The Relationship Between Childhood Teasing and Later Interpersonal Functioning

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The current study explored the relationship between recall of a form of bullying, specifically childhood teasing, and later interpersonal functioning in a sample of 414 college students. It was predicted that memories of frequent teasing during childhood would be associated with fewer close friends, a more anxious attachment style in the context of romantic relationships, and lower social self-esteem in early adulthood. Although recalled-teasing was not associated with number of friends later in life, it was related to other interpersonal difficulties. Specifically, frequent teasing was associated with less comfort with intimacy and closeness, less comfort in trusting and depending on others, a greater degree of worry about being unloved or abandoned in relationships, and poorer social self-esteem. The relationship of these difficulties to specific domains of teasing was also explored.

KEY WORDS: peer victimization; teasing; relationships; attachment; self-esteem.

Bullying is a relatively common peer victimization experience during childhood and adolescence, with one of seven children reporting that they are bullied "now and then" or even more frequently (Olweus, 1993). Bullying has been defined as being exposed "repeatedly and over time, to negative actions" in which "someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another" (Olweus, 1993, p. 9). Teasing, the most common form of peer victimization among both boys and girls, is a specific form of bullying in which "negative actions" are verbal in nature (Olweus, 1993). Common topics about which children are teased include their appearance, intelligence, weight, behavior, and clothing (Kowalski, 2000).

A number of features differentiate harmless joking among children from serious teasing and other forms of bullying (see Griffin & Gross, 2004). Perhaps the two most salient features are that bullies fully intend to inflict harm on their victims and that there is a power differential between the bully and victim such that the latter cannot defend him or herself (Griffin & Gross, 2004). The intentionality of bullying, and the power differential inherent in the bullying relationship, make clear that bullying is a form of aggression. Teasing communicates rejection from one child to another, thereby conferring a similar effect on children as physical violence (Asher, Rose, & Gabriel, 2001). Understanding the nature and impact of teasing can inform a broader understanding not only of bullying, but also of other forms of peer victimization including social ostracism and rejection.

Given the pejorative nature of peer teasing, it is not surprising that being teased is associated with poor psychosocial adjustment of children and adolescents at the time that it occurs. Cross-sectional studies have linked teasing to concurrent social anxiety, depression, loneliness, poor self-esteem, and low levels of social acceptance and competence (Callaghan & Joseph, 1995; Craig, 1998; Neary & Joseph, 1994; Storch, Masia-Warner, & Brassard, 2003; Storch, Nock, Masia-Warner, & Barlas,

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2003; Storch, Zelman, Sweeney, Danner, & Dove, 2002; Walter & Inderbitzen, 1998). The experience of childhood teasing has also been found to be associated with psychological distress years later. In an earlier study, recalled childhood teasing was significantly related to current depression, anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation among college students (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002). These findings were replicated in a subsequent study, which also showed recalled childhood teasing to be related to later loneliness (Storch et al., 2004). The Storch et al. (2004) study also explored the relationship of being teased in specific domains to later psychological difficulties. Using the Revised Teasing Questionnaire (TQ-R; Storch et al., 2004), which assesses teasing in five unique domains (performance, academics, social behavior, family background, and appearance), it was found that recalled teasing in the social domain (e.g., being teased about being shy, looking nervous, etc.) had the most far-reaching effects later in life, showing significant, positive relationships with depression, anxiety and loneliness. Further, findings showed that the magnitude of the associations between recalled teasing and adjustment did not differ for men and women.

These findings suggest that the experience of frequent teasing, particularly when it pertains to personality and social behavior (as captured by the TQ-R social domain), is associated with maladaptive patterns of cognition. Although causal conclusions cannot be made from these correlation studies, one possibility is that frequent teasing *may* contribute to the development of maladaptive patterns of cognition. Specifically, children may internalize their peers' negative comments and believe that they are different from their peers or flawed in some manner. Furthermore, when children are unable to bring teasing to a halt, they might develop the belief that they are ineffective and unable to navigate the social world. In addition, even if initial teasing is spurred by personal factors (e.g., poor social skills, personal qualities), this teasing may serve to exacerbate maladaptive cognitions and thereby negatively impact future interactions.

