

Introduction

- Sexual minority youths are those who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; report same or both-sex attraction; and/or have a romantic partner of the same sex.
- Sexual minority adolescents report more peer victimization and less closeness with friends than their heterosexual peers (Williams et al., 2005).
- However, little is known about the social experiences of sexual minority youths earlier in development – in late childhood and early adolescence.
- Sexual minority youths exhibit gender-nonconforming behaviors prior to adolescence (Rieger et al., 2008)
- These behaviors elicit negative peer response (Plummer, 2001).
- Thus, sexual minority youths may be at risk for social difficulties prior to adolescence.
- This phenomenon may be more pronounced for males, who are subject to more stringent gender roles than females (Horn, 2007).

- This study examines peer victimization and peer support experiences of sexual minority males and females from late childhood to early adolescence.

Method

Sample

- 836 children from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD)
- 50% female
- 80% Caucasian, 13% African-American, 7% Other
- 4.3% (42 adolescents) classified as sexual minority
 - 75% female

Measures

Kids in My Class at School. Child participants rated the frequency of peer support and/or victimization using a five-point scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *always*) in third, fifth, and sixth grades (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

Analysis

The roles of sexual orientation and sex in peer victimization and support in third, fifth, and sixth grades were analyzed using 3 (grade) × 2 (sexual orientation) × 2 (sex) mixed ANOVAs. Significant results were followed by t-tests.

Results

Peer support

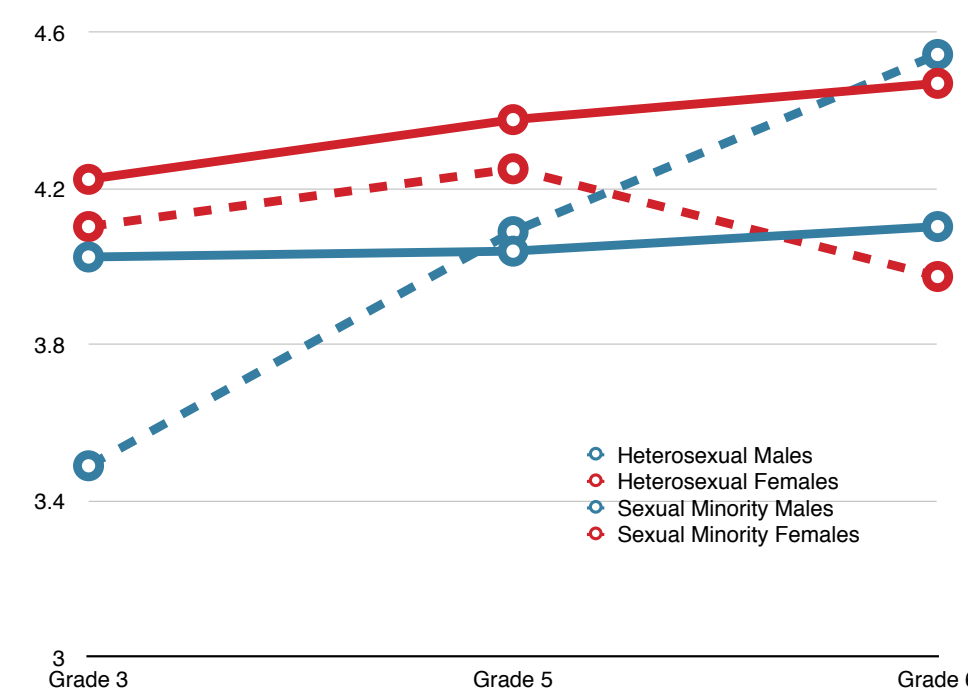


Figure 1. Perceived peer support among heterosexual and sexual minority males and females in third, fifth, and sixth grades. Dotted lines represent sexual minority status.

