3. Parental strategies and trajectories of peer victimization

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine how parental strategies contribute to explaining trajectories of peer victimization in young children. A total of 73 4 and 5 year old children identified as victims of peer aggression in the fall semester and their parents were recruited from 46 classrooms in 18 schools in the Netherlands. All children were followed-up twice in order to determine for whom victimization was stable. Hypothetical vignettes describing various forms of victimization were presented to one parent of each child in order to assess parental responses to victimization events. Findings indicated that autonomy supporting and autonomy neutral strategies were associated with a decrease of victimization in the first semester of the school year. No protective effects were found in the second semester. Autonomy undermining strategies were not related to the course of peer victimization. These findings underscore the importance of joint and coordinated efforts of teachers and parents as partners in supporting victimized young children at school.
Introduction

Entering elementary school is a challenging period for all young children. They have to adjust to the school environment and gain acceptance in the peer group (Ladd & Price, 1987). In this age group, peer victimization has been shown to be at its most widespread (Smith, Madsen, & Moody, 1999). Victimization in young children (4 to 5 years old) has generally been defined as a form of peer abuse in which a child is frequently the recipient of aggressive acts that can be expressed both directly (e.g., hitting and calling names) and indirectly (e.g., isolation from the group and rumor spreading; Hanish, Ryan, Martin, & Fabes, 2005; Kochenderfer & Ladd 1996a; Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2003; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). For parents, victimization of their young child is a great worry, and their reactions to the situation can be divergent. However, we do not know how these divergent reactions may influence the course of peer victimization.

It has been argued (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996b; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Perry, Perry, & Boldizar, 1990) that in the early stages of group formation, victims are mostly selected at random. Aggressors still have to learn who are the most attractive candidates for systematic bullying. Most children are therefore victimized for a short period of time, while some children become chronic victims of peer aggression. Using self-reports of peer victimization, Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996a) 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 to 14% of the sample emerged as stable victims.

The extent to which children may or may not remain victimized is linked to the concept of social competence. Ladd and Pettit (2002) described childhood social competence as the ability to “initiate and sustain positive interactions with peers . . . form affiliative ties . . . and high-quality relationships with peers . . . and avoid debilitating social roles . . . and interpersonal and emotional consequences” (p. 270). Parenting plays an important role in the development of social competence, especially when children make the transition to school (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 1998). Ladd and Pettit (2002) made a distinction between direct and indirect contributions of parental socialization on their children’s social competence. Indirect parental influences refer to behaviors and relationship patterns within the family system that do not include relationships external to the family (e.g., attachment and parenting style). For example, Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd (1998) found that two general aspects of parenting style, intrusive–demandingness and responsiveness, were predictive of the onset of peer victimization in kindergarten. Most
other research has focused on the impact of indirect parental influences on social competence in general, rather than on the specific social competence of dealing with being victimized.

Direct parental influences refer to parents’ efforts to scaffold their children’s social development and meet specific socialization goals within the context of peer interactions (Ladd & Pettit, 2002; Werner, Senich, & Przepyszny, 2006). 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. Although these roles appear to be potentially important components of parental responses on children’s exposure to victimization, research evidence is limited on the impact of the way in which parents start to design the setting, mediate, supervise, or consult when the child is victimized. Some studies have touched on the issue by examining parental strategies in response to hypothetical peer conflicts, but these conflicts were situations in which mothers supposedly were around and could directly intervene (Colwell, Mize, Pettit, & Laird, 2002). Victimization usually takes place when there is little or no supervision. This might call for a broader set of potential parental strategies, including changing the design of the interaction setting by trying to change the school or the teachers’ behavior or by giving children advice for moments that the parent is not around.

Mills and Rubin (1990) used four hypothetical vignettes in order to investigate the strategies parents employed in response to situations in which their 4 year old children engaged in aggressive or socially withdrawn behavior. They found that parents responded to their children’s aggression with high and moderate power strategies (e.g., strong commands, reasoning, and gentle directions). In case of social withdrawal, parents responded with low power strategies (e.g., asking child what happened), information seeking (e.g., asking the teacher), and planned strategies (e.g., arranging opportunities for the child to play with peers).

Russell and Finnie (1990) investigated mothers’ supervising strategies in relation to the social status of their 4 to 5 year old children during an observational play procedure. They found that mothers of popular children were highly group oriented and were likely to suggest active and skillful strategies to their child such as cooperation. In contrast, mothers of neglected and rejected children seemed to be less aware of group needs. Mothers of rejected children were more likely to show disruptive behavior and to use their authority to take charge of the play, whereas mothers in the neglected group showed a relative absence of help or ideas about how to join in a play and were more oriented towards the play materials.
Although previous studies did not specifically address the reactions of parents to victimization and the course of victimization, their findings suggest that parental responses may be highly diverse. This diversity regards the choice of different types of direct parental interventions (i.e., designing, mediating, supervising, and consulting; Ladd & Pettit, 2002) as well as the parenting style or quality that characterizes these interventions. The findings of Mills and Rubin (1990) and Russel and Finnie (1990) indicate that the intervention style varies along a dimension of support, from developing autonomous social problem solving to undermining the development of such autonomy. Although it is understandable that out of protectiveness in the face of victimization, some parents may have a tendency to take charge of the situation, such responses could be counterproductive. Controlling, autonomy undermining parenting has been found to diminish adolescents’ sense of self-determination, which in turn increased their vulnerability for maladjustment (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Smits, Lowet, & Goossens, 2007). Following self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), parental interventions and guidance that respect or stimulate children’s autonomous motivation would support children’s competence in dealing with the victimization, because children would be more likely to engage in social problem solving and persist until the victimization stops.