Maladaptive beliefs may also be related to later interpersonal difficulties. Being frequently teased during childhood might lead individuals to feel that they cannot trust or depend on others. These early negative experiences might result in a tendency to avoid some interpersonal relationships, while feeling a great deal of anxiety in those they are able to establish. This anxiety can be spurred by the *expectation* of disaster—and when disaster is expected, people engage in behaviors that can actually increase the likelihood of it happening. For example, people who experience relationships in an anxious way might seek reassurance from friends and significant others that

can become so taxing these individuals actually do reject them.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research on the relationship between childhood teasing and later interpersonal difficulties that could support these contentions. McCabe, Antony, Summerfeldt, Liss, and Swinson (2003) examined recalled childhood teasing in adult patients with social phobia, panic disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Childhood teasing was most strongly related to social phobia in adulthood. Although correlation does not imply causation, this finding suggests that the experience of childhood teasing might have a negative impact on later social functioning.

The current study explores the relationship between childhood teasing and later interpersonal functioning. Rather than looking at a psychiatric disorder characterized by difficulties in interpersonal functioning (as McCabe and colleagues did), this study examined various aspects of interpersonal functioning in a college student sample. It was hypothesized that report of frequent teasing during childhood would be associated with (1) fewer close friends in early adulthood; (2) more anxious attachment style in the context of romantic relationships, characterized by difficulties depending on and feeling close to others, as well as worries about abandonment; and (3) lower social self-esteem. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that being teased in the social domain, compared to being teased about other topics (e.g., academics, family, etc.), would be most strongly related to later interpersonal difficulties (e.g., anxious attachment and low social self-esteem).

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

As reported in a previous paper (Storch et al., 2004), participants were students in psychology classes at the University of Florida and Louisiana State University who took part in a study to validate and study a new measure of memories for childhood teasing. All students participated in the research voluntarily, completing a questionnaire battery during a group administration period. No compensation was provided. Because of time constraints, all measures could not be completed by the entire sample.

Questionnaire packets were completed by 414 students, 227 at the University of Florida and 187 at Louisiana State University. No differences between institutions were found in gender or ethnic distribution. Participants from Louisiana State University, $M = 20.84$, $SD = 2.91$, were significantly older than those from the University of Florida, $M = 20.26$, $SD = 2.19$;

$F(1, 413) = 5.27$, $p < .05$. However, comparison of the means suggests that the two samples were not meaningfully different in age. For the full sample, the mean age of participants was 20.52 ($SD = 2.55$) and the majority were female (73.2%) and single (93.5%). The sample included students from all years of college: 17.1% were in their first year, 27.3% were sophomores, 27.3% were juniors, 24.2% were seniors, and 4.1% were fifth year or beyond. The ethnic distribution was as follows: 77.1% were White, 8.5% were African American, 7.7% were Hispanic, 4.1% were Asian, and 1.9% were of another racial background besides those listed.

Measures

Teasing Questionnaire—Revised (TQ-R; Storch et al., 2004)

The TQ-R is a 29-item self-report scale designed to retrospectively assess memories of teasing experiences during childhood. Responses to the TQ-R are made on a 5-point Likert-type scale ($0 = I$ *was never teased about this*, $1 = I$ *was rarely teased about this*, $2 = I$ *was sometimes teased about this*, $3 = I$ *was often teased about this*, and $4 = I$ *was always teased about this*). The TQ-R has good psychometric characteristics. The proposed five-factor model assessing teasing about performance (e.g., "I was teased because I was not good at sports"), academic characteristics (e.g., "I was teased for being the "teacher's pet"), social behavior (e.g., "I was teased because I wasn't very good at initiating and maintaining conversations with other kids"), family background (e.g., "I was teased because my family didn't have as much money as other kids' families"), and appearance (e.g., "I was teased about my weight") was confirmed using structural equation modeling. Further, moderate correlations among the five factors suggested that the TQ-R subscales assessed related, but conceptually unique dimensions of teasing. In addition, there was support for the internal consistency of the TQ-R total (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$), and five subscales: Performance (three items, $\alpha = .58$), Academic (six items, $\alpha = .84$), Social Behavior (seven items, $\alpha = .70$), Family (three items, $\alpha = .48$), and Appearance (eight items, $\alpha = .78$). Finally, 2-week test–retest reliability was good with an intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of .87 for the total score and ICCs ranging between .66–.89 for the subscales (Strawser, Storch, & Roberti, in press).

Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS; Collins, 1996)

The 18-item RAAS is a slightly modified version of the Adult Attachment Scale originally developed by Collins and Read (1990) for the assessment of attachment styles in the context of romantic relationships. The scale assesses three dimensions of attachment: the Close subscale measures the degree to which individuals are comfortable with intimacy and closeness, the Depend subscale measures the extent to which individuals feel that they can trust and depend on others, and the Anxious subscale measures the degree to which individuals worry about being unloved or abandoned in relationships. Each of the 18 items on the RAAS are rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*), and an average score for each of the subscales is then computed by taking the average of the scores on the relevant six items. Collins (1996) reported the RAAS to have adequate internal consistency and temporal stability over a 2-month period.

Janis–Field Self-Esteem Scale With Appearance Subscale (JFSES; Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990)

This scale includes the 23 items originally included in the Feelings of Social Inadequacy Scale (Janis & Field, 1959), plus six items developed by Pliner and colleagues to assess for appearance self-esteem (e.g., "How much do you worry about your appearance?"). The original Janis–Field scale assessed for academic self-esteem (e.g., "How often do you have trouble understanding things you read for class assignment?"), self-related self-esteem ("How often do you feel like you dislike yourself?"), and social self-esteem (e.g., "Do you find it hard to talk when you meet new people?"). For all items, respondents are asked to check one of five statements describing the degree to which they identify with each question; the statements vary from item to item. The statement indicative of poorest self-esteem receives a score of 1; the statement indicative of the highest self-esteem receives a score of 5.

Because this study was primarily concerned with examining the impact of teasing on later social self-esteem, only this subscale is reported here. The social self-esteem subscale includes five items, with a possible subscale score of 5–25.

Friendship Information Questionnaire (FIQ; Roth, Scott, & Heimberg, 2004)

The FIQ asks participants to list the name of each of their good and best friends, the gender of each friend, how long their friendship with each person has lasted and where each person lived at the time of the study. For the

Table I. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

		Mean (SD)		
	Range	Men	Women	Total sample
1. TQ-R Total	0–98	15.71 (11.21)	15.43 (12.50)	15.51 (12.15)
2. TQ-R Performance	0–12	1.46 (1.74)	1.46 (1.82)	1.46 (1.80)
3. TQ-R Academics	0–24	3.88 (4.38)	4.75 (4.51)	4.52 (4.49)
4. TQ-R Social	0–28	2.92 (2.99)	2.54 (3.40)	2.64 (3.29)
5. TQ-R Family	0–10	1.91 (2.30)	1.47 (1.99)	1.58 (2.08)
6. TQ-R Appearance	0–25	5.43 (4.71)	5.18 (5.18)	5.25 (5.06)
7. Number of Friends	0–23	7.09 (3.84)	7.63 (3.90)	7.49 (3.89)
8. AAS-Close	6–30	21.54 (5.14)	21.92 (5.19)	21.82 (5.18)
9. AAS-Depend	6–30	20.59 (5.00)	19.51 (5.14)	19.79 (5.12)
10. AAS-Anxiety	5–30	13.86 (5.36)	15.70 (6.05)	15.22 (5.92)
11. Social Self-Esteem	5–25	16.64 (4.28)	15.79 (4.61)	16.02 (4.53)

Note. TQ-R: Revised Teasing Questionnaire: Total Score, Performance Subscale, Academics Subscale, Social Subscale, Family Subscale, Appearance Subscale. AAS: Adult Attachment Scale: Close Subscale, Depend Subscale, Anxiety Subscale. Social Self-Esteem: Janis–Field Self-Esteem Scale: Social Subscale.

purposes of the current study, only the total number of friends listed on the FIQ was used.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations of all of the study variables for the total sample and by gender are presented in Table I. Men and women did not differ significantly on any of the study variables. Pearson product moment correlations were computed among the subscales of the TQ-R, the number of friends reported by the participant, the subscales of the RAAS and the Janis–Field Self-Esteem Social subscale for the entire sample (see Table II). Subsequently, correlations were computed separately for men and women. As the strength of the association between variables did not significantly differ, only the correlations for the entire sample are reported.[7] Cohen's (1977) frame of reference was used for the magnitude of the correlation coefficients: correlations of .10–.29 as being a small effect size, .30–.49 as being a medium effect size, and .50 or above as a large effect size. Given the large number of tests conducted and the large sample size (increased power), only p-values of less than .001 were considered significant to minimize the chances of Type I errors.

