Social Support in the Lives of Students Involved in Aggressive and Bullying Behaviors

Michelle Kilpatrick Demaray, Christine Kerres Malecki, and Lyndsay N. Jenkins
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, DEKALB

Lauren D. Westermann
THE INDIAN PRAIRIE SCHOOL DISTRICT, AURORA, IL

Abstract

Engaging in bullying and other violent behavior is influenced by characteristics of the individual, family, peers, school, and community; thus, researchers have focused on understanding the many ecological and contextual variables surrounding bullying and school violence. This chapter focuses on one such contextual factor: perceptions of social support from peers, parents, and teachers. Current research about social support and school violence is described and the chapter concludes with a discussion of how this research can be translated into practice.

Violence in American schools has been identified as a concern to educators across the country. For example, in 2007, 32% of 12- to 18-year-old students reported being bullied at school during the previous year (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009). Being bullied at school or engaging in bullying behaviors has been identified as a risk factor for other violent behaviors, such as carrying weapons, fighting, and incurring injuries from fighting (Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003). Engaging in bullying and other violent behavior is influenced by characteristics of the individual, family, peers, school, and community; therefore, researchers have focused on understanding the many ecological and contextual variables surrounding bullying and school violence (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). This chapter discusses perceptions of social support from peers, parents, and teachers. Current research regarding social support and school violence is described and the chapter concludes with a discussion of how this research can be translated into practice.
Social Support

Tardy (1985) described a conceptual model that includes five aspects of social support. First, direction describes whether the support is being given or received. Second, disposition describes whether the supportive behaviors are just available or if they are actually being enacted or used. Description/evaluation refers to whether a person describes the support they receive or evaluates that support. Fourth, Tardy describes one’s network or the source(s) of an individual’s support network (parents, teachers, friends, etc.). Finally, Tardy describes the content or type of support, which includes emotional, instrumental, informational, and/or appraisal support. Emotional support refers to caring support (e.g., providing empathy, hugs, and care). Instrumental support refers to spending time with someone or providing necessary resources. For example, a parent spending time with their child to work on math homework or practice soccer would be instrumental support. Providing the necessary resources, such as a calculator for a math class or a soccer ball to practice soccer, is also instrumental support. Informational support involves providing someone with valuable information or advice. Finally, people we care about provide appraisal support when they give feedback or evaluation that is beneficial. For perpetrators and/or their victims, various types of social support from different sources may play a role in the aggressive dynamic or in the aftermath of violent school behavior.

Social support may play a role in school violence in several ways. Two theoretical models generally describe how social support may function. First, the main effect model (Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000) suggests that positive social support is beneficial for all people. This theory posits that if we have adequate levels of social support, we will function more effectively and be healthier in general. The stress-buff ering theory (Cohen et al., 2000) suggests that when we are under stress, social support plays a protective role resulting in more positive outcomes than if we did not have adequate social support. For victims of school violence and bullying, the stress-buff ering model of support seems most salient. Students who are victims of violence or bullying may be under more stress and social support may buff er them from more negative outcomes.

Social Support and School Violence

Many researchers believe that social support may be a salient factor in preventing school violence. For instance, one focus of the National School Safety Center (NSSC) has been to expand the role of student support services in schools (Stephens, 2002). Creating supportive student environments includes establishing a sense of student ownership and pride in the school and offering services for troubled youth. The NSSC strategy for increasing school safety not only includes providing social support for students, but also for teachers, parents, and community members (Stephens, 2002). The creation and implementation of these programs rely on an understanding of various social support systems (i.e., family, peer group, and school) that may affect students’ behavior (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). For example, Furlong, Pavelski, and Saxton (2002) suggest that the examination of supportive connections of students to their school is a useful way to identify the level of violence prevention program needed. Therefore, an understanding of the relationship among social support and school violence is one that must be understood if efforts to decrease violence are to be successful.