The level of support of or intrusion in children’s autonomy may be important for other reasons as well. From a social learning perspective, the positive effects may be expected from autonomy enhancing or autonomy neutral strategies for scaffolding children’s social development through providing suggestions for behavioral solutions and monitoring the children’s success from a distance (Rubin & Burgess, 2002). From a group dynamic perspective, parents may undermine the development of autonomous social competencies by contributing through their interventions to a dependent and immature reputation of the children in the eyes of their classmates (Ladd & Kochenderfer Ladd, 1998). This undermining may occur when parents become actively involved in the situation in which victimization occurs, complain to the teacher or to the bully’s parents, or instruct their children to respond in a specific way when they are victimized. Based on these considerations, higher levels of autonomy supporting strategies might be associated with a decrease in victimization over time. Higher levels of autonomy undermining strategies might be associated with an increase or stabilization in victimization. It is yet unknown whether this association also exists for the youngest group of elementary school children. Some support in this direction has been found by Rubin, Burgess, and Hastings (2002). Their study revealed that higher levels of maternal intrusive control and derision were positively associated with social reticence of children at age four. These children, however, already had an inhibited temperament.
The purpose of the current study was to examine the longitudinal effect of parental strategies on the course of peer victimization in young children. Studying these parental strategies may lead to the identification of stylistic aspects of parental interventions that are helpful or unhelpful to their children’s status. Higher levels of autonomy supporting strategies were expected to be related to lower levels of victimization during one academic year. Furthermore, higher levels of autonomy undermining strategies were expected to be related to continuation or at least stabilization of victimization during one academic year.

Research on parental strategies has been conducted with verbal or written hypothetical vignettes describing social situations in which a child interacts (Mills & Rubin, 1990; Werner et al., 2006). This child is usually matched in age and gender with the age and gender of the children of the parent in order to facilitate making an appropriate deduction to the parents’ own response. Research on parental strategies derived from observation of parental supervision during a play procedure (Russell & Finnie, 1990), from responses to videotaped vignettes of social situations between models (Colwell et al., 2002) has shown that parental responses to conflict or bullying between children are strongly influenced by the context. For this study, parents were presented with verbal hypothetical vignettes that depicted their child being victimized in order to achieve maximum control over contextual characteristics that could determine response. Parents’ responses on open ended questions regarding their responses to the situation were used to determine the use of particular strategies.

As stated earlier, the instability of kindergarten groups due to the inflow of new children is likely to play an important role in the high prevalence rate of peer victimization among 4 to 5 year old children (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Perry et al., 1990). The study of Roseth, Pellegrini, Bohn, Van Ryzin, and Vance (2007) revealed that the aggression rate in preschool increased during the fall semester when group hierarchy is being formed. However, after the establishment of social dominance, the aggression rate decreased throughout the year. Because of this distinct feature in the social context during and after the process of group formation, the effects of parental strategies were examined in both the first and second semester of the academic year.

In sum, the present study was designed to relate parental strategies to the course of peer victimization in young children during one academic year. Children identified as victims of peer aggression in the fall semester were followed up twice to determine for whom victimization was stable.
Method

Participants
The sample included 73 victimized children (20 girls, 53 boys), aged either 4 or 5 years \((M=5.01\) years, \(SD=.60\) years at the start of the school year) and one of their parents (57 mothers, 16 fathers). Most children (82.9%) were from two-parent families. Forty percent of the parents had college or university degrees. According to the Census Bureau data (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2009), the educational level of the parents in this sample was slightly higher than the educational level of the general population (32%). The children and families were recruited from 46 classes from 18 elementary schools in the Netherlands. Dutch children begin elementary school at age four. In all schools in this sample, classrooms were composed of almost equal numbers of first and second graders. As a result, the classes were heterogeneous with respect to age.