It was hypothesized that frequent teasing during childhood would be associated with having fewer close friends in early adulthood. However, this hypothesis was not supported—none of the subscales of the TQ-R were significantly related to the number of current friends re-

ported and the magnitude of these correlations was very small.

It was also predicted that frequent childhood teasing would be associated with a disturbed attachment style in the context of romantic relationships during early adulthood. Specifically, it was predicted that this disturbed attachment style would be characterized by difficulties depending on others (as measured by the Depend subscale of the RAAS) and feeling close to others (as measured by the Close subscale of the RAAS), as well as worrying about abandonment (as measured by the Anxiety subscale of the RAAS). As predicted, the TQ-R Total score was significantly and negatively related to the RAAS Close and Depend subscales, and significantly and positively related to the Anxiety subscale. Generally, these correlations were small in magnitude. Correlations between the RAAS subscale scores and specific domains of teasing were also examined. The TQ-R Performance, Social and Appearance subscales all showed significant negative relations to the RAAS Depend subscale. The TQ-R Social and Appearance subscales both showed significant positive relations to the RAAS Anxiety subscale. Again, these correlations represented small effects.

It was also hypothesized that frequent teasing during childhood would be associated with lower social self-esteem during early adulthood. The TQ-R Total score was significantly and negatively related to the JFSES Social subscale and the magnitude of this effect was medium. Analyses of the relationship between social self-esteem and TQ-R subscales showed a significant negative relationship between JFSES Social subscale and the TQ-R Performance, Social, and Appearance subscales. Similarly to the TQ-R Total score, the correlations with these

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[7]These analyses are available from the first author upon request.

Table II. Pearson Product Moment Correlations Among the TQ-R and Measures of Interpersonal Functioning

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. TQ-R Total	—									
2. TQ-R Performance	.71*	—								
3. TQ-R Academics	.74*	.46*	—							
4. TQ-R Social	.73*	.63*	.34*	—						
5. TQ-R Family	.50*	.23*	.18*	.34*	—					
6. TQ-R Appearance	.81*	.43*	.42*	.43*	.35*	—				
7. Number of Friends	−.10	−.05	−.10	−.06	−.11	−.08	—			
8. AAS-Close	−.17*	−.12	−.13	−.15	−.07	−.12	.14	—		
9. AAS-Depend	−.19*	−.16*	−.08	−.16*	−.11	−.16*	.19*	.61*	—	
10. AAS-Anxiety	.22*	.15	.12	.20*	.14	.20*	−.04	−.35*	−.57*	—
11. Social Self-esteem	−.32*	−.40*	−.11	−.33*	−.15	−.31*	−.01	.33*	.44*	−.53*

Note. TQ-R: Revised Teasing Questionnaire: Total Score, Performance Subscale, Academics Subscale, Social Subscale, Family Subscale, Appearance Subscale. AAS: Adult Attachment Scale: Close Subscale, Depend Subscale, Anxiety Subscale. Social Self-Esteem: Janis–Field Self-Esteem Scale: Social Subscale.

$^*p < .001$ level (two-tailed).

three subscales represented medium effects. Results of all of these analyses were similar for men and women.

