



PEERS LAB, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

PEERS Lab Classroom Experiences Project

May 2012

WHO MATTERS FOR CHILDREN?

Classroom Experiences Project

by Wendy Hoglund and the PEERS Team

We are excited to share some of our findings from our study of children's classroom experiences and social relationships.

Who participated in this study?

Ten elementary schools from the Edmonton Public and Edmonton Catholic School Districts participated in this study.

In these schools, 506 children in kindergarten to grade 3 participated in our 18-month study. Of these children, 51% were girls and 27% were in kindergarten, 29% were in grade 1, 22% were in grade 2, and 22% were in grade 3. Participating children were also ethnically diverse, with 49.5% of children from ethnic minority families. About 35% of children were also from immigrant families.

Across the 10 schools, 72 teachers also took part in our study. Overall, 93% of teachers were female, 73% had a Bachelor's Degree, and 27% had a 2-year after-degree.

We asked these children and their parents and teachers questions 6 different times between January 2010 and June 2011.

What did we study?

This study assessed children's relationships with peers and teachers, their mental health

(such as symptoms of depression and anxiety and aggressive, disruptive behaviours), their interest in school, and their academic skills.

We also asked teachers about their teaching experiences and observed the overall interactions among children and teachers in each class to assess the classroom climate.

Why did we do this study?

We wanted to learn about how children's experiences in their classrooms relate to their positive and negative experiences with peers, relationships with teachers, mental health, and their academic skills. We followed the same children over 18 months to see how children's experiences changed over time.

What did we find?

The summary of our findings on the pages that follow focus on children's experiences of peer bullying, academic skills, relationships with friends and teachers, and on teachers' experiences and the classroom climate.

- Page 2: Peer bullying.
- Page 3: Academic skills.
- Page 4: Children's relationships.
- Page 5: Teachers' experiences.
- Page 6: Publications from this project.



Friends Matter

When children had a friend who they could rely on they were bullied by peers less, bullied other children less, showed fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, and enjoyed school and participated in class activities more.



Teachers Matter

When children experienced a close relationship with their teachers they were bullied by peers less, bullied other children less, showed fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, were less aggressive and disruptive in class, enjoyed school and participated in class activities more, and showed better academic skills.

Peer Bullying:

Victimization and Aggression

Peer Victimization

Children's risk for being bullied or victimized by peers is a concern for many parents and schools. We asked children how often in the past month they had been the recipient of **relational victimization**, such as other kids excluding them from activities or telling lies about them, and **physical victimization**, such as being hit or pushed by other kids. Children rated whether they were victimized "never," "sometimes," or "all the time."

On average, children reported low levels of peer victimization at each data collection point. Overall, **33% to 35%** of children reported that they were **never victimized** relationally or physically by peers.

Nonetheless, some children experienced moderate to high levels of peer victimization at each data collection point, with **9% to 10%** of children reporting that they were victimized relationally or physically by peers "sometimes" to "all the time."

Peer Aggression

We also asked children how often they bullied other children using either relational

or physical aggression. Children rated whether they bullied other kids "never," "sometimes," or "all the time."

On average, children reported engaging in very low levels of relational and physical aggression at each data collection point. Overall, **66%** of children reported that they **never bullied other children relationally** and **82%** of children reported that they **never bullied other children physically**. Only 3% of children stated that they bullied other kids "sometimes" to "all the time."

Grade Differences

Children in the lower grades (kindergarten to grade 1) reported that they were relationally victimized and engaged in relational and physical aggression more often than children in the higher grades (grades 2 and 3).

Changes over Time in Bullying

Average levels of peer victimization and aggression decreased over the 18 months of the study. Younger children showed greater decreases over time in both relational and physical aggression than older children. As children mature they generally become more skilled at regulating aggressive behaviours.

Risks for Bullying

When children experienced more conflict in their relationships with friends and teachers, reported more symptoms of depression and anxiety, and endorsed aggressive strategies



to resolve conflicts with peers they were more likely to be victimized by peers and also to bully other children.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GIRLS & BOYS

Overall, girls and boys experienced similar levels of physical victimization and engaged in similar levels of relational and physical aggression across the 18 months of the study.

Our findings converge with other studies on relational aggression in suggesting that, contrary to media images, both girls and boys use threats of friendship withdrawal and rumor spreading as a way to harm their peers.

Nonetheless, girls reported experiencing more relational victimization across the 18 months of the study than boys. It may be that girls are more sensitive to relational threats than boys.