An independent-samples t test was conducted to check for differences between the participating and nonparticipation schools on school size, social climate of the school, and socioeconomic status (SES) of the neighborhood where the school was located. Information on school size and social climate was obtained from the most recent assessment reports from the National School Inspectorate (‘Inspectie van Onderwijs’), who oversees the quality of education in the Netherlands. School size is the number of children attending the school. All schools were divided into three groups: small size (i.e., <300 children), medium size (i.e., 301 to 500 children) and large size (i.e., >500 children). Social climate was defined as a safe, supportive, and challenging environment in which students as well as teachers and parents feel involved (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2004). Scores given by the National School Inspectorate ranged from 1 (bad social climate) to 4 (good social climate). The variable SES of the neighborhood where the school was located was included as defined and measured by the Census Bureau (‘Social and Cultural Plan Bureau’) in The Netherlands. This score is a deprivation index based on three measures (i.e., income, education, and employment). The independent-samples t tests indicated no significant differences on school size \(t(47)=-.08, p>.05\); social climate \(t(45)=.35, p>.05\); or SES of the school neighborhood \(t(47)=-1.22, p>.05\).

Measures
Peer victimization. Teachers completed a 16-item measure of children’s peer victimization (Bonnet, Goossens, Willemen, & Schuengel, 2009). This measure covered five different forms of victimization, including physical victimization, instrumental victimization (taking or destroying material possessions), verbal victimization, direct victimization, and indirect relational victimization. Victimization items were taken from Ladd and Profet’s (1996) Perception of Peer Support Scale (a self-report measure); from the teacher report version...
of the Preschool Peer Victimization Measure developed by Crick, Casas, and Ku (1999); and from peer report cartoons developed by Monks, Smith, and Swettenham (2003). All these measures have in common that they were developed for preschool-aged children. Items, such as “This child gets hit, kicked, or pinched by peers”, “This child is called mean names (e.g., baby)”, and “This child gets left out of the group”, were answered using a 4-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (never true), 2 (almost never/ rarely), 3 (regularly), to 4 (often/very often). The dimensionality of the 16-item measure was analyzed using maximum-likelihood factor analyses. Two factors showed an eigenvalue higher than 1.0 (eigenvalues were 7.44 and 1.20 respectively). However, the scree plot pointed to one underlying factor. A Varimax rotation was performed on a two-factor solution, showing that the items loading on the second factor also loaded on the first one. Victimization scores were therefore computed by taking the summed score of the 16 items for each child. Internal consistency reliability was high (coefficient alpha=.87, .90, and .92 at T1, T2, and T3, respectively), and item–total correlations all exceeded .44 at each time point.

A pilot study was conducted in order to test the teacher-report measure and to determine a cut off point for peer victimization. The sample included 197 elementary school children (115 girls, 82 boys) between 4 and 7 years of age (M=6.15 years, SD=13.9 months). The children were recruited from eight classes from two elementary schools in the Netherlands. Parents were informed about the study by way of letter and asked for permission. Less than 10% of the parents refused.

During the pilot study, the teacher report measure was compared with a peer-report measure, a self-report measure, and a parent report measure on exposure to victimization. Peer reports of victimization were assessed by way of five cartoons developed by Monks et al. (2003) that depict a variety of victimization situations in young children (coefficient alpha=.82). Victimization items of the Perception of Peer Support Scale (Ladd & Profilet, 1996) were used as a self-report measure (Coefficient alpha .88). Parents completed the same 16-item teacher report measure of children’s peer victimization (coefficient alpha=.89) as did the teachers (coefficient alpha=.92). Each participating child was interviewed individually. The cartoons were shown one by one, and each was followed by the question if there were any children in their class who experienced such situations. To ensure that the children knew all their classmates, individual pictures of all children were shown preceding this task. Following the peer-report measure, all children were interviewed individually about their own victimization experiences. Raw correlations between peer reports, self-reports and teacher reports ranged from .20 (teachers and peers) through .26 (teacher and self-reports) to .28 (peer and self-reports). After partialling out age and gender, teacher reports were significantly predicted by both peer and self-reports (R²=.16; self-reports were more strongly associated). Peer reports were significantly predicted by both self-reports and teacher.
reports ($R^2=.15$; self-reports were more strongly associated). Self-reports were significantly predicted by peer and teacher reports ($R^2=.18$; teacher reports were more strongly associated). These results were similar to those of Crick, Casas, and Mosher (1997) who considered teachers to be reliable informants on the social behavior of young children. When comparing teacher and parent reports of victimization, statistically significant but medium (Cohen, 1988) correlations were found ($r=.27$). Moreover, parents and teachers agreed strongly on who were the victims. On the basis of these results, the teacher measure was chosen for the current study because it was judged to be the most practical in terms of investment of time.

In order to determine a cut-off point for victimization, a global composite of victimization based on multiple informants was created. The scores of the peer and self-reports were standardized and summed. This summed score was used as a golden standard to determine a cut-off point for teacher-rated victimization by conducting a Receiver Operated Curve (ROC) analysis. The optimal cut off point found was $z=.74$ (Westin, 2001).