Finally, tests of dependent correlations (Meng, Rosenthal, & Rubin, 1992) were used to test the hypothesis that being teased in the social domain would be more strongly related to later interpersonal difficulties than being teased about other topics. Teasing in the social domain was significantly more strongly correlated with the JFSES Social subscale than was teasing in the academic domain ($Z = -4.02$, $p < .001$). Further, there were trends for teasing in the social domain to be more strongly correlated with RAAS-Depend and RAAS-Anxiety than was teasing in the academic domain ($Z = -1.43$, $p = .077$ and $Z = 1.44$, $p = .075$, respectively). Teasing in the social domain was significantly more strongly correlated with the JFSES Social subscale than was teasing in the family domain ($Z = -3.31$, $p < .001$). Further, there was a trend for teasing in the social domain to be more strongly correlated with RAAS-Close than was teasing in the family domain ($Z = -1.42$, $p = .077$). Regarding comparisons to teasing about performance, teasing in the social domain was significantly less strongly correlated with the JFSES Social subscale than was teasing in the performance domain ($Z = 1.79$, $p = .036$). Finally, teasing in the social and appearance domains showed similar magnitudes of correlation with the three RAAS scales and the JFSES Social subscale (all $p's > .25$).

DISCUSSION

The current study explored the relationships of childhood peer teasing in numerous domains to friendships, at-

tachment style, and social self-esteem during early adulthood. The study also explored whether interpersonal problems in early adulthood were more strongly related to recalled teasing in the social domain than to recalled teasing in other domains. Overall, partial support was found for these hypotheses.

In terms of the first hypothesis, the frequency of teasing was not related to the number of friends participants reported having in early adulthood. Unfortunately, participants were not asked about the quality of their current friendships. It is certainly possible that individuals who recall being teased as children experience impairments in the *quality*, not objective *quantity*, of their friendships. If individuals who were teased as children did not feel supported by their friends (e.g., their friends did not stick up to bullies on their behalf), they might develop a more general belief that friends are not there for them when they are in need.

This interpretation relates to the second hypothesis of this study. A recalled history of frequent teasing was related to less comfort with intimacy and closeness, less comfort in trusting and depending on others, as well as a greater degree of worry about being unloved or abandoned in relationships. Further, examination of the TQ-R subscales showed that being teased in the social, appearance, and performance domains was significantly related to later attachment difficulties across gender, whereas being teased about family background or academics showed more modest relationships. These results suggest that various forms of teasing may differentially impact subsequent functioning.

The third hypothesis was that recalling childhood teasing would be associated with lower social self-esteem

during early adulthood. This hypothesis was supported by findings that reports of more frequent childhood teasing in the performance, social, and appearance domains were associated with decreased social confidence in young adulthood. Further, the magnitude of these correlations (r's from $-.31$ to $-.40$ suggesting medium effect sizes) suggests that these are meaningful relationships and not just significant as an artifact of a large sample size.

Finally, it was predicted that being teased in the social domain, compared to being teased about other topics, would be most strongly related to later interpersonal difficulties. This prediction was not wholly supported. Being teased in the social domain was associated with greater impairment in later interpersonal functioning than being teased in the academic and family domains. However, being teased about performance and appearance were generally associated with similar levels of later impairment as being teased in the social domain.

In a previous study (Storch et al., 2004), reports of childhood teasing in the social domain, and (to a slightly lesser extent) in the performance domain, were most strongly related to later psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, loneliness). In that study, the authors considered why being teased in the social domain seemed to have such broad consequences later in life. It was proposed that being frequently teased about one's personality (as is captured by the social domain) might lead children to believe that they are different or flawed in some way. Furthermore, when children are unable to stop teasing, they may come to believe that they are ineffective and that they have little control over their social lives.

In the current study, being teased in the performance and appearance domains was also associated with poorer later interpersonal functioning. Why might this be the case? Being teased about appearance, very similar to being teased about one's personality, may affect core beliefs about self-worth. Children are limited in their ability to change aspects of their appearance that others view negatively. Again, this might leave teased youngsters with the belief that their "flaws" are unchangeable and intrinsic, leaving no way to garner favorable impressions from others. Later in life, people are much less likely to be teased about appearance, might "grow out" of problems that lead to teasing (e.g., acne; being short or overweight), or might be more able to do things to improve their appearance (e.g., replace eyeglasses with contact lenses; get curly hair straightened). Even so, people who were teased as children may continue to carry with them the belief that they are flawed and unable to manage in the social world. As for the performance domain, people who were teased as children about not being able to *do* certain things, might

again carry these insecurities into adulthood, having poor perceptions of one's own abilities and expecting negative evaluation from others.