Despite the fact that policies meant to address violent behavior in schools often focus on creating meaningful relationships among students and supportive peers and adults (Austin, 2003), the research on social support and violent or aggressive behaviors remains scarce. Although some previous investigations have included students’ significant others as a factor in the lives of victims (Furlong, Chung, Bates, & Morrison, 1995; Morrison, Furlong, & Smith, 1994), only a handful have investigated social support as a primary construct related to aggressive and violent behaviors in schools (Cowie & Olafsson, 2000; Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Demaray & Malecki,
The use of socially supportive behaviors is often suggested as a method to decrease and prevent violence (Reinke & Herman, 2002; Scott, Nelson, & Liaupsin, 2001; Stephens, 1994), yet these suggestions are based on assumptions rather than scientific data.

However, some recent work by researchers Cowie and Jennifer (2007, 2008) has focused on programs that use peer social support to improve school safety and reduce instances of bullying and school violence. Their framework creates peer support systems in schools by training certain students to offer emotional and social support to peers who are in distress (Cowie & Smith, 2010). They propose three key aspects of their peer support programs: (a) selected peers are trained to be peer supporters, (b) certain peers will enact upon the peer support, and (c) longer-term training of peer supporters will reduce the rates of conflict and bullying in a school. Evaluation of the effectiveness of this framework has been evaluated by a range of means (e.g., case studies, testimonials, independent reviews), but Cowie and Smith (2010) report that the overall consensus is that the peer supporters as well as the support recipients have benefited from the program. Additionally, teachers report improvements in the safety of the school and more caring being demonstrated among students.

Though the term “school violence” may bring to mind extreme behaviors, such as school shootings, violence in schools encompasses a much wider range of behaviors including bullying, teasing, harassment, and assault (Furlong et al., 2002). These low-level forms of violence have been largely overlooked in previous decades of research, despite their potential to greatly influence the school environment (Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002). This oversight is troubling given that seemingly benign behaviors, like teasing or bullying, can lead to more serious, violent ones (Spivak & Prothrow-Smith, 2001).

An emerging area of school violence involves the use of technology to engage in peer aggression. This type of youth violence has been termed cyberbullying or electronic bullying. Raskauskas and Stolz (2007) found that among their sample of adolescents, involvement in traditional bullying predicted involvement in electronic bullying. Being a victim of electronic bullying was related to being a bully at school, but victims of traditional bullying were not found to be electronic bullies. Because the study of electronic bullying is relatively new, only one study was found that examined relations among internet bullying and verbal and physical traditional bullying with peer social support. Williams and Guerra (2007) found that when youth viewed their friends as caring, helpful, and trustworthy, they also reported significantly lower levels of involvement in all three types of bullying (i.e., verbal, physical, and Internet bullying). Future studies are needed to further understand the amount and type of social support that is perceived among participants of cyberbullying.