**Parental strategies.** Five hypothetical vignettes about victimization situations were developed by an expert panel in order to assess parental responses to victimization. The five vignettes were chosen a priori and corresponded with five different forms of victimization known from literature about victimization in young children—being physically attacked, being verbally harassed, being excluded from an activity, having personal belongings taken or damaged, and being the subject of rumors (e.g., Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999; Monks, Ortega Ruiz & Torrado Val, 2002). All vignettes were presented to each parent individually in a telephone interview. Following each vignette, parents were asked what they would say to their child and do if they found out that what was described in the vignette was happening to their child. For example, the following story describes the child as being excluded from an activity:

“Your child has told you several times that he/she gets left out of fun games and activities by a couple of kids in his/her class. They just say to your child that they will not have him/her around. Today, your child is telling you this once again. What would you say and/or do in this situation?”

To ensure that the vignettes represented typical victimization situations in young children, a pilot study was conducted among 10 parents (i.e., 8 mothers and 2 fathers). Each parent was interviewed personally or by phone, and all answers were recorded on audiotape. Afterwards the parents were asked to judge the relevance and the age appropriateness of the vignettes by answering some structured, open-ended, questions (e.g., ”Do you recognize these situations from real life experiences with your child?”, ”Do these forms of victimization typically happen within your child’s classroom?”). The vignettes were also tested to ensure that they elicited a wide range of responses from the
parents. Parents were asked how they thought about the variety of their responses (e.g., did they have one main strategy or a variety of strategies dependent of the form of victimization?). Nine parents judged the vignettes as a good reflection of reality within a classroom of 4 to 5 year old children. All parents judged the vignettes as eliciting a wide variety of parental strategies. After transcribing the interviews, all parental responses were also compared qualitatively by the authors per vignette and across vignettes to check for differences and similarities in parental responses. This comparison confirmed the judgment of the parents. On the basis of all the information obtained during the pilot study, all five vignettes were maintained. The final five vignettes can be found in the Appendix.

A coding system for parental responses to the vignettes that distinguished and described various parental strategies was adapted from the work of Mills and Rubin (1990). Each specific parental strategy was labeled by an expert panel as autonomy supporting, autonomy undermining, or autonomy neutral. Coders first tallied how many times specific parental strategies were reported by the individual parent and then summed in order to create a total score on each of the three dimensions. Autonomy supporting strategies were defined as strategies to scaffold the child’s developing social competencies. They included giving the child alternative suggestions on how to behave or respond in bullying situations, other-oriented reasoning (referring to consequences of the child’s behavior for others), self-oriented reasoning (referring to consequences of the child’s behavior for the self), normative statements (referring to social or moral values), asking the child to suggest a solution for the victimization experiences, and teaching the child how to express feelings or share emotions. Autonomy undermining strategies were defined as strategies that limit the opportunities for the child to develop social competencies and contribute to a dependent and immature image of the child. They included the parent going to school and talking to the bullies, the parent asking the teacher to keep an eye on the child, and the parent giving the child directive instructions. Autonomy neutral strategies refer to favorable indirect strategies, and were defined as practices that do not stimulate, reward, nor discourage autonomous problem solving. They included comforting the child, asking the child what happened, and asking the teacher what happened.

All answers to the vignettes were coded by three trained coders (i.e., female graduate students). Parents could propose multiple strategies and each strategy was coded as representing one of the three dimensions of parenting strategies as shown in Table 1. Vignettes from the pilot study were used in order to train all coders to an 80% or higher level of agreement with the first author on the level of the three dimensions. After group instruction, the three coders rated a set of five pilot interviews. Disagreements were discussed and questions were answered afterwards. Then, the second set of five pilot
interviews was rated. Reliability was calculated by using the average intraclass correlations (ICC) across the three coders. For the pilot sample, interrater reliabilities for the three dimensions of parenting strategies ranged from .83 to .99.

Table 1. Dimensions of Parental Strategies in Response to Victimization and Rated Strategies in Example Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Interview narrative</th>
<th>Rating strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy supporting strategies</td>
<td>I ask him if he knows why these children do not want to play with him. He often says that he is too noisy. In that case I tell him that the other children may not like playing with a noisy child and I will give him some ideas to change his behavior so the other children like him better.</td>
<td>Self-oriented reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy undermining strategies</td>
<td>I tell him that I am unhappy about this situation and let him know that I will help him. The next day I will take the bullying children aside and tell them that I don’t like their behavior.</td>
<td>Giving the child instructions on how to behave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy neutral strategies</td>
<td>I would ask him why he can’t play with these children, if he knows that. The next day I would check his story with the teacher or someone else who knows him well, just to make sure it really happened.</td>
<td>Asking the child what happened</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the rating period of the study sample, reliability was continuously monitored. After each set of 20 interviews reliability was calculated, and disagreements were resolved by discussion. For the total sample, interrater reliabilities for each dimension were as follows: autonomy supporting strategies, .85; autonomy undermining strategies, .86; and autonomy neutral strategies, .87. A total score for each dimension was calculated for each parent by summing the number of each strategy mentioned across the five vignettes. Subsequently these scores were averaged across the three coders.

