Multi-Faceted School Readiness and the Student-Teacher Relationship

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Introduction

Peer exclusion in elementary school is a risk factor associated with future difficulties in areas of social adjustment and mental health (Bierman, 2004; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Parker & Asher, 1987). Research suggests that children who are excluded by peers in early elementary school often have pre-existing vulnerabilities; many are characterized by elevated levels of inattention and emotion dysregulation (Pope & Bierman, 1999). It has been postulated that inattentive behavior, including distractibility and difficulties sustaining attentional focus, contributes to peer exclusion at school because inattentive children tend to miss out on social cues and sequences, and fail to grasp the rules of activities and peer games (Bellanti & Bierman, 2000). For this reason, inattention may result in a failure to conform to social norms, and inattentive children may be viewed as socially awkward or even "strange". It has also been suggested that the link between inattention and peer exclusion may be indirect and due, in part, to the increased emotion dysregulation often experienced by inattentive children (Barley & Fischer, 2010; Bellanti & Bierman, 2000). For instance, when inattentive children miss key aspects of social sequences or rules of games, they may experience feelings of frustration at the seeming arbitrariness of decisions. Whether these children can regulate their emotions, particularly frustrated and angry outbursts, may have a great impact on whether they are excluded by peers in the future. Yet, the nature of the association between inattention and emotion dysregulation in predicting peer exclusion remains understudied.

Study Aims

The present study addressed this gap by examining the transactional relationship between inattentive behavior and emotion dysregulation skills in kindergarten and first grade. Additionally, it examined the degree to which inattention and emotion dysregulation uniquely predicted peer exclusion (as measured by children and teachers) in second grade.

Methods

Participants were 356 children (17% Hispanic, 25% African American, 42% European American; 54% girls). These children were recruited from Head Start, a preschool program designed for low-income children, and were recruited for a preschool intervention study (Head Start REDI). 192 children received an enhanced Head Start intervention; the other 164 children served as a comparison group. 192 children received an enhanced Head Start intervention; the other 164 children served as a comparison group.

Measures included teachers' ratings of children's inattention using the ADHD Rating Scale (DuPaul, 1991). Teachers also completed the 6-item emotion regulation subscale of Social Health Profile (SHP, CPPRQ, 1999); scores were reverse coded to reflect emotion dysregulation. Kindergarten and 1st grade teachers provided these ratings. At the end of second grade, a 3-item subscale of the Friendship Questionnaire (Bierman & McCabeley, 1987) was administered to children to assess peer exclusion and victimization experiences at school (e.g., "Is there someone who teases you and makes fun of you?"). Additionally, second grade teachers also rated peer exclusion using 4 items from the Child Behavior Scale (Ladd & Proffit, 1996).

Plan of Analyses

Cross-lagged path models were specified to examine the relationship between inattention and emotion dysregulation across kindergarten and first grade, and to predict peer exclusion in second grade, with a model estimated separately for child-reported and teacher-reported peer exclusion. Path analyses were performed using AMOS 21.0. The parameters were estimated using full-information maximum likelihood estimation method to reduce the potential bias of incomplete data. Treatment status and child verbal intelligence were included as covariates in each model.

Results

- Inattention and emotion dysregulation were moderately stable.
- Inattention at Time 1 predicted emotion dysregulation at Time 2, but emotion dysregulation at Time 1 did not predict inattention at Time 2.
- Emotion dysregulation at Time 2 directly predicted children's report of peer exclusion at Time 3 (Figure 1). Although inattention at Time 2 did not directly predict children's report of peer exclusion at Time 3, the cross-lagged association between inattention and emotion dysregulation suggests the possibility of an indirect effect of inattention on peer exclusion through emotion dysregulation.
- Emotion dysregulation at Time 2 directly predicted teachers' report of peer exclusion at Time 3 (Figure 2). Inattention at Time 2 was directly and indirectly (through emotion dysregulation) associated with teachers' subsequent report of peer exclusion.

Discussion

Interestingly, this study revealed a cross-lagged association between inattention in kindergarten and emotion dysregulation in first grade, such that higher inattention was associated with worse subsequent emotion dysregulation. Further, results indicated that inattention was directly and indirectly (through emotion dysregulation) associated with subsequent teacher-reported peer exclusion, and indirectly (through emotion dysregulation) associated with child-reported peer exclusion. These findings suggest that emotion dysregulation may serve as a mechanism that links inattention with subsequent exclusion by peers. Additionally, emotion dysregulation measured in kindergarten and first grade was directly associated with child- and teacher-reported peer exclusion in second grade.

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