The goal of the PEERS Program is to support young children's healthy peer relationships, including reducing risks for bullying, and their ability to manage feelings of anger and emotional distress.

What Can Schools Do about Bullying?

PEERS Program: Promoting Children's Early Empathic Relationships in School

With the information gathered from the Classroom Experiences project, we developed a social-emotional and literacy learning program for children in kindergarten to grade 3: **PEERS: Promoting Children's Early Empathic Relationships in School**.

The goal of the PEERS Program is to support children's healthy peer relationships, including reducing risks for bullying, and their ability to manage feelings of anger and emotional distress. Through the use of high quality children's storybooks, PEERS also aims to enhance children's literacy skills.

PEERS is implemented by teachers across the year and includes 6 program units, each with 3 to 4 lesson plans. The lesson plans are integrated into the Health and Life Skills and

Language Arts curricula and focus on helping children celebrate cultural diversity, manage diverse emotions, resolve conflicts with peers, and make and keep friends.

PEERS provides teachers with mental health consultants on a bi-weekly basis to support their strategies for working with diverse children. Monthly roundtable sessions are also held to enhance teachers' knowledge of young children's mental health concerns.

We pilot tested the PEERS Program in three Edmonton Public Schools during the 2011-2012 academic year. Data from both the Classroom Experiences and PEERS projects will be used to support applications for additional research funding to evaluate the PEERS Program in additional schools.

WHAT NURTURES ACADEMIC SKILLS?



Engagement in School

When children reported that they enjoyed school and participated in class activities more they showed higher academic skills, as assessed by standardized reading, writing and math skills and teacher-rated literacy skills.



Supportive Relationships

When children had a close relationship with teachers and were bullied by peers less they enjoyed school more and showed higher academic skills.



Positive Mental Health

When children experienced fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety and were less aggressive and disruptive in class they participated in class and enjoyed school more and showed higher academic skills.

FAST FACT

31%

Of children reported it was "really true" that they enjoyed school and participated in class activities.

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Children's Academic Skills:

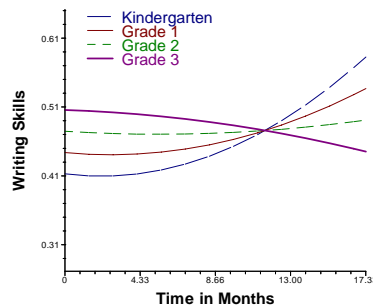
Reading, Writing and Math Skills and Language and Literacy Skills

We studied how children's interest in school and participation in class, relationships with peers and teachers, and their mental health were related to their academic skills.

Reading, Writing and Math

We assessed children's reading, writing and math skills by asking children to complete several grade-specific questions that used these skills. Their answers to each question were rated as "incorrect = 0" or "correct = 1."

On average, children's skills in reading, writing and math increased over the 18 months of the study. Children in the lower grades showed increases in their academic skills whereas skills for children in the higher grades did not change significantly. Girls also showed better writing skills than boys, but girls and boys did not differ in the other skills.



When children enjoyed school and took part in class activities more often they also showed higher writing and math skills.

Children who shared a close, comforting relationship with their teacher also showed higher reading, writing and math skills.

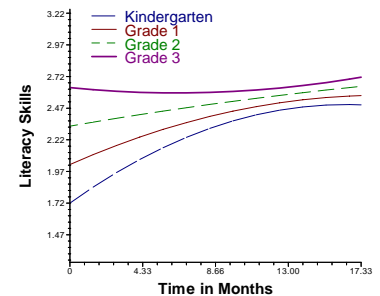
Alternatively, children who were absent from school often and who were bullied by peers more showed lower reading and writing skills. Children who bullied other kids more also showed lower reading and math skills.

Children who experienced more symptoms of depression and anxiety and who were more aggressive and disruptive also showed poorer reading, writing and math skills.

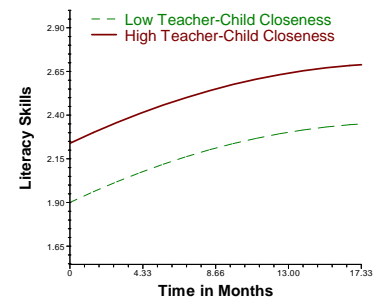
Language and Literacy

We also asked teachers about children's language and literacy skills. Teachers rated children's skills on a scale that ranged from "not yet proficient = 0" to "proficient = 4."

On average, children's language and literacy skills increased over the 18 months of our study. While children in the higher grades showed more proficient literacy skills, children in the lower grades showed greater increases in their literacy skills over time.