**Procedure**

The sample of victimized children was selected on the basis of a two-step screening procedure. In the first step, 49 schools in the provinces of Flevoland and North Holland were requested to participate. These provinces are situated in the central part of the Netherlands and contain both urban and rural areas. The consent of the schools was
obtained on the basis of a letter describing the purpose of the study and the kind of cooperation it would require. A total of 23 schools (47%) consented to participate.

After permission was obtained from the school councils to conduct the study, parents were informed about the project by way of a letter and asked whether they objected to the teacher providing anonymous information on victimization of the children in their classroom. A passive consent procedure was used. About 8% of the parents objected. Teachers were asked not to include these children in their reports.

The teachers then completed, mostly within one week, a questionnaire on exposure to victimization for each participating child in late October. All children had been observed by their teacher for at least 6 weeks. No names or other identifying data were disclosed by the schools to the researchers. Instead, each questionnaire was given a unique code by the researchers corresponding to a school, class and child. The teacher linked each child to a unique code and kept a list of names and corresponding codes. A total of 2,003 children were assessed with respect to exposure to victimization.

In the second step of the two-way screening procedure, a cut off point for victimization scores was determined based on a pilot study that the authors conducted among 197 elementary school children (see Measures subsection for description of the pilot study). To prevent variance in responding between teachers to lead to unequal distribution of children over classes, children who scored above the cut off point were identified within each individual school class. After this second step, 295 children were identified as victimized by peers. The unique codes of these 295 children were given to the teachers, and they were asked to inform the parents of these children about the project, by way of an information folder. In this folder, the purpose and design of the study and required efforts of children and parents were described. Each information folder included a consent form and stamped envelope that parents could return to the researcher if they were interested in participation. By sending this form to the researchers, parents revealed their name, address, and phone number. All parents who returned this form were phoned by the researcher in order to provide answers to their questions and derive informed consent. The consent rate was 25%. It was not possible to examine differences between consenting and nonconsenting parents, because of the anonymous character of the screening procedure. This study and selection procedure was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board.

Each participating child was evaluated three times by their teacher on exposure to victimization over the course of one school year (i.e., three time points). The first assessment (T1) was conducted during the fall period (i.e., screening procedure in late October), the second was conducted during the winter period (T2), and the third took place during the spring period (T3). Assessments occurred 4 months apart. The
questionnaires were filled out by the teachers during working hours. All teachers received a reward of €10 (i.e., $7.50) for their participation.

Approximately two to four weeks preceding T2, one parent of each participating child was interviewed by phone in order to assess parental strategies to victimization using five vignettes describing various forms of peer victimization. The duration of the interview was typically about 40 minutes, and all interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed afterwards.

**Data Analyses**

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine effects of time, age, and gender in the primary variables as well as bivariate associations among the study variables. Preliminary analyses were also conducted across vignettes in order to examine their influence on the parents’ responses. Because some children came from the same classes, violations of the independence assumption were examined (Peugh, 2010). Because the number of children per class (1.6) was lower than 2.0, the design effect could not exceed 2.0, which would have indicated a need for analyzing the data in a multilevel framework. Next, multiple regression analyses were performed in which peer victimization later during the school year (T2 and T3) was predicted by entering peer victimization earlier in the year (T1 and T2) in block 1 of independent variables, and the measures of parenting strategies (i.e., autonomy supporting strategies, autonomy undermining strategies, and autonomy neutral strategies) in block 2, in order to test the association with change. By including 73 children in this study, power for detecting a medium effect size ($f^2=.15$) in multiple regression analyses was sufficient (>0.80).

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses**

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the study variables. All variables were within reasonable bounds for skewness and kurtosis (between -1 and +1; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006). The means of peer victimization scores at T1($M=26.18$; $SD=6.13$; range 17-44), T2($M=24.77$; $SD=6.01$; range 16-40), and T3($M=23.77$; $SD=5.99$; range 16-36) decreased over time. The results of a oneway within-subjects ANOVA indicated a significant time effect, Wilk’s $\Lambda=.87$, $F(2,71)=5.5$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2=.002$. Follow-up polynomial contrasts indicated a significant linear effect with means decreasing over time, $F(1,21)=10.89$, $p<.01$, $\eta^2=.002$.

Pearson correlations were computed between all variables. As shown in Table 2, autonomy supporting strategies were significantly and negatively associated with autonomy undermining strategies.
### Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables and Bivariate Correlations (N=73)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
<th>7.</th>
<th>8.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender, girls</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>-.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Supporting strategies</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.33**</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Undermining strategies</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Neutral strategies</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Peer victimization T1</td>
<td>26.18</td>
<td>6.13</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Peer victimization T2</td>
<td>24.77</td>
<td>6.01</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Peer victimization T3</td>
<td>23.77</td>
<td>5.99</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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

### Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Autonomy Supporting, Autonomy Undermining, and Neutral Strategies by Vignette (N=73)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette</th>
<th>Supporting strategies</th>
<th>Undermining strategies</th>
<th>Neutral strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean, SD</td>
<td>Mean, SD</td>
<td>Mean, SD</td>
<td>Mean, SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 1</td>
<td>.94, .57</td>
<td>1.42, 1.01</td>
<td>1.42, .80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 2</td>
<td>.94, .59</td>
<td>1.00, .87</td>
<td>1.62, .96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 3</td>
<td>.97, .61</td>
<td>.88, .91</td>
<td>1.43, .87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 4</td>
<td>1.03, .51</td>
<td>.55, .75</td>
<td>1.46, .99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 5</td>
<td>.80, .46</td>
<td>.87, .87</td>
<td>1.52, .86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A significant negative association was found between autonomy neutral strategies and victimization at T2, indicating that a higher level of autonomy neutral practices at T2 was associated with a lower level of peer victimization scores. In addition, age and gender of the children were not significantly associated with any of the dependent or independent variables ($p > .05$). Therefore, these variables were not included as a covariate in further analyses.

Means and standard deviations of all scores by vignette are presented in Table 3. In order to examine whether the type of vignette was associated with the proposed parental strategies, a test for differences across vignettes was conducted. The ANOVA test for repeated measures revealed no significant effect on autonomy supporting strategies and autonomy neutral strategies, Wilks’s $\Lambda=.88$, $F(4,69)=2.39$, $p>.05$ and Wilks’s $\Lambda=.93$, $F(4, 69) =1.33$, $p>.05$, respectively, but a significant effect was found on autonomy undermining strategies, Wilks’s $\Lambda=.60$, $F(4,69)=11.51$, $p<.001$. These results indicated that parents responded with autonomy supporting strategies and neutral strategies irrespective of the type of victimization. However, as shown in Table 3, parents responded with autonomy undermining strategies mostly in case of the child being physically attacked ($M=1.42$) and least in case of the child being excluded ($M=.55$). The responses of parents might therefore be determined both by the situation as well as the characteristics of parent and child.

**Predicting the Course of Peer Victimization**

Multiple regression analyses were performed to identify the association between parenting strategies and change in peer victimization. Three series of analyses were conducted separately for the association of parenting strategies in the first school semester (starting at T1 and ending at T2), for the association in the second school semester (starting at T2 and ending at T3), and for the association of parenting strategies during the entire school year (starting at T1 and ending at T3).

As shown in Table 4, autonomy supporting strategies and autonomy neutral strategies were associated with a significantly stronger decrease of victimization during the first semester of the school year (starting at T1 and ending at T2). Autonomy undermining strategies were not significantly related to the course of peer victimization in the first semester. The parental strategy measures accounted for a significant proportion of change in peer victimization, $R^2$ change=.14, $F(3,68)=4.64$, $p<.01$. Supporting this result were the bivariate correlations between both autonomy supporting strategies and autonomy neutral strategies measures and peer victimization at Time 2, which were -.21, $p=.07$ and -.27, $p<.05$, respectively.
Table 4. Hierarchical Regression Analyses for the Effect of Parenting Strategies on Peer Victimization in the First Semester (Starting at T1 and Ending at T2, N=73)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Block 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Victimization T1</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.43**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Victimization T1</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy supporting strategies</td>
<td>-1.11</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>-.30*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy undermining strategies</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy neutral strategies</td>
<td>-.79</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>-.29*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. $R^2=.19$ for Block 1; $\Delta R^2=.14$ for Block 2 ($p<.01$).

* $p<.01$ ** $p<.001$

The association between autonomy undermining strategies and the course of peer victimization remained nonsignificant when only the scores on the physical attack vignette (vignette with the highest score on autonomy undermining; $\beta=-1.35$, $p=.19$) or the exclusion vignette (vignette with the lowest score on autonomy undermining; $\beta=.39$, $p=.78$) were entered as predictor in Block 2.

Regression analyses with the measures of parental strategies as predictors of the course of peer victimization in the second semester of the school year (which started at T2 and ended at T3) yielded no significant associations, $R^2$ change=.02, $F(3,68)=-.50$, $p>.05$. Finally, regression analyses on the parental strategies measures were performed to predict the course of peer victimization during the entire school year (starting at T1 and ending at T3). Results of these analyses were also nonsignificant, $R^2$ change=.03, $F(3,68)=.75$, $p>.05$.

**Discussion**

This study examined the association between the course of peer victimization in 4- to 5-year-old children and parental strategies of responding to such events. The results suggested that strategies to stimulate the autonomy of children and autonomy neutral strategies might support the decrease of peer victimization early in the school year. However, in the second semester, protective effects of parental strategies were not sustained. No support was found for autonomy undermining strategies as amplifying the vulnerability for peer victimization.