Being teased in the academic and family domains was not as strongly related to later interpersonal difficulties as being teased in the social domain. In a previous study (Storch et al., 2004), these domains were also unrelated to later psychological distress. It may be that characteristics of these domains (e.g., reinforcement for academic excellence) serve as some sort of protective factor against later interpersonal problems. Further, children teased about their family or academic abilities may not be not particularly affected because they may develop relationships with peers who possess similar values.

Although the current study focused on the specific experience of verbal teasing, it is certainly possible that the findings would hold for other bullying experiences, like physical aggression, as well as broader peer victimization experiences like social ostracism or rejection. Given mounting evidence of the long-term negative impact of childhood peer victimization, it is interesting to consider the mechanisms by which these experiences confer vulnerability to later impaired interpersonal functioning and psychological distress. One possibility is that being victimized by peers may lead to a negative inferential style, such as a tendency to be hopeless regarding one's ability to change negative events. This line of thought is largely consistent with Rose and Abramson's (1992) proposal that childhood maltreatment, particularly emotional maltreatment, may lead to a negative inferential style and thereby confer vulnerability to hopelessness depression. Rose and Abramson (1992) argued that, with repeated emotional maltreatment, children are increasingly likely to attribute maltreatment to stable and global negative characteristics of the self and become increasingly hopeless. Further, they argued that emotional maltreatment would have a particularly negative impact, given that the maladaptive cognitions (e.g. "You are a loser") are frequently supplied directly to the victim. There is mounting support for Rose and Abramson's model, linking emotional maltreatment, negative inferential styles, and hopelessness depression (see for example Gibb, Alloy, Abramson, & Marx, 2003). Conceptualization of childhood peer victimization, including teasing, as an example of emotional maltreatment may be fruitful.

A number of methodological limitations should be noted when interpreting these findings. First, it is certainly possible that individuals who lack social contact or have negative interpersonal relationships may recall their childhood experiences in an overly negative manner (Lochman & Dodge, 1994). Second, the accuracy of retrospective

recall has been debated, with some researchers finding it be a relatively accurate way of assessing childhood experiences (Masia et al., 2003), whereas others have not (Offer, Kaiz, Howard, & Bennett, 2000). In future studies, it would be beneficial to collect reports of teasing from other individuals, like parents, to provide convergent validity for self-reports of recalled teasing. Doing so would also address the impact of current depression or anxiety on the recall of childhood experiences by providing accounts that are not influenced by mood symptoms. Certainly, prospective studies would also be of benefit and would circumvent the methodological problems associated with retrospective research.

On a related note, it is impossible to know whether individuals in the sample who were frequently teased differed from those who were less frequently teased, even before the teasing began. There is evidence that children who are teased possess characteristics (e.g., shyness) that make them vulnerable to such attacks, and then react in such a way (e.g., crying, social withdrawal) to maintain the aversive behavior of their peers (see Olweus, 1993). It is possible that these predisposing characteristics may have contributed to later interpersonal difficulties, independent of teasing by peers. It is also possible that these characteristics have continued to invite teasing and other forms of peer victimization (e.g., social exclusion) in college. In other words, these enduring characteristics might more clearly account for difficulties in interpersonal functioning than teasing experiences that occurred during childhood, or that continue to occur at the present time. Unfortunately, the current study cannot address these possibilities. This notwithstanding, the results suggest that it may be worthwhile to explore the utility of intervening early with children who are teased and helping them to better navigate peer relations.

A final limitation of this study is that adult attachment was measured only in the context of romantic relationships. The Revised Adult Attachment Scale is a well-established scale and is representative of research trends in adult attachment where focus has primarily been placed on attachment in the context of romantic relationships. Attachment theorists propose that the early parent–child relationship establishes a "working model" for later relationships, guiding "expectations, perception, and behavior" (Collins & Read, 1990, p. 645). Thus it is reasonable to expect that the way people relate in romantic relationships would be similar to how they relate in friendships and other interpersonal relationships. Future research, however, should explore whether adult friendships and adult romantic relationships are differentially influenced by childhood experiences with peers.

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