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Title: Parents as Moderators of the Impact of Peers and School Environment

Text:

The middle school years place many adolescents at risk for adjustment problems. They also present opportunities for reducing risk and promoting health. During this transition youth may be particularly susceptible to peer influences and school-level factors that either promote aggression or encourage nonviolent responses to provocation. The extent to which parents endorse values that discourage the use of aggression and that promote nonviolent responses may directly affect risk or mitigate peer and school-level influences. Few studies have included a sufficiently large and diverse sample of schools to examine the impact of school-level factors on middle school students. This study took advantage of longitudinal data from a multi-site study to examine the role of parent and peer influences within the context of school climate variables. A particular focus was on the extent to which parental influences could serve as a protective factor to reduce the impact of school-level and peer influences during middle school. Data on 5,581 youth were collected from 74 classes (two cohorts of students each from 37 schools) in four communities at the beginning and end of the 6th grade, and at the end of the following two school years. The sample included a random sample of about 65 students from each cohort at each school. Mixed effects models with measurements nested within individuals and individuals within classes found that aggression and peer delinquency, school norms for aggression, and parental support for fighting increased during middle school, while parental support for nonviolence decreased. School-level norms supporting aggression, delinquent peer associations, parental monitoring, parental support for fighting, and parental support for nonviolent behavior each significantly and uniquely accounted for changes in individual aggression from the beginning to end of the sixth grade. Several effects were maintained across subsequent waves of data suggesting that sixth grade factors may have a persistent effect on adolescents' adjustment. Each of the three parenting variables moderated one or more risk factor, with the magnitude of many protective effects decreasing over time. These results have important implications for the development and timing of violence prevention programs. They support the notion that school-level, peer, and parenting variables each exert important and independent influences on the development of aggression during middle school. They also suggest that parental influences alone may not be sufficient to buffer adolescents from the impact of school and peer environments that support aggression and discourage nonviolent behavior.

Theme Groups: 1 Key social relationships