Children who were more engaged in school and children who shared a closer relationship with teachers showed higher literacy skills.



Alternatively, children who bullied other kids more and who showed more depressive, anxious symptoms and aggressive, disruptive behaviours showed poorer literacy skills.



Children's Friendships

Caring and Conflict

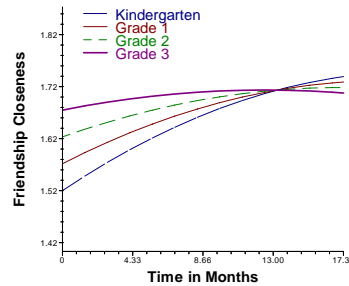


We asked children about their relationship with their best friend. Children reported on the degree of **caring in their friendship**, such as whether their best friend says nice things about them and would stick up for them, and **conflict in their friendship**, such as whether they fight with their best friend. Children rated whether the qualities of their friendship were "not true = 0," "a little true = 1," or "really true = 2."

Caring and Closeness

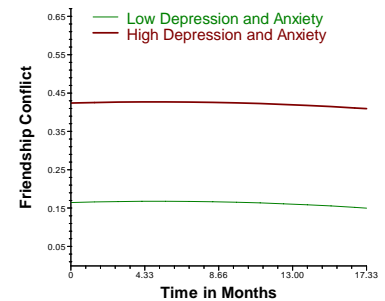
On average, children reported a high degree

of caring and closeness in their friendships that increased across the 18 months of the study. Older children reported closer friendships than younger children. Girls and boys reported similar levels of closeness.



Conflict

The level of conflict in children's friendships was low and decreased across the study. Younger children reported more conflict in their friendships than older children. Girls and boys reported similar levels of conflict. When children bullied other kids more often, experienced more symptoms of depression and anxiety, and were more aggressive they also reported more friendship conflict.



SUPPORTIVE FRIENDSHIPS MATTER

Several studies show that children who have a friend whom they can rely on for support and protection are less likely to be bullied by peers. Children with a close, supportive friendship are also less vulnerable to feelings of depression and anxiety when they do experience bullying.

Children's Relationships with Teachers

Closeness and Conflict



We asked children how supported and comforted they felt by their teachers. We also asked teachers about whether they shared a close, warm relationship with children or a conflicted relationship.

Closeness

Children reported very close relationships with teachers that did not change over time or differ by children's grade. Girls reported greater increases in their closeness with teachers over time than boys.

Teachers also reported sharing very close relationships with children that increased across the study. Teachers reported closer

relationships with children in the lower grades than children in the higher grades.

When children experienced less depression and anxiety they reported that they shared a closer relationship with their teachers. When children were less aggressive and disruptive, teachers also reported a closer relationship.

Conflict

Teachers also reported little conflict in their relationships with children. These levels did not change over time or differ between girls and boys. Teachers reported more conflict in their relationships with children in the lower grades than children in the higher grades.

When children showed more symptoms of depression and anxiety and were more aggressive and disruptive, they experienced more conflicted relationships with teachers.

Teachers' Experiences and Interactions in the Classroom

Emotional Exhaustion, Personal Accomplishment and Classroom Climate

We asked teachers about their feelings of job-related emotional exhaustion, sense of accomplishment in their work, and about the social support they received from colleagues.

Emotional Exhaustion

Teachers rated how often they felt emotionally exhausted by job-related stressors. On average, teachers reported low levels of emotional exhaustion that did not change over time. Teachers with more years of teaching experience felt less emotionally exhausted than more novice teachers.

When teachers felt more supported by their colleagues they felt less emotionally exhausted. Alternatively, when classrooms had more aggressive, disruptive children teachers felt more emotionally exhausted.

Personal Accomplishment

Teachers also reported how often they felt

effective in meeting their personal goals for their work. On average, teachers reported high levels of personal accomplishment and this did not change over time. When teachers felt more supported by their colleagues they also felt more effective in their work.

Classroom Climate

We also observed the overall supportive and respectful interactions among the children and teachers in the classrooms and how well managed classrooms were. Overall, levels of support and respect in the classrooms were high and classrooms were well managed.

When teachers felt more supported and accepted by colleagues they also had classrooms that were well managed. In well managed classrooms, teachers spend less time redirecting children's misbehaviours and more time engaging children in learning.

WHAT SUPPORTS TEACHERS?



Social Support from Colleagues

When teachers reported that they felt supported and accepted by colleagues they reported feeling less emotionally exhausted and more effective in their work, and their classrooms were better managed.

