relative importance of parenting for social development may be higher than at later ages (Dekovic & Janssens, 1992; Ladd & Kochenderfer Ladd, 1998).

This chapter introduces the core theoretical approach employed in the present thesis and the research aims and questions that were formulated in the context of these perspectives. Next, the research design is explained followed by an outline of the thesis.

**Victimization in context**

Although relatively few studies on victimization have focused on young children (4-5 years), there is evidence to suggest that the prevalence of victimization in this age group is relatively high (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996b; Kochenderfer Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). In order to learn more about the factors responsible for peer victimization in young children, most studies have focused on risk factors at the individual level or at group processes. However, more distal variables within children’s school environment may contribute to the onset of peer victimization as well. In some classroom, school, and neighbourhood environments young children may be more or less at risk of becoming victimized than in others (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). The rate of victimization measured in past studies may not only have characterized the individual child, but may also have characterized the school system in which children were embedded. Therefore, identifying types of classes and schools that are at risk for peer victimization in this young age group may be an essential first step in disentangling the divergent pathways of victimization. The first study in the present thesis (Chapter 2) included a multilevel study on the association between school level factors and peer victimization in young children. In this study, school-context variables (i.e., school size, neighbourhood SES) as well as school-climate factors (i.e., social climate of the school, anti-bullying policies) were examined as potential risk factors in explaining the onset of peer victimization.

**Parenting and socialization**

School is not the only system in which children are embedded. Identifying risk factors within the family system is another very important avenue for research in order to explain the onset and continuation of peer victimization. Ladd and Pettit’s model on family processes and the socialization of children’s social competence (2002) was chosen as one

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\(^1\) Throughout the thesis we used the term first and second graders in accordance with the Dutch school system. With respect to age, first and second graders are comparable with kindergartners.
A theoretical framework to facilitate our study into the role of parents in case of peer victimization. In this model, Ladd and Pettit (2002) made a distinction between direct and indirect contributions of parental socialization to their children’s social competence. Direct parental influences refer to the concept of parental strategies. In other words, this refers to parents’ efforts to scaffold their children’s social development and meet specific socialization goals within the context of peer interactions. Indirect parental influences refer to concepts such as attachment and parenting style. In other words, it refers to behaviors and relationship patterns children have learned within the family system and have transferred to the peer domain. In the current study, parental strategies, parenting style and attachment quality were chosen as three key variables which may explain the contribution of parenting to the course of victimization in young children.

**Parental strategies.** Ladd and Pettit suggested that parents may directly shape children’s interactions with peers as a designer of the setting in which these interactions take place, as a mediator for making interactions happen, as a supervisor during interactions with peers, and as a consultant when the child brings up worries. Parents may engage in multiple forms of these ‘management roles’ and all these various parental strategies may have different effects on children’s social development. One aim of the current thesis was to investigate these different parental ‘management’ roles in relation to peer victimization, because this may lead to the identification of specific interventions of parents that are helpful or unhelpful in influencing the course of the victimization.

Parental intervention strategies vary along a dimension of support; from the development of autonomous social problem-solving to undermining the development of such autonomy (Mills & Rubin, 1990; Russel & Finnie, 1990). Autonomy supporting strategies may be helpful in terminating victimization, such as scaffolding the child’s social competences through providing suggestions for behavioral solutions and monitoring the child’s success from a distance (Rubin & Burgess, 2002). Other strategies may derive from a generally autonomy undermining style, and may be particularly unproductive for a child who is victimized. Some parents pressure the child towards particular ‘solutions’, such as retaliation. Retaliatory responses, however, tend to exacerbate the problems of the child (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997). Other parents may be prone to step into the situation and complain to the teacher or to the bully’s parents or they may demand that their child behaves in a given way towards the bullies, in both cases limiting opportunities for the child to develop social competencies and contributing to a dependent and immature image of the child in the eyes of his or her classmates (Ladd & Kochenderfer Ladd, 1998).

In Chapter 3, a study will be reported that related three different types of parental strategies (i.e. autonomy supporting, autonomy undermining and autonomy neutral) to the course of peer victimization in young children.

**Parenting style.** Research on parenting style has in general focused on two broad dimensions: parental control (i.e. intrusive demandingness) and responsiveness. Parental...
control refers to parental behavior that limits opportunities for the child to mature and develop social competence. This parental behavior is characterized by the tendency to solve their children’s problems or demanding specific forms of behavior of the child. Responsiveness refers to parental behavior that supports children’s autonomy, self-regulation, individuality and self-assertion (Bornstein & Bornstein, 2007). A proper balance between control and responsiveness has been linked to higher social competencies in children. High levels of responsiveness affirm and build on children’s initiatives and contribute to children’s self-efficacy and the growth of self confidence (Laible & Thompson, 2007). A moderate level of parental control may provide the direction and guidance necessary for children to become socialized into the norms and values of a given socio-cultural context. However, too much parental control may put children at risk, because their behavior may lack the flexibility and confidence in order to develop good peer relationships (Ladd & Pettit, 2002). In other words, parenting styles may foster child behavior patterns that put them at risk for peer victimization, but parenting may also contribute to the ability to solve social problems and rid themselves from the status of victim. Parental control, in the form of intrusive demandingness, and responsiveness has been found to be associated with the onset of victimization status in preschool (Ladd & Kochenderfer Ladd, 1998). One aim of the current thesis was to investigate to what extent these parenting styles also predict the course peer victimization may take. Therefore, the study described in Chapter 4 examined the linkages between two dimensions of parenting style, controlling parenting in the form of intrusive-demandingness and autonomy support in the form of responsiveness, and the stability of peer victimization in young children (4-5 years) during one school year.

Attachment security. The attachment system can be described as a behavioural system in which the attachment figure functions as a secure base for the child from which he/she explores the world and at the same time as a safe haven to seek relief in times of distress. In most attachment relationships, the functions of secure base and safe haven form a flexible and dynamic balance. Children who are in such a secure attachment relationship build up a representation of the attachment figure as available and competent in times of distress and a representation of the self as effective in eliciting an appropriate parental reaction (also called the internal working model; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). However, in some attachment relationships the balance between the two functions tips to the other end. Children who are in such an insecure attachment relationship build up a representation of the attachment figure as inconsistently available, rejecting, or disengaged and of the self as unworthy of attention and largely ineffective in eliciting a prompt and appropriate response. The type of internal working model children derive from attachment relationships with parents also influences how they anticipate and experience new, nonparental relationships with adults and peers. Insecurely attached children may evoke more negative responses from the same partner than securely
attached children, based on their coloured expectations of unfriendliness and unreliability (Thompson, 2006). Insecure attachment histories have been found to be associated with victimization status in preschool (Troy & Sroufe, 1987).

Attachment theorists have argued that attachment security is not only important for social development because the working models of attachment relationships may generalize to other social relationships, but also because the possibility to use attachment figures as a secure base and as a safe haven is important across development in order to function socially in an adequate way. The study of this conjecture is complicated by the fact that older children have developed independent coping skills, so opportunities to study the importance of attachment security in times of stress become exceedingly rare. Victimization presents a naturally occurring stressor for which young children may generally lack the ability to cope with adaptively on their own. Therefore, one aim of the present thesis, described in Chapter 5, was to examine whether concurrent attachment security was associated with the course of peer victimization.

The quality of attachment relationships is most often assessed on the basis of observations of child behaviour towards an attachment figure in either a separation-reunion paradigm (the Strange Situation Procedure: Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) or from behaviour in a naturalistic setting (e.g., home observations using the Attachment Q-sort; Waters, 1995). Few studies have yet looked at convergent validity of the AQS against attachment classifications based on (adapted) Strange Situation Procedures or separation/reunion procedures in preschool-aged children. Due to the fact that the design of the current thesis only allowed a short time span of two months to obtain attachment data, we designed a new laboratory procedure to be able to use the two instruments, which are widely accepted as valid for assessing attachment quality, at the same time (for more details see the description of the research design). The study described in Chapter 5 of the present thesis examined the convergent validity of the two instruments in this new laboratory procedure.

**Research design**

To address the research aims which are described in the previous section, four studies were performed (Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5). The data of the four studies were obtained from questionnaires, interviews, and observations during a laboratory situation in the guise of a children’s party.

**Participants.** The sample of the multilevel study, described in Chapter 2, comprised 2,003 children (between 4 and 5 years) from 98 classes in 23 elementary schools in the Netherlands. These children were both victims and non-victims. The sample of the main study, described in Chapter 3, 4, and 5, was a selection of only victimized children from the original sample of 2,003 children. This sample included 73 children (20 girls, 53 boys), aged either 4 or 5 years ($M=5.01$ years, $SD=.60$, at the start of the school year) and one of
their parents (57 mothers, 16 fathers). These children and families were recruited from 46 classes from 18 elementary schools in the Netherlands.