Victims’ and Bully/Victims’ Levels of Support

When attempting to understand why certain students are victimized, it is helpful to identify risk factors that may make them vulnerable to attack. One risk factor appears to be the lack of support, as previous research indicates that victims typically have poor support from adults and peers in their lives. Furlong et al. (1995) compared fifth- through twelfth-grade students who were victims of multiple incidents of school violence to those who were not victimized. Victims sought teacher and peer support significantly less than non-victimized students. Additionally, victims reported feeling less connected to their schools than non-victims. Similarly, using a sample of over 18,000 parents and students, Schreck, Miller, and Gibson (2003) found that students who felt alienated from school were more likely to be victims of violent and nonviolent crimes. Victims of school bullying exhibit similar patterns of low support as victims of violence. For instance, in a sample of 12- to 16-year-old students, status as a victim of peer bullying was related
to low levels of support from best friends and classmates. For females, victimization was also related to low teacher support (Rigby, 2000). In their investigation of bullying and social support in sixth- through eighth-grade students, Demaray and Malecki (2003) found that students classified as victims had low support from their classmates, whereas students that exhibited characteristics of both bullies and victims (i.e., bully/victims) also had low support from the people in their lives. Bully/victims reported low support from their parents, classmates, and people in their schools, suggesting that students who are both the perpetrators and victims of such behaviors are at the greatest risk for negative outcomes (Demaray & Malecki, 2003). Holt and Espelage (2007) also examined perceptions of social support among middle and high school students and found that students who were victims and bully-victims reported significantly lower levels of social support compared to students uninvolved in bullying. In this study, however, victims did not significantly differ from bullies in levels of perceived social support. The overlap of the bully and victim categories and the great risk for students who are both bullies and victims creates concerns that some victims may become violent in an attempt to protect themselves. Kingery, Pruitt, and Heuberger (1996) reported that adolescents who brought guns to school were much more likely than non-gun-carriers to have been the victim of violent behavior in the previous year. These bully/victims appear to be especially vulnerable to negative outcomes, as they report lower levels of support than nonaggressive victims (Brockenbrough, Cornell, & Loper, 2002).

Perpetrators’ Levels of Support

It is not only students who are at the receiving end of violent and bully behaviors that present a concern for schools; perpetrators of these behaviors have similarly low levels of support (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Duncan, 2004; Hanish, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Fabes, Martin, & Denning, 2004). This could indicate that violent and aggressive students may be disengaged from the very individuals that can help decrease their problem behaviors. In an investigation of the determinants of violent behavior in inner-city youth, Powell (1997) found that support from adults outside the family was able to protect against student involvement in violent behavior. Behaviors that could potentially lead to violent incidents, such as weapon carrying, also appear to be related to low support. Malecki and Demaray (2003) investigated the social support of early adolescents who self-reported bringing a weapon to school and found that low support from parents, teachers, and peers was predictive of weapon carrying. Similarly, McNabb, Farley, Powell, Rolka, and Horan (1996) reported that adolescent gun-carrying was correlated with the lack of an employed male role model in the home. Other low-level forms of aggressive behavior, such as bullying, have been linked to low support. Demaray and Malecki (2003) found that students who were classified as bullies had low amounts of support from parents, classmates, and people in their schools.

Bystanders Level of Social Support

An expanding area of research is to investigate social support in the lives of student that are classified as neither perpetrators nor victims of bullying and school violence. Researchers seek to understand the factors that lead these peers to either help or hinder perpetrators or victims. Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Kaukiainen (1996) and Salmivalli, Huttunen, and Lagerspetz (1997) have developed several categories for these groups, such as assistant to the bully, reinforcer of the bully, defender of the victim, and outsiders. A recent study by Summers and Demaray (2010) investigated perceptions of social support among various participants (i.e., Bully, Victim, Defender, Outsider, and Comparison) in the bullying situation. With regard to parent support, the Comparison, Bully, Defender, and Outsider groups all perceived more social support than the Bully/Victim group. For teacher support, the Comparison, Defender, and Out-
sider groups all perceived more social support than the Bully/Victim group and the Defender group perceived more social support than the Bully group. With respect to classmate support, the Comparison, Bully, and Defender groups all perceived more social support than the Victim group. In addition, the Defender group perceived more social support than the Victim/Defender and Outsider group. For close friend support, the Defender group perceived more support than the Victim group. Lastly, for school support, the Comparison and Defender groups perceived more support than Bully/Victims; in addition, the Defender Group perceived more support than Victims and Outsiders. In sum, victims and bully-victims often perceived lower levels of social support while the Comparison and Defender groups often perceived higher levels of support. This has important implications for understanding why some kids defend victims, suggesting that perhaps higher perceptions of social support allow them to stand up to bullies in bullying situations.

More work is needed on the role of social support for all of the bystanders in bullying, but in terms of intervention to benefit victims, the group of particular interest may be the defender group. Cowie and Smith (2010) describe defenders as groups of peers that are “usually friends of a victim who help them by intervening on their behalf, comforting them, confronting bullies, or seeking adult help, thus making future attacks less likely” (p. 177). Cowie and her colleagues have developed a peer support framework that seeks to train peers to intervene and comfort victims of bullying. The core of their work is centered on employing more peers as defenders in order to increase school safety.

One of the few studies that have examined factors related to the likelihood that peers will support victims during bullying situations was conducted by Rigby and Johnson (2006). The study produced some findings that can help inform intervention ideas for using social support to benefit victims of school violence. First, they found that elementary students are more willing to support victims than middle school students, and that elementary girls were more willing to intervene than elementary boys. Students in both elementary and middle school reported that they were more likely to support a victim of verbal bullying than in a physical bullying situation. Overall, even though most students reported a positive attitude towards the victim, the majority of students did not indicate that they would provide support to the victim. Though the researcher only assessed readiness to support (not why they would choose not to support) several implications can be inferred from this study.

The Protective Effects of Social Support after Victimization

One very promising direction in intervention for students involved in bullying may involve social support. The stress buffering model of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985) has been a guiding theory in many recent studies that investigated how the provision of support may be a valuable tool in helping students cope with and recover from incidents of school violence and bullying. Davidson and Demaray (2007) found that for middle school girls, parent support played a buffering role between being victimized and distress from bullying. They also found that for middle school boys, teacher, classmate, and school support played this buffering role. Similarly, Stadler, Feifel, Rohrmann, Vermeiren, and Poustka (2010) found that for middle school students, parent support buffered victims against maladjustment and, for high school students, support from the school buffered victims against maladjustment.

Some researchers have examined the more complex patterns in this possible buffering relationship. In one study, the combination of both teacher and peer support showed the strongest buffering effects against victimization on more negative quality of life (Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009). Finally, some interesting patterns of this buffering effect were found when examining victims, bullies, bully-victims, and non-involved students (Conners-Burrow, Johnson, Whiteside-Mansell, McKelvey, & Gargus, 2009). It was found that
parent support buffered against depression especially well for bully-victims, but also for non-involved students, victims, and bullies. Furthermore, they found that when parent support was low, teacher support played a buffering role for non-involved students, bullies, and bully-victims against depression.

In sum, a number of researchers, studying a variety of outcomes, are finding promising results suggesting that social support from parents in particular, but also from teachers, peers, and other people in the school may buffer students involved in bullying from adverse outcomes such as maladjustment, negative quality of life, depression, and distress from bullying. This promising line of research should continue to help inform school staff specifically how they might utilize social support as an effective intervention.

Social Support from Negative Sources and Peer Groups

One factor that sometimes is overlooked when examining the relationship among social support and violent or aggressive behaviors is the impact of potential negative sources of social support. Just as social support from positive sources such as teachers, parents, and school staff can keep students from becoming involved in violent behaviors (McNabb et al., 1996; Schreck et al., 2003) and protect against the negative impact of victimization (Rigby, 2000), support from negative sources can have a harmful impact on students' lives. The influence of delinquent peers or family members has been related to a variety of aggressive and violent behaviors. While peers reject some aggressive children, others are popular and may gain support for engaging in violent or aggressive behavior (Estell, Cairns, Farmer, & Cairns, 2002; Perren & Hornung, 2005; Robertson et al., 2010; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000). In fact, some aggressive children receive support not only from other aggressive peers within deviant peer groups, but from nonaggressive peers as well (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2006). Recent research has identified subsets of aggressive, antisocial, or delinquent students who are well liked by classmates and are considered leaders by both their teachers and peers (Estell, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker, & Rodkin, 2008; Robertson et al., 2010; Rodkin et al., 2000). The presence of these well liked yet aggressive students in the classroom impacts the group social dynamic (Rodkin et al., 2000) and may promote the use of aggressive behaviors for social advancement (Robertson et al., 2010; Rodkin et al., 2000).

