Article

Coping Strategies against Peer Victimization: Differences According to Gender, Grade, Victimization Status and Perceived Classroom Social Climate

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Abstract: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include "Good Health and Well-being" (SDG3) and "Quality Education" (SDG4). Nevertheless, many students cannot achieve these goals if they suffer peer victimization at their schools, and intervention programs to reduce it are necessary. These programs should consider the possible differences in the coping strategies preferred by students according to some personal (e.g., gender, grade, victimization status) and contextual (e.g., perceived classroom social climate) factors to be more effective. Therefore, the objective of this study was to analyze the possible differences in the coping strategies preferred by students (ask a friend for help, ask a teacher for help, ask parents for help, not ask anyone for help, fighting back, avoid the aggressor and ask the aggressor why) to handle situations of relational, physical and verbal peer victimization according to their gender, school grade, victimization status and perceived classroom social climate. The sample comprised 479 students (52.2% boys, 47.8% girls) aged from 9 to 14 years ($M = 11.21$, $SD = 1.52$). The results showed that girls chose the strategies of asking friends or adults for help and asking the aggressor why more than boys, while boys chose the strategies of fighting back and not ask anyone for help more than girls. The coping strategy of asking a teacher for help was preferred more by students of lower school grades and by students with a positive perception of the classroom climate. Victimized students preferred the strategy of not asking anyone for help. These results may be useful for developing more effective intervention programs. These programs should aim to enhance the teacher–student relationship in upper school grades, help victimized students to inform about peer aggression situations and improve perceived classroom social climate.

Keywords: coping strategies; peer victimization; gender; school grade; classroom social climate

1. Introduction

The United Nations 2030 agenda includes, among its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), "Good Health and Well-being" (SDG 3) and the "Quality Education" (SDG 4). All students should have the right to a quality education that includes promoting in them the values of peaceful coexistence and respect among peers in a social environment where they feel safe and do not suffer violence. However, many students suffer peer victimization at their schools, which seriously affects both their psychosocial well-being and their ability to concentrate on learning tasks [1–4]. Peer victimization is considered a major health problem with serious negative consequences for many children and adolescents [1–4]. This victimization includes any act of aggression by similarly aged peers and can be repeated in time [4]. Peer victimization can occur either directly through verbal or physical aggressions to the victim or indirectly by subtle forms of attack through actions that include social exclusion, spreading rumors and threats to withdraw friendship [5,6]. Negative peer

victimization consequences include depressive symptoms, loneliness, anxiety, somatic complaints, social dissatisfaction and low self-esteem [2,4,7–9].

However, not all victims suffer the same negative consequences, and peer victimization is not always an experience that is repeated over time [10]. The chronicity of peer aggression and the severity of the negative consequences for victims differ depending on victims' way of reacting to attacks [11,12]. While some coping strategies are considered more effective in reducing peer victimization, others such as crying, giving in to bully's demands or striking back seem to increase the likelihood of subsequent victimization [12–15]. Victims of peer aggression use different strategies to cope with this stressful situation according to their personal and contextual characteristics [16–18]. Nevertheless, few studies have analyzed the personal (e.g., gender, grade, victimization status) and contextual (e.g., perceived classroom social climate) factors associated with the strategies preferred by the students to cope with peer victimization. Moreover, the type of victimization suffered (relational, physical or verbal) could also be related to the use of different and specific coping strategies. Greater knowledge about the relations between these factors and the coping strategies that students prefer can be useful for developing intervention programs aimed to reduce bullying, through teaching more effective coping strategies to victims. Furthermore, these intervention programs could also be better adapted to the specific personal and social characteristics of the students they target, which would increase their effectiveness.

1.1. Coping Strategies against Peer Victimization

Coping strategies are defined as behavioral, emotional and cognitive responses to stress [19–21]. They are intentional efforts that individuals use to regulate aspects of themselves (i.e., emotion, cognition, behavior, physiology) or aspects in the environment to reduce stress [17]. Lazarus and Folkman [19] distinguished between problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. Problem-focused strategies include the actions that aim to attempt to solve the problem and to seek help to handle the stressful situation, while emotion-focused strategies include actions that intend to move away from the source of stress, rejecting the problem, denying it or trying to ignore it. However, previous studies into peer victimization have highlighted the difficulty to differentiate between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies in these stressful situations [17,22,23]. Victims of peer aggression often apply multiple strategies simultaneously to cope with their situation [23], and some strategies aim to stop aggression and to regulate emotion at the same time. For these reasons, research into peer victimization more often differentiates coping strategies according to their degree of effectiveness.

Some strategies are considered to be more effective ways to cope with peer aggression, because they minimize the likelihood of subsequent victimization and reduce negative effects on victims' psychosocial well-being [22]. Help-seeking is considered an effective way to cope with peer victimization and is encouraged in many intervention programs [24–26]. Along these lines, previous studies have shown that asking friends or adults for help and conflict solving (e.g., trying to understand why victimization happened) are coping strategies related to a lower risk of subsequent victimization [12,27]. Help-seeking is related to less negative consequences for victims [20], probably because it allows them to feel supported by their social environment, and it helps them to reduce the risk of future attacks. Students may ask friends, teachers or parents for help, and many students prefer seeking for help from their friends rather than from teachers to cope with peer victimization [28]. Nevertheless, the nature of the suffered aggression (verbal, physical or relational) could be associated with which person they choose to ask for help, and these relations need to be analyzed in more depth. Furthermore, there are some students who tell nobody that they are victims of peer aggression [22,29]. Boulton et al. [16] indicated that many adolescents choose not to tell anyone, particularly teachers, that they are being peer victimized. Some students might feel that social support is not available for them or they believe that seeking/receiving help can allow people to consider them weak because they cannot cope on their own [16].

Another coping strategy that can be used by victims is ignoring the aggression. This strategy has been considered effective by some authors [30], but others [17] have pointed out that its effectiveness could depend on the nature of the suffered aggression. At this regard, Kokkinos et al. [17] indicated that against social exclusion situations, students might prefer distancing or ignoring it, while against physical aggression situations, they prefer help-seeking. Some avoidance strategies (such as avoiding the aggressor or ignoring aggression by pretending that it did not occur) may not stop victimization but can protect victims against psychological maladjustment difficulties. Victims can reduce negative consequences if they are able to emotionally distance themselves from the victimization situation, although this distancing is more difficult when aggression is frequent and severe [12]. Students are more likely to seek help in victimization cases that are more obvious (e.g., physical aggression), to use more retaliations to face verbal victimization and to prefer distancing and avoidance over relational victimization situations [17,30].

The coping strategies of fighting back or revenge-seeking are considered less successful [11,13,30]. These coping strategies are ineffective in reducing the risk of subsequent victimization and could increase the psychological maladjustment risk, even though using them children can feel a certain control of the situation or more respect by peers [12]. The reasons for choosing to fight back the aggressor to gain respect of peers could also be associated with students' personal factors, such as gender, or contextual factors, such as the classroom social climate. The relevance of these factors needs to be analyzed.

1.2. Coping Strategies According to Gender, Grade, Victimization Status and Perceived Classroom Social Climate

Some gender differences in coping strategies against peer victimization have been noted. Previous studies have shown that girls are more willing to seek help, and they are more likely to ask a teacher for help [16,31–34], while boys more often indicate that they would fight back [34]. More girls seek help from friends than boys [18], although the results for seeking help from parents are mixed, with some studies showing that boys use this strategy more, while more girls do in others [18]. Nevertheless, all these gender differences might be linked with the victimization type more frequently suffered by boys and girls. Physical and verbal victimization is more frequent in boys [1,35–37], and relational victimization is in girls [1,35,37]. Therefore, research on gender differences in coping strategies against peer victimization needs to also consider the type of victimization suffered (relational, physical, verbal), and to explore in more depth possible gender differences in who is asked for help (teacher, friends, parents) according to the type of victimization suffered.

The coping strategies used by students could also differ according to their school grade. Students attending elementary schools are younger and have developed some cognitive and social skills to cope with peer victimization to a lesser extent. In line with this, Boulton et al. [16] showed that help-seeking from teachers is a less used strategy in adolescence. They suggested that adolescents have increased social-cognitive capacities and are able to self-generate more solutions for stressful situations such as peer victimization. Nevertheless, Boulton et al. [16] also suggested that another possible reason is that adolescents can perceive it as not "normative" to seek help, especially from teachers, and they may anticipate negative peer reactions. Some students could anticipate that classmates believe they are weak if they cannot cope with these situations on their own [38,39], which might act as a help-seeking barrier [40]. This possible negative perception of peers when students ask a teacher for help would increase in adolescence, and the use of this strategy in compulsory secondary education (CSE) would be scarce. In addition, teachers increasingly expect adolescents to independently solve problems with their peers [41], and CSE students could also perceive teachers being less capable of helping them [42]. All these reasons might explain less help-seeking, especially from teachers, by CSE students. However, a more in-depth analysis of the possible changes in coping strategies from elementary to secondary education is necessary.