**Procedure.** Study families were recruited on the basis of a two-step screening procedure. In the first step, 2,003 preschool children were assessed with respect to exposure to victimization on the basis of teacher reported victimization during the fall period. In the second step, parents of the 295 children who scored the highest on exposure to victimization (at least compared to their classmates) were asked informed consent for participation in the study. All participating children were followed up twice during one school year (in the winter and spring period) to determine for whom victimization was stable. For a more detailed description of the two-step screening procedure and the construction and validation of the teacher report measure we refer to the separate chapters and to Chapter 3 specifically.

Data on attachment and parenting style were collected through laboratory sessions in the form of children’s parties, which were organised during the Winter term. Each party consisted of the following parts: a welcome to the party with coffee and tea, a separation-reunion procedure, free play after the separation/reunion procedure, snack time, four tasks allowing the observation of parenting style and the ending of the party. The duration of the sessions was 2.5 hours and each session was videotaped by nine cameras. Children as well as their parent were invited (six children and one of their parents per session).

In order to assess the quality of the parent-child attachment relationship we included the Attachment Q-set (Waters, 1995). Based on video observations of the whole party, except for the observations during the separation/reunion procedure, an independent certified observer sorted the 90 items of the AQS-set. To allow assessment of convergent validity a separation/reunion procedure based on the protocol of Cassidy and Marvin (1992) was conducted. This procedure was designed to be able to assess secure base behaviour in a situation of mild stress. Because the sample consisted of children in preschool age, separations may be more routine and less upsetting than for infants. Therefore, the procedure was conducted right after the start of the party before the children had become familiar with the location. In an unfamiliar setting, with unfamiliar people, the children were separated from their parent for 40 minutes to bake cookies. After 40 minutes each child was brought separately to another room by an unknown adult. The child could make a drawing for 5 minutes, while the unknown adult was reading a magazine. After 5 minutes the parent entered the room for reunion. About one minute after the reunion, the stranger left the room. The reunion behaviour of the child was coded afterwards by a certified coder using the McArthur Preschool Attachment Classification.

In order to assess parenting style, mother and child were presented a series of four tasks. The party was designed in such a way that the interaction tasks were performed near the end. In this way parents and children would get the opportunity to feel
comfortable with the situation and act more naturally. All four tasks were designed to create the opportunity of observing controlling parenting in the form of intrusive-demandingness and autonomy support in the form of responsiveness. The tasks included the following: (1) a challenging puzzle: children had to solve a puzzle which was far too difficult for them to solve on their own and help from their parents was needed; (2) painting a plaster figure: children were invited to paint a plaster figure in any way they liked, with or without help from their parent; (3) reading a book: parent and child could pick out a book and read it together; (4) a miniature table version soccer game in which the ball was moved by blowing through a straw: parent and child were asked to determine the play rules together and to play the game. Every 7 minutes all parent-child dyads were asked to rotate from one task to the following one. As a small reward, the children received a card to paste a sticker onto after completion of each task. The video-observations were rated afterwards by an independent set of two trained coders on 5-point scales for intrusiveness, demandingness and responsiveness (Ladd & Kochenderfer Ladd, 1998).

Table 1. Overview Chapters, Procedures and Measures

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<td><strong>T3: Follow up in June</strong>&lt;br&gt;Teacher questionnaire (n = 73)</td>
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and/or do if they found out that this was happening to their child. All interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed afterwards. An adapted version of a coding scheme developed by Mills and Rubin (1990) was used to rate three dimensions of parental strategies a) autonomy supporting strategies, b) autonomy undermining strategies, and c) autonomy neutral strategies. More detailed information about the procedures and coding systems used in this study is described in Chapter 3, 4, and 5. Table 1. presents an overview of the included samples and measures in the four studies.

Outline of the thesis

In Chapter 2 a multilevel study is presented which examined how factors within young children’s environment contribute to explaining peer victimization. School-context factors (i.e., school size, neighbourhood SES) as well as school-climate factors (i.e., social climate of the school, antibullying policies) were investigated as potential risk factors of the onset of peer victimization. Chapter 3 describes the study on the association between parental strategies and the course of peer victimization by examining the effect of autonomy supporting, autonomy undermining, and autonomy neutral parental responses. Chapter 4 focuses on indirect parenting factors. The association 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 was studied. Chapter 5 reports on the convergent validity of the AQS and the separation-reunion procedure in preschool children. Furthermore, the role of attachment in relation to the course of peer victimization is further investigated. Finally, in Chapter 6 the central findings of the four studies are integrated and discussed.

The chapters can be read as separate studies; therefore some overlap in the description of the studies was inevitable.
References


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