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From Shyness to Victimization: the Role of Loneliness in Adolescence

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Abstract

This study examined a theory-driven path model linking shyness to peer victimization through socioemotional mechanisms in early adolescence, informed by the evolutionary theory of loneliness (ETL). ETL conceptualizes loneliness as an adaptive signal of potential social exclusion, which may increase social vigilance and withdrawal. While these responses may promote short-term self-protection, they can also inadvertently exacerbate social difficulties over time. In a sample of 782 youth (mean age = 12.33 years, SD = 1.17), we tested a model in which shyness predicted loneliness both directly and indirectly via rejection sensitivity, and loneliness predicted peer victimization both directly and indirectly via friendship stability. Model fit was excellent: $\chi^2(4) = 1.734$, $p = .785$, RMSEA = .000, CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.000, SRMR = .010. All hypothesized paths were significant: shyness predicted rejection sensitivity ($\beta = .55$) and loneliness ($\beta = .48$); rejection sensitivity predicted loneliness ($\beta = .25$); loneliness predicted more peer victimization ($\beta = .56$) and less friendship stability ($\beta = -.16$); friendship stability predicted less victimization ($\beta = -.11$). Indirect effects supported a full cascade. These findings suggest that shyness-linked social-emotional vulnerabilities may amplify risk for peer victimization, and that friendship stability may serve as a modest protective factor.

Keywords: Adolescence; Friendship; Loneliness; Rejection Sensitivity; Shyness