The influence of delinquent family and community members has also been related to children and adolescents' involvement in maladaptive behaviors. Powell (1997) reported that family member involvement in gangs was a risk factor for inner-city students' involvement in violent behavior. Parental incarceration also places children at a high risk of engaging in delinquent behavior (Murray & Farrington, 2006). Research investigating the impact of community settings on adolescent behavior indicates that adolescents are at a higher risk of engaging in delinquent activity when they are exposed to repeated violence within their communities (Zinzow et al., 2009). This community violence is likely to include relatives and family members as the perpetrators (Zinzow et al., 2009).

Similar to the potential for negative types of social support to increase children's involvement in violent behavior, certain types of social support may have the undesired effect of perpetuating low-level aggressive behavior, such as bullying. For example, some of the groups identified by Salmivalli et al. (1996), such as assistants to the bully and reinforcers of the bully, may be providing social support for the bullies and may perpetuate such behavior. In addition, investigations of the social dynamics of classroom bullies and victims have found that bullies are well liked by classmates and successful within their peer groups (Perren and Hornung, 2005; Witvliet et al., 2010). Witvliet et al. (2010) concluded that bullies associate with each other to maintain their popular status among their peers.
Summary and Implications of Social Support Research for School Violence Victimization

This chapter has examined the literature on the association between social support and school violence. Implications of this research can be summarized into four main points. First, it is well established that both perpetrators and victims of school violence tend to perceive lower amounts of positive social support from significant adults and peers in their lives compared to students who are uninvolved in school violence (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Furlong et al., 1995; Holt & Espelage, 2007; Rigby, 2000; Schreck et al., 2003). Parents, teachers, peers, and students’ school environments all seem to play a role in the complex set of factors that surround school violence, and each individual can impact outcomes for improved school safety. For example, teachers could be trained to create and maintain socially supportive classrooms and classmates could be trained how to intervene in a socially supportive manner if they witness violence or bullying. Recent work by Cowie and Jennifer (2007, 2008) suggests that directly intervening by providing victims of bullying and school violence with peer support can benefit both the victim as well as the peer providing the support.

Second, recently, there has been an increase in research regarding the role and the function of students that are classified as neither perpetrators nor victims of school violence. Several studies have identified roles such as assistant to the bullying, reinforcer of the bully, defender of the victim, and outsiders (Salmivalli et al., 1996, 1997). Some research has documented that perceptions of social support vary across these participant roles (Rigby & Johnson; 2006; Summers & Demaray, 2010). Specifically, defenders have been found to report perceived higher levels of social support (Summers & Demaray, 2010). It may be important to engage defenders of victims at an early age, which may increase their likelihood of defending victims in secondary school, which was when students reported that they were less likely to support victims. Giving students tools to comfort victims, confront bullies, and modes of contacting adults may boost their confidence in defending victims, particularly in the case of physical violence. Students reported they were more likely to support the victim of verbal bullying, so training students on what to do in both verbal and physical bullying is important. Cowie and Jennifer’s (2007, 2008) framework for peer support is based upon the suggestion that peers in the defender role can play a crucial role in providing social support to victims of bullying and other school violence. As a first step, peers can approach a victim and let them know they are sorry for what happened and can help that peer get to the appropriate adult support. Peers should also be trained to inform adults in the school whenever they witness physical or verbal bullying.

Third, several recent studies have found that social support serves as a buffer against negative outcomes that are associated with school violence victimization (Conners-Burrow et al., 2009; Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Flaspohler et al., 2009; Stadler et al., 2010). Among these studies, parent support in particular emerged as a significant protective variable, but also social support from teachers, peers, and other people in the school. Therefore, one could argue that involving parents is particularly important for victims of school violence. Proactively, schools may want to provide information to parents about how to recognize warning signs that their child may be victim of school violence and how to handle these situations. If a school finds that a child is a victim of school violence, then involving the parent is an essential component for improving mental health outcomes for that child.

Fourth, though there is scarce research regarding the link between types of social support and school violence, many potential implications and interventions could be inferred. Youth look to their parents, classmates, and close friends for both emotional and information support (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Thus, schools could provide information to parents about how to recognize signs in their children that they may be experiencing violence or may be perpetrating violence.
Michelle Kilpatrick Demaray et al.

at school as well as ways to help their child emotionally. This information could be provided during a Parent Night hosted by the school or through literature sent to the home, for example. Information support from classmates and close friends could be enhanced if the school provided all students with information about what to do if they are the victim of school violence or rec-

Table 5.1 Implications for Practice: Social Support and School Violence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Support</th>
<th>Implications for Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Provide parents with informational support about recognizing signs in their children of being either perpetrators or victims of violence in the schools. Provide parents with supportive contacts if they suspect their child is either a perpetrator or victim of school violence. These contacts should be people in the school they can contact for emotional and informational support. Have trained staff at the school conduct support groups for parents whose children have been involved in school violence to obtain emotional support from other parents. Encourage parents to take an active, supportive role in the lives of their children. Provide training to teach parents all the ways they can provide support including by providing accurate information, emotional/caring support, and being available (instrumental support) to their children to talk about bullying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>Provide teachers with informational support about recognizing signs in their students of being either perpetrators or victims of violence in the schools. Train teachers in how to provide informational support, emotional support, instrumental support, and appraisal support to students who are bullies or victims of bullying. Train teachers to respond in supportive ways to an observance of school violence or bullying (e.g. along with implementing appropriate consequences for the bully, praise any students who intervened and immediately show caring for the student who was victimized and direct that student to resources, follow-up with the victim to ensure they had received the support and information they need). Train teachers how to, in general, encourage and create socially supportive classrooms, being sure to talk about all types of support and what those supportive behaviors look like. For example, teachers could model and expect respectful behavior and reward supportive behaviors exhibited by peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other People in the School</td>
<td>Assess the perceptions of students with regards to levels of social support in schools or school climate. Train entire school staff in ways to be socially supportive to students in general (e.g. using students’ names, noticing and rewarding positive social behaviors, and supporting victims of bullying or school violence (e.g. directing them to sources of support, communicating concern and care to the victims). Have a system in place so that victims of violence get services from supportive staff in the school to increase the connectedness victims of violence feel to the school. Have trained staff at the school conduct support groups with students who have been victims of violence to gain emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support from other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmates/Friends</td>
<td>Train students how to intervene in a socially supportive manner when they witness violence or bullying acts (e.g. communicate caring and concern to the victim, direct the victim to adult sources of support, report the incident to adults in the school). Train students to communicate their lack of support for violent or aggressive behavior in the school. Students need to understand that silence may be interpreted as being supportive of negative acts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recognize signs that someone may be a perpetrator of school violence. Peer support groups may also provide emotional support for victimized students (Cowie & Smith, 2010). Students report that teachers are a source of informational support most frequently, but Malecki and Demaray found that emotional support from teachers was significantly related to positive social skills and academic competence. Thus, school may need to provide training to teachers about how to increase the availability of emotional support for their students.

Conclusion

Many ecological and contextual variables surrounding bullying and school violence (Espelage & Swearer, 2004) are important to understanding bullying behavior and to preventing and intervening with participants in the bullying dynamic. This chapter summarized one important contextual factor, social support from parents, peers, teachers, and the school. However, this chapter also emphasizes that more research is needed. Further study is needed to understand the mechanisms of the many roles of social support in the bullying dynamic. Most importantly, more intervention research is needed to inform families and schools what types of socially supportive behaviors are effective to prevent, interrupt, and aid recovery in bullying situations.

References


Michelle Kilpatrick Demaray et al.