Peer victimization

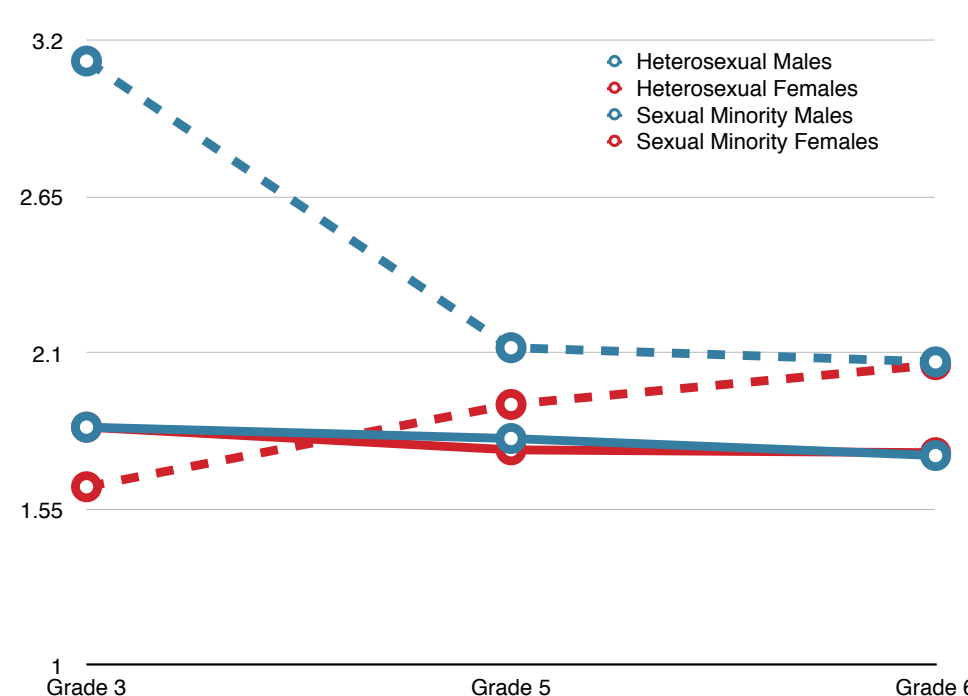


Figure 2. Perceived peer victimization among heterosexual and sexual minority males and females in third, fifth, and sixth grades. Dotted lines represent sexual minority status.

Love Is in the Air. At age 15, child participants indicated whether they were attracted to members of the opposite sex, same sex, or both sexes. Participants who indicated same-sex or bisexual attraction were classified as sexual minority youths.

- For peer support, there was a grade × sexual orientation × sex interaction [$F(2, 831) = 13.926$, $p < .001$].

- Sexual minority males reported higher peer support than other males in sixth grade ($p < .01$).

- Sexual minority females perceived lower peer support than heterosexual females in sixth grade ($p < 0.05$).

- For peer victimization, there was a grade × sexual orientation × sex interaction [$F(2, 636) = 6.045$, $p < .01$].

- Sexual minority females reported increasing peer victimization from third to sixth grade ($p < 0.05$).

- Sexual minority females were significantly more victimized than heterosexual females in sixth grade ($p < .05$).

Discussion

- In early adolescence, sexual minority males perceived more peer support than heterosexual males.

- Sexual minority males in early adolescence may seek female friends, who may have more lenient views on gender roles than males.

- As sexual minority females transitioned from preadolescence into early adolescence, they perceived an increase in peer victimization.

- They also perceived lower peer support than heterosexual females in sixth grade.

- However, it is not clear why sexual minority females exhibited more difficulties in peer relations than sexual minority males in early adolescence.

- Sexual minority females may not seek the company of heterosexual females because they may lack interest in feminine activities.

Limitations

- Small number and sex imbalance (75% female) of sexual minority youths

- No explicit information on gender-nonconforming behavior

Implications for future research

- Future research should examine peer relations as a function of both gender nonconformity and sexual orientation and explore cross-gender friendships in sexual minority youths.

References

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