Children's Positive Behaviors

When there were more aggressive, disruptive children in the classroom, teachers reported more job-related emotional exhaustion and their classrooms were less well managed (Hoglund, Klinge, & Hosan, 2012).

PEERS Lab Classroom Experiences Project

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To date, data from the Classroom Experiences project have been used to support two Masters Theses (Naheed Hosan and Ayanda Chakawa), one Undergraduate Honours Thesis (Courtney Chisholm), and several presentations by undergraduate and graduate students at local and international research conferences, including the Royce Conference, Society for Research on Child Development, and the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development.

We are grateful to the children, parents, teachers, principals and other school personnel who made this study possible through their participation.



We also thank the numerous undergraduate and graduate students who committed their time and boundless energy to this study: Naheed Hosan, Ayanda Chakawa, Shayla Richards, Phillip Hau, Alex Graf-Dunseith, Courtney Chisholm, Naomi Sheh, Lindsey Bannard, Harriet Halse, Meghan Walker, Kirsten Klinge, Sabrina Brady, Lindsay Hoban, Carina Glerud, Jeff Sawalha, Wendy Salvisberg, Selina Wong, Cecilia Ma, Natasha Varma, Alyssa Jantz, Brittany Crow, Crystal Lung, Rumbi Mutikani, and Dena Samimi.

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For more information on the Classroom Experiences project or the PEERS Program contact Wendy Hoglund or visit our website.

<http://www.psych.ualberta.ca/~hoglund/PEERSlab/>

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Publications from the Classroom Experiences Project

Manuscripts Submitted for Publication:

- Hoglund, W. L. G., Klingle, K. E., & Hosan, N. E. (2012). *Risks or resources: The classroom context of children's social and academic functioning*. Manuscript under review.
- Hoglund, W. L. G., & Chisholm, C. (2012). *Reciprocating risks of peer relationship problems and aggression for children's internalizing problems*. Manuscript under review.
- Hosan, N. E., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2012). *Does relationship quality matter for children's school engagement and academic skills?* Manuscript under review.



Conference Presentations:

- Hoglund, W. L. G., Klingle, K. E., & Hosan, N. E. (2012, July). *Teacher burnout, classroom climate, and children's social and academic functioning*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, Edmonton, AB.
- Hosan, N. E., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2012, July). *Children's peer networks and changes in internalizing problems*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, Edmonton, AB.
- Chisholm, C., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2012, July). *The association between peer rejection, aggression and internalizing problems in middle childhood*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, Edmonton, AB.
- Richards, S. R., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2012, July). *Household risk, parent involvement in schooling, and adjustment problems in middle childhood*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, Edmonton, AB.
- Hau, P., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2012, July). *Children's aggression-victimization status and school engagement*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, Edmonton, AB.
- Hoglund, W. L. G. (2011, April). *Gender differences in comorbid internalizing problems, aggression, and peer victimization in middle childhood*. Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development, Montreal, QC.
- Hosan, N. E., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2011, April). *Children's peer networks and internalizing problems in middle childhood*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development, Montreal, QC.
- Hoban, L. C., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2011, April). *Classroom climate, normative beliefs, and peer victimization in middle childhood*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development, Montreal, QC.
- Sheh, N., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2011, April). *Classroom climate, student-teacher relationship quality, and internalizing problems*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development, Montreal, QC.
- Graf-Dunseith, A., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2011, April). *The association between student-teacher relationship quality and subtypes of peer victimization and racial/ethnic differences*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development, Montreal, QC.
- Chakawa, A., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2011, April). *Longitudinal associations between parent involvement in school, child school engagement, and literacy during middle childhood*. Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development, Montreal, QC.
- Klingle, K. E., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2011, March). *Teacher burnout, social support, pedagogy, and classroom climate*. Poster presented at the annual Royce Conference, Edmonton, AB.
- Richards, S. R., & Hoglund, W. L. G. (2011, March). *Household and school mobility, parenting practices, parent involvement in schooling, and adjustment problems*. Poster presented at the annual Royce Conference, Edmonton, AB.

Masters Theses:

- Chakawa, A. (2012). *An exploratory study of ethnic differences in parent cultural socialization practices and children's experiences of peer ethnic victimization* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB.
- Hosan, N. E. (2011). *Children's student-teacher relationships, friendships and school engagement: Trajectories of change in middle childhood* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB.

Honours Theses:

- Chisholm, C. (2012). *Peer rejection, aggression and internalizing problems in middle childhood* (Unpublished honours thesis). University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB.