Group Pressure in Youngsters' Dangerous Behaviour

Dr. Doc. Mimoza Çarka

University "Eqrem Çabej", Gjirokastër, Albania

Abstract

Unintentional injury is the leading cause of death and disability in children. Many injuries to school–aged children occur during unsupervised peer activities, but peer influences on risky behavior in preadolescence remain under-investigated. We examined peer context effects on reported risk-taking, indentified predictors of peer influence, and compared peer influence in high-and low-social-functioning groups. Forty-one boys aged 8-10 years listened to scenarios in which they encountered opportunities for risk-taking with their best friends, with "cool guys", with disliked peers, and alone. They rated the likelihood that they would engage in risky behavior in each condition for each scenario. Children also completed measures of friendship satisfaction, peer orientation, and socially desirable responding. Children reported more risk-taking with positive peers than alone, and less with negative peers than alone. Children in the high social competence group showed larger peer influence, and indicated a preference for risk-taking with best friends over cool guys. Results are discussed in terms of improving injury prevention efforts by reconceptualizing "peer pressure" as a developmentally adaptive aspect of child functioning.

Keywords: *preadolescence, cool guys, peer pressure, risk behavior, injury.*

Unintentional Injury

Unintentional Injury constitutes an enormous threat to the health and welfare of children. In this country, twenty two million children are injured every year (Boyce & Sobolewski, 1989). Prevention of unintentional injuries to children should be considered a high priority for researchers, policy makers, and society at large. Unintentional injuries, although often seen as random and unavoidable (as the term "accident" implies), are in actuality predictable and controllable. However, determining effective prevention strategies requires a detailed understanding of the process of injury that transcends epidemiological data.

The processes that lead to unintentional injuries by children are complex and multi-deterministic; an exclusive focus on child factors ("internal determinism") or on environmental factors ("external determinism") is insufficient and overlooks the reciprocal, transactional nature of injury events. Injuries result from specific behavior-environment interactions and many if not all injuries require a failure or break-down at multiple levels of the system in which the child is permanently embedded. Thus "injuries are the product of avoidable environmental and behavioral forces that together produce an unfortunate outcome" (Peterson, Farmer, & Mori, 1987, p. 33) Whether investigation occurs at an epidemiological or child motivations and behavior patterns (Jaquess & Finney, 1994), parental supervision beliefs and practices (Valsiner & Lightfoot, 1987), and structural considerations in the immediate and broader environment (Rivara & Mueller, 1987).

Socio-cognitive development

Injury is a developmental and cultural phenomenon; injury risks and outcomes vary with child age and with socio-cultural features of the child's environment. Interpersonal relationship and cognitive functioning are intimately related; in order to understand children's risk-taking decisions, an understanding of the relational basis of cognition is a necessary prerequisite. From before birth, children are embedded inexorably in their culture; all development proceeds from within this context (Rogoff, 1990).

Children are active agents in seeking the interactions necessary for their own development, and their learning is guided by shared thinking with caregivers, and participation in the ongoing activities of their culture. Social relationships proceed from early experiences of shared attention and co-regulation with caregivers, through the construction of shared meanings with peers in dramatic play, through negotiation of joint problem -solving requiring perspective-taking, to the establishment of intimate friendship and a peer culture based on shared expectations and interpretations (Rogoff, 1990). Thus, children are always constructing their world in the context of their relationships with others. Together, people construct cultural contexts for their interactions, in which there are "standing rules for behavior appropriate to a particular socially assembled situation"- these rules vary depending on the context of the situation, but members of the same culture will generally agree on what they are.

"To understand the role of peer interaction in cognitive development, it is necessary to examine situations in which children are in charge of their own activities" (Rogoff, 1990).

Social development and injury risk in middle childhood

There is little consensus on what level of supervision is appropriate for children in middle childhood in high-risk situations (Peterson, Ewigman, & Kivlahan, 1993). Peterson and her colleagues (1993) found that in evaluating the need for supervision of 9 and 10-year-old children in neighborhoods containing common environmental hazards (e.g., creeks, busy streets), parent's responses varied widely, but that many parents indicated that it would be appropriate for children of this age to play in the neighborhood unsupervised for more than a few minutes if at all (Peterson, et al., 1993). Others have similarly suggested that during preadolescence the range of independent behavior increase, there is a decrease in direct adult supervision, and peers take on increased importance as socialization partners. It is also important to note that when in outdoor environments with opportunities for risky behavior, children behave more safely when aware of being observed by adults than when these observations are made unobtrusively. Additionally, there is evidence that 8 to 11-year children perceive fewer situations as hazardous and perceive situations as less hazardous than do either younger or older children.

In particular, they often disagree with their parent's perceptions of what risks are too great for their abilities (Christensen & Morrongiello, 1997) and frequently base their disagreement on an overly optimistic evaluation of their own competence in preventing injury to themselves (Hyson & Bollin, 1990).