Changes in group dynamics during the school year may offer an explanation why parental strategies were associated with victimization in the first semester and not in the second semester. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Wardrop (2001) stated that in the early stages of group formation, victimized children still may have friends and peers with whom to play
and interact. These victimized children may therefore be able to benefit from the autonomy supporting strategies recommended by their parents during the first semester. Empirical support for the positive effect of autonomy supporting strategies on the social development of young children has been shown in prior research. For instance, Laird, Pettit, Mize, Brown, and Lindsey (1994) found that parents who engaged in conversations with their young children about peer relationships (e.g., making friends at new school and dealing with conflict situations) had more socially competent children. The authors argued that these conversations with their mother help children to learn about relevant social cues and other children’s feelings and increase their problem solving strategies.

However, the longer the victimization experiences continue, and the more stable the group hierarchy becomes, the more victimized children may get the feeling they are not able to stop the victimization. It is also possible that peers begin to avoid them out of fear of becoming a victim as well (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). At this stage, it might be more difficult for children to continue practicing their social competences and for parents to effectively intervene and help their child. In order to find support for this argument, future research should expand on the present findings by examining if and how parental strategies change over time and what the effect will be on the course of peer victimization.

Furthermore, the results revealed that autonomy neutral strategies were mentioned the most and were related to diminishing peer victimization. These strategies included asking the child and teacher for more information regarding the victimization experiences. An explanation of this finding might be sought in the fact that information seeking enables the parent to learn more about the social context in which the victimization occurs and the behaviors displayed by both the aggressor and their child (Mills & Rubin, 1990), while respecting the autonomy of the child. This rich contextual knowledge also enables the parent to choose an intervention strategy geared toward the needs of the child. Furthermore, parents who ask questions implicitly convey to children that they are available for offering support but leave it to the child to take the initiative, implicitly supporting the child’s self-determination. Mills and Rubin found that information seeking was the most frequently mentioned strategy among mothers in response to aggressive behavior or social withdrawal of their child. Because almost 80% of our sample were mothers, our finding that autonomy neutral strategies were the most prevalent concurs with these earlier findings.

Regarding autonomy undermining strategies, no support was found for the hypothesis that these strategies would increase children’s risk of being victimized. This finding is somewhat surprising and not in line with prior research in this area. For example, Rubin and Burgess (2002) stated that being overprotective means that parents encourage dependency. When parents notice that their children have problems in peer interactions,
they step in and take over or at least support children in a very directive way by instructing them what to do. Support for the association between overprotective mothering, intense closeness and peer victimization, was reported in several studies, especially for boys (Finnegan, Hodges, and Perry, 1998; Georgiou, 2008; Olweus, 1980).

A possible explanation of this contradictory finding is that, in contrast to the other studies, this study was conducted among young children. Children who are 4 or 5 years of age are still at the early stage of developing autonomy. Therefore, it may be possible that in this age group strategies such as standing up for their child and directive instruction can be expected and are not necessarily interpreted by children and their peers as a sign of weakness or immaturity.

Furthermore, the current study found that parents’ undermining reactions appeared to depend on the situation. Undermining strategies were mentioned most when children were victim of physical aggression and mentioned least in case of relational aggression (i.e., exclusion from the peer group). This finding may be explained by parental beliefs about the impact of peer victimization. Werner and Grant (2008) found that most mothers view physical aggression as harmful to a child and as unacceptable, whereas relational aggression is viewed as less harmful and more normative. These beliefs may have influenced the parents’ reactions to the hypothetical vignettes. Given the fact that children of four and five years are still at the early stage of developing autonomy and standing up for themselves, it may even be appropriate for parents to intervene in more directive ways when their child is hurt by peers. In these situations, directive intervening may not be seen as undermining autonomy but rather as preventing physical and emotional damage to a young child. Future studies may investigate further our findings by comparing the associations between victimization and autonomy undermining strategies across developmental periods, including parental beliefs about the impact of victimization experiences.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Representativeness. Only 25% of the 295 parents who were asked to participate in this study consented. Because of the anonymous character of the screening procedure, it was not possible to determine differences between the consenting and nonconsenting parents (e.g., in educational level), and how these differences might affect the results. One parent of each child was interviewed, and they were mostly mothers. Research with a larger group of fathers should clarify whether mothers and father make different use of autonomy supporting and undermining strategies in responding to victimization (Ladd & Pettit, 2002; Mills & Rubin, 1990), and whether the effects of these strategies might be different depending on gender of the parent as suggested by research on parenting style and peer acceptance (Parke et al., 1989).
Another question is whether the parental strategies in response to the hypothetical vignettes were representative of the strategies they used in real-life situations. Studies have shown that the context of the victimization (e.g., distress of the child) also plays a role (Colwell et al., 2002; Werner et al., 2006). The current findings represent the strategies that parents were able and willing to reproduce to the interviewer. Their actual implementation remains to be addressed in future research.

Teachers were single informants on victimization. It is possible that teachers do not always notice negative interactions between children depending on their awareness and sensitivity with respect to victimization, as well as their willingness to reveal what goes on under their supervision (Craig, Henderson & Murphy, 2000). Multiple methods such as observations on the school ground and multiple informants such as teachers and peers in future research may yield better estimates of victimization than the use of single informants (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002).

**Child gender.** The current study did not reveal significant effects of child gender, but was limited in this respect by the small percentage (27%) of girls that had been identified as victim by the teacher. Colwell, Mize, Pettit, and Laird. (2002) and Werner, Senich, and Przy bụngsky. (2006) also found that mothers’ intervention strategies to hypothetical relational or physical aggression did not vary by the sex of their preschool aged child. However, Mills and Rubin (1999) reported that parents more strongly responded in case of socialization problems with daughters than with sons. A future direction is to longitudinally test the hypothesis (Colwell et al., 2002; Werner et al., 2006) that under the influence of beliefs about gender specific social development parents’ interventions may become more gender differentiated as children become older.

**Other school and parenting factors.** The current study focused on the strategy that parents subscribed to in responding to peer victimization. How this strategy would be enacted was not coded, and therefore it is not known whether the chosen mode of parenting might have increased or decreased the effectiveness of the strategy. Ladd and Pettit (2002) suggested that parents influence their children’s social functioning by acting as designer, mediator, supervisor, or consultant. Because victimization takes place at school, a strategy enacted through direct supervision would be less effective than strategies enacted through designing (e.g., asking the teacher to keep an eye on the child) or consulting (e.g., giving the child alternative suggestions on how to behave or respond in bullying situations). Further study of the roles that parents choose might contribute to a further articulation of the practical implications of this research for parenting.

This study extends work that has focused on indirect (i.e., parenting style) parenting influences on social functioning of children by examining direct (i.e., parental strategies) influences. Parenting style may also affect the course of victimization through other mechanisms, for example the expectations that children might have developed about
parental responses to children’s problems in general. It is therefore still an open question to what extent the parental strategies studied explain the influence of parenting style.

The effects of parenting are part of a broader system that includes the class of the children and the schools that these are part of (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). In a report on the original 2,003 children from which the victimized children were selected, school and class differences accounted for 27% and 8% of the variance in victimization, respectively (Bonnet et al., 2009). Research on bullying and victimization has traditionally focused on school and individual child factors as determinants. The findings from the current study might stimulate researchers to include the strategies that parents subscribe to for dealing with victimization in a broader effort in order to understand how the various factors at the level of child, family, peers, class, and school interact to explain the adaptation or maladaptation of children at school.

**Practical Implications**

Victimization is an important and emotion laden subject of discussion between parents and teachers. Most parents take their child to school trusting that school is a safe place and an enjoyable experience for children. A child becoming the victim of peer aggression is a great worry, and parents may not always know what kind of interventions will be the most helpful to their child. Therefore, schools could publish helpful tips and guidelines to support the parents, and teachers should be available and responsive when parents ask questions about the victimization experiences of their child. Teachers may use teacher reports to stay aware of victimization in their classroom throughout the school year, as they appear to be reliable informants.

However, schools should not suggest that the problem can be completely solved by the parents. On the contrary, the findings of this study plead for joint, coordinated efforts for supporting victimized young children. Such efforts are due to be more successful if teachers and parents teach, demonstrate, and reinforce the same social skills that victimized children may need to learn. Prior studies (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Limper, 2000; Olweus, 1999; O’Moore & Minton, 2005) have underlined the importance of regular communication with and involvement of parents as partners in tackling victimization problems at school. Finally, the findings do not support concerns that parents may actually make the situation of young victimized children worse by active parental involvement and taking charge.

In conclusion, the results of this study further our knowledge about the contribution of parental strategies to the degree of stability of peer victimization in young children as well as suggest new areas for investigation. Given the importance of early prevention and intervention, it remains essential not only to investigate further the association between direct parental influences and the course of victimization but also to investigate the
contribution of child, class, and school characteristics, both before and after a certain dominance structure in the peer group has been established.
Appendix

Overview of the Five Vignettes Used to Operationalize Parental Strategies

1. Physically attacked: Your child has told you several times that he/she gets hit and pinched by a certain classmate. Today, your child is telling you this once again. What would you say and/or do in this situation?

2. Belongings damaged: Your child has told you several times that a certain classmate destroyed his/her handiwork. Today, your child is telling you this once again. What would you say and/or do in this situation?

3. Subject of rumors: Your child has told you several times that the classmate who is sitting right next to him/her spreads the rumor that your child smells badly. Today, your child is telling you this once again. What would you say and/or do in this situation?

4. Being excluded: Your child has told you several times that he/she gets left out of fun games and activities by a couple of kids in his/her class. They just say to your child that they will not have him/her around. Today, your child is telling you this once again. What would you say and/or do in this situation?

5. Verbally harassed: Your child has told you several times that he/she gets laughed at and ridiculed by a certain classmate. Today, your child is telling you this once again. What would you say and/or do in this situation?
References


