

How Do You Know When Your Student Or Child Is Being Victimized and How Can You Help

Despite the relative safety of school compared with neighborhoods and homes where adult supervision may be lacking, research suggests that school violence remains a significant problem. For example, in a large school-based investigation, it was found that as many as 44% of the study participants had been personally victimized by their peers, and more than half of the sample had witnessed their peers being victimized (1). Remarkably, school personnel are either insufficiently aware of or inattentive to the degree to which students are victimized. Our hope is that as adults better recognize and understand the impact of victimization, their commitment towards reducing and, ultimately, eliminating such experiences will increase exponentially.

What Is Victimization

We define victimization as involuntary, direct or indirect, personal exposure to acts of violence that significantly heighten feelings of vulnerability and lower feelings of personal safety. As such, victimization not only includes personal attacks (i.e., direct victimization), but also includes witnessing others being victimized (i.e., indirect victimization). School victimization encompasses a broad array of situations ranging from verbal harassment and threats, social isolation, being the target of rumors, being chased or hit, to being threatened with a knife or gun, getting wounded or raped. The following sections will address the general effects of all forms of victimization in the school setting.

Signs Of Victimization

Parents and school staff must be able to recognize some common signs of victimization, especially considering that many youth feel disrespected by authority figures and may not disclose violent incidents because of feelings of distrust and a lack of confidence that adults can or will do their best to protect them from harm (2).

Students who are personally victimized may experience such symptoms as depression, anxiety, safety concerns, sadness, aggression, academic issues, low self-esteem, deficits in peer relations, and substance use (3).

Adults should also be aware of other possible warning signs of school victimization:

1. Numerous lost belongings
2. Frequent injuries or damage to clothes or property
3. Spends time primarily with younger students (may indicate a problem with peers)
4. Avoids recess (i.e., playground) before, during and/or after school
5. Arrives to school late or just at the starting bell
6. Appears to be alone most of the time at school
7. Obtains an excessive or insufficient amount of sleep
8. Somatic complaints (i.e., headaches, stomachaches, etc.)

Though a few of the aforementioned items only apply to direct victimization (i.e., 1 and 2), the majority of the items also extend to youth who have been indirectly victimized, including those who witness victimization of their peers. For example, students who witness violence may begin to take precautions such as avoiding recess to prevent a personal attack or further exposure. Although witnessing school violence generally gets less attention in the literature, some findings indicate that witnessing violence may be just as damaging for exposed youth. In a large sample of low to middle class 3rd-12th grade students, youth who were personally victimized or witnessed violence at a higher rate than their peers experienced more psychological distress (i.e., depression, anxiety, and anger) and low-violent behaviors (i.e., threatening others, physical retaliation, initiating physical fights) (1).

Recognition of some of the common signs of victimization may provide us with further insight into our children's behaviors. For example, when we note that our child or student is failing a class, before concluding that his or her failure is simply due to a lack of effort or indifference, we must consider victimization-related events as a possible

source of academic difficulties. Similarly, uncharacteristic aggression on the part of a child may be a sign of victimization. In this context, aggression may be used as a form of coping in an attempt to resolve the conflict, achieve a higher social status, avoid future conflict, or displace feelings of vulnerability that accompany victimization.

Responding To Signs Of Victimization

Clearly, verification that one's child or student is being victimized is most strongly corroborated by witnessing it oneself. The testimony of the child or peers can also be useful. However, youth are often reluctant to discuss victimization experiences because they are embarrassed to be a victim, or to have failed to act on behalf of a victim. Further, youth often fear that adults will not act to protect them or may even exacerbate the situation. Therefore, it is critical that teachers and parents be vigilant in their attempts to identify signs of victimization rather than presuming that victimized youth will come forward.

Intervention Principles For Parents And School Personnel

We conclude with guiding intervention principles for parents and school personnel (3)

- Once adults manage to get youth to open up about victimization experiences, they must ensure that the trust implicit in such disclosures is not violated. In other words, adults must listen, give support and empathy, and avoid blame.
- Parents and teachers must ensure that children are receiving appropriate care from school-based health care personnel. Such care should involve reducing or eliminating violence exposure and related symptoms.
- Adults should avoid aggressive, intimidating, and abusive behaviors, but, rather, model social and emotional competencies in the classroom and home settings that we would like to see reflected by our youth.
- Given the pervasiveness of school victimization, school-wide interventions that target aggressors and victims with a focus on the development of social-emotional competencies in an effort to prevent future difficulties are indicated. Such interventions must also address students who bare witness to violence (1).

References

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