Adolescence is popularly considered to be a time when peers take over as the primary

socialization source in children's lives, and there has been ample examination of peer influences on youthful risk-taking behaviors that threaten long-term health (e.g., cigarette smoking, illegal drug use). Little is known, however, about the influence of peers on risky decision-making in middle childhood. The middle school years (approximately ages 11-14) appear to be a particularly dangerous time in childhood; children in this age group are more frequently injured, and are disproportionately represented among "accident-repeaters" (i.e., children incurring multiple injuries over time). Further, it has been reported that many injuries to school-aged children are incurred in the presence of peers. Although little work has examined the influence of peers on the risk-interpersonal influences of each other in situations that do not involve risk-taking. There is ample evidence that even very young children can effectively influence one another's behavior. Trawick–Smith (1992) found that persuasive children can be identified before the beginning of elementary school, and tend to use markedly different strategies than less successful persuaders; the successful influencers used positive persuasive strategies like friendly demands, were generally socially skilled, and used fewer aggressive or angry strategies to induce compliance with their requests. The number of persuasive tactics employed, and the complexity of these strategies, although not necessarily the overall success of the influence attempt, increase with age, and children's strategies for effecting interpersonal influence are sophisticated and well-developed by middle childhood. It should be noted that most of the work in this area has focused on identifying successful persuaders and examining the persuasive techniques they use; in contrast, there is little information available on the children being persuaded, and we know very little about individual differences in "influence ability" in children.

Social Competence and Peer Influence

Children's activities in peer culture situations have little attention, in part because of the difficulty adult researchers have in accessing such situations; as a result, we know little about how children behave when on their own together or how they construct their shared meanings in the absence of adult models, guides, and restrictions (Rogoff, 1990). It is important never to overlook the child's active role in constructing these environments and subjectively experienced contexts; children are purposive and goal-oriented, and their behavior in different socially assembled situations will be based on their current goals and abilities. In peer-culture situations, one common goal will be to construct shared experiences and viewpoints in order to build relationships based on a group identity. This goal is congruent with the tendency to conform to others' demands and beyond is correlated with the tendency to conform to others' demands and be cooperative –these characteristics should be desirable to peers intent on coming to a shared understanding of experience.

Establishing a shared identity with a group of peers may be a more important goal for some children than for others. Dodge and Richard (1985) assert that children have widely differing social goals and motivations; some children consider friendship secondary to other social goals, while others value peer relationships more than their own self-protection. Ollendick and Schmidt (1987) included this consideration in their

examination of the utility of social learning constructs in predicting peer interaction patterns. Peer reinforcement value is a measure of how important peer relationships are to a child, or how much he values interactions with other children. Placing a high value on peer interactions is related to having positive peer relationship; many children who report placing heavy emphasis on peer interactions have positive relationships with their peer. Socially skilled children are thus both more likely to be peer-oriented and to achieve positive peer relationships, and children are more likely to be influenced by peers with whom they have positive relationships.

Peer pressure and risk-taking may be seen as active behavior choices that encourage the establishment of a group identity through shared risk-taking. Thus, Lightfoot (1992) describes risk-taking behavior as "a culture-creating device employed for the purpose of organizing self-other relationships. There were two fundamental differences between these two conceptualizations of peer pressure: a- the consequences of conformity or independence were not explicitly stated (as in the oft-presented "What are you, chicken?" version of peer pressure); and, b-shared risk–taking was sees as a proactive mechanism for creating important group experiences and advancing as an externally imposed opportunity to prove one's worth or avoid the criticism of aggressive or antagonistic peers (the latter being assumed in the educational focus on "Just Say No" and other resistance based admonitions). If participipation in peer-sanctioned risk behavior is considered a mechanism for improving and maintaining positive peer relationships, children who are more socially competent may be more likely to engage in these behaviors: socially competent children are more likely to have positive peer relationships (in which the influence valence is likely to be stronger), to determine accurately the social context demands of peer situations, and to act cooperatively in order to competently establish a shared perspective with their peers.

Many peer-pressure programs focus on increasing children's social skills in order to protect them from peer bids for dangerous behavior. This implies that is a lack of social competence that encourages peer-sanctioned risk-taking. A positive relationship between social competence and peer influence is congruent with the conceptualization of "peer pressure" and shared risky behavior as active, effective behavioral choices made by competent children intent on establishing, and maintaining positive peer relationships.

Peer Context, Risk-taking, and Social Competence

Based on the considerations presented above, the current study was designed to investigate pre-adolescence children's decisions to engage in shared risky behavior based on the presence of on established peer group (i.e., "some of your best friends"), a new, desirable peer group (i.e., "some cool guys at school who aren't your close friends yet but you want them to like you"), or a disliked peer group ("some kids you don't like to play with"). The risk-taking situations used as stimuli in this investigation were derived based on information about the types of serious injuries most common in middle childhood. Using responses to these risk-taking measures designed for this study. Using responses to these risk- taking scenarios and considering relationship quality, peer orientation, parent-reported social competence, and socio-demographic variables, this study (a) examined

pre-adolescent children's socially contextual decisions to engage in shared risky behavior: (b) identified predictors of peer influence; and, (c) compared peer influence patterns in children with high and low social competence. When considerate overall, our results indicate that boys in middle childhood reported more risky behavior in positive peer group situations than when they were alone.

Further, these boys reported that they generally were less likely to engage in risky activities with children whom they disliked than they were by themselves. Two interpretations are possible; both concern the motivation of the boys for performing these behaviors. It could be that risk-taking behaviors in particular are influenced by peer context. However, it could be that children would generally prefer to participate in activities with their friends than by themselves regardless of the riskiness of the behavior.

However, many of the alone condition scores for the scenarios measure indicate that the children were unlikely to participate in the risky activities described without their peers. This could be because the activities sounded unattractive without their friends, or it could be that the children chose not to perform these behaviors alone because the risk involved was considered too great without the opportunity to abstain peer socialization benefits.

Discussion

When considerate overall, our results indicate that boys in middle childhood reported more risky behavior in positive peer group situations than when they were alone. Further, these boys reported that they generally were less likely to engage in risky activities with children whom they disliked than they were by themselves. Two interpretations are possible; both concern the motivation of the boys for performing these behaviors. It could be that risk-taking behaviors in particular are influenced by peer context. However, it could be that children would generally prefer to participate in activities with their friends than by themselves regardless of the riskiness of the behavior. However, many of the alone condition scores for the scenarios measure indicate that the children were unlikely to participate in the risky activities described without their peers. This could be because the activities sounded unattractive without their friends, or it could be that the children chose not to perform these behaviors alone because the risk involved was considered too great without the opportunity to obtain peer socialization benefits. From previous research and these results, it seems plausible that boys in middle childhood take risks with their friends because doing so cements shared perspectives and other relationship variables critical for socio-cognitive development. Nonetheless, when opportunities to meet these goals via shared risk-taking experiences present themselves, many boys who reported that they would be unlikely to take such risks alone indicated that they would perform the same dangerous behaviors with their friends. Determining what types of alternative group activities could equally meet the peer socialization goals driving shared dangerous behavior, and providing children with access to these activities, could be one strategy for reducing behaviors that place children at risk for unintentional injury.

This study bears a number of important limitations

First, we measured children's report of what they would be congruent with their behavior in the real world. Conclusions regarding peer influence on children's risky behavior could

be strengthened by observing overt behaviors in analog or (even better) naturalistic settings. Second, our sample was constricted in many respects: it was small, excluded girls, and was comprised almost entirely of white, upper-middle-class children from well-educated two-parent families living in a suburban college setting.

Conclusions

One important caveat to interpreting the application of these result to real-life risk-taking situations is that while socially competent children indicated that they were unlikely to take risks alone but more likely to do so when encouraged to participate in these behaviors with their friends, it is unknown to what extent the child's friends would encourage risky behavior (especially given that they, too, might report similar reluctance to participate in these risk alone), or to what extent the child would expect his friends to encourage risks behavior. The dynamic interplay between children's risk-taking decision-making in group contexts is not represented here, so it is unknown to what extent these children should be expected to encounter in daily life the type of peer encouragement described here.

More sophisticated investigations could include an examination of the correspondence between a child's perceived likelihood that his friends would encourage particular risk-taking behaviors and his reported likelihood of performing these behaviors. Reducing child injuries is an important social goal worthy of resource investment. However, the apparent effect of social context on children's risky behavior suggests that strategies for reducing child injuries during peer activities must be designed that accommodate peer socialization goals. This is especially critical given our evidence that socially competent children report greater increases in risk-taking with their friends than do their less socially competent counterparts. That highly functioning children show this pattern suggest that it is likely a skilled, functional behavior.

Small groups of pre-adolescent boys with positive peer relationships are likely to take physical risks together, and programs aimed at reducing the danger associated with this behavioral pattern should respect the social competency of the children making these decisions. Being susceptible to "peer pressure" in middle childhood, now a behavior adults stigmatize, in itself clearly should not be considered dysfunctional. For highly socially adapted boys, choosing to participate in peer sanctioned risky activities is unlikely to be the result of unskilled contextual decision-making. As active agents in their own development those most vulnerable to counter-developmental influences. Programs designed to reduce "peer pressure" are unlikely to succeed with socially incompetent children by providing them with social (since these would likely increase peer influence, not the opposite).

And they are unlikely to succeed with socially competent children until they acknowledge that for these children the need to build peer relationships over-rides admonitions against dangerous behavior, and that is a functional behavioral choice. For parents and adult society, the cost-benefit analysis in risky peer pressure situations dictates that prevention of serious harm to the child supersede any perceived benefits in the form of fun or peer culture acceptance. However, recognizing that "peer pressure" is a developmentally adaptive aspect of child functioning will be a prerequisite to impacting behaviors judged by adults to represent too great a risk to the child's health.

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