The victimization status in the peer group may be another factor related to students' selection of different coping strategies. Previous studies [16] have shown that frequent

victims are more reluctant to tell teachers that they are being bullied than non-victims. Victimized students may feel that teachers are unable to help them or may be concerned about the potential negative outcomes of asking teachers for help by analyzing the possible negative perception by the peers and their feelings of weakness if they decide to ask a teacher for help [16,40]. Moreover, victimized students often perceive no benefits from asking teachers for help, because their social status in peer group is similar and peer victimization situations are repeated. However, victimized students may also differ in their use of other coping strategies, such as avoiding the aggressor or fighting back, and these possible differences should also be analyzed.

Although there are many children and adolescents who ask a friend or a parent for help when they have problems, others are reluctant to seek help from anyone [18]. The perceived available social support has been demonstrated as an important factor related to help-seeking to cope with problems [18,43]. In the school context, students' perception of more emotional support is related to more help-seeking from teachers [44], and a positive classroom social climate may be a relevant contextual factor to increase or reduce the likelihood of asking for help in peer victimization situations. Positively perceiving the classroom social climate has been previously related to higher students' school satisfaction and self-esteem [45]. The students who more positively perceive the classroom social climate evaluate both relationships between classmates, and those between teacher and students, more positively, and perceive a higher level of student integration and supportive behaviors [45,46]. So, these students are likely to trust the social support available in their classroom more and to use the help-seeking strategy more. In addition, they may also differ from those students who negatively perceive the classroom social climate in other coping strategies. Other possible differences in coping strategies according to the perceived classroom climate need to be analyzed to get more knowledge about the role that this contextual factor plays.

1.3. The Present Study

Taking into account the relevance and need for more in-depth knowledge about how some personal (e.g., gender, grade, victimizations status) and contextual (e.g., perceived classroom social climate) factors are related to the different coping strategies preferred by students to handle different types of peer victimization (relational, physical and verbal), this study was proposed. In spite of some previous research works on the issue, a systematic study with a broader approach is needed to clarify how the suffered victimization type relates to the victim's choice of different coping strategies and how this choice can also differ depending on their personal and contextual characteristics. The specific objectives of the present study were to (1) test for differences in the preferred use of coping strategies by the students depending on the peer victimization type (relational, physical, verbal) faced; (2) test for differences in the preference of using of these coping strategies according to their: (a) gender, (b) school grade, (c) victimization status and (d) perceived classroom social climate. For these objectives, the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 1: *There are differences in the preferred use of coping strategies depending on the peer victimization type (relational, physical, verbal) faced. Students prefer using avoidance strategy to cope with relational victimization and asking a teacher for help to cope with physical victimization.*

Hypothesis 2: *There are gender differences in the preferred use of coping strategies. Girls prefer using help-seeking strategies (asking teacher, parents or friends for help) more than boys to cope with the three peer victimization types (relational, physical, verbal), while boys prefer employing the fight-back strategy to cope with these three peer victimization types more than girls.*

Hypothesis 3: *There are differences in the preferred use of coping strategies depending on students' school grade. The students of lower grades (last elementary years) prefer using help-seeking strategies, especially from teachers, to cope with relational, physical and verbal peer victimization than those of upper grades (CSE) who choose these strategies less.*

Hypothesis 4: *There are differences in the preferred use of coping strategies depending on victimization status. Victimized students prefer not to use the coping strategy of asking a teacher for help and prefer the coping strategy of not asking anyone for help to cope with relational, physical and verbal peer victimization than non-victimized students.*

Hypothesis 5: *There are differences in the preferred use of coping strategies based on the perceived classroom social climate. The students who more positively perceive the classroom social climate prefer using help-seeking strategies, especially asking teachers for help, to cope with relational, physical and verbal peer victimization than the students who more negatively perceive the classroom social climate.*

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

A sample of 479 students, aged from 9 to 14 years (*M* age = 11.21; *SD* = 1.52), participated in this study. Regarding gender, 52.2% were boys (*M* age = 11.26; *SD* = 1.60) and 47.8% were girls (*M* age = 11.15; *SD* = 1.44). They were studying in four public schools in the Valencian region (east Spain), two of which were elementary schools and the others were compulsory secondary education (CSE) schools. They were students from the last three elementary grades (4th, 5th and 6th grades) and students from the first two CSE grades (1st and 2nd grades). We considered these two different levels of education because we were interested in analyzing possible differences between elementary and CSE school grades. Regarding their age and the percentage of students in each school grade, the students in elementary 4th grade (20.9% of the sample) were 9–10 years old, 10–11 years old in the 5th grade (19.2% of the sample) and 11–12 years old in the 6th grade (19.2% of the sample). In CSE, they were 12–13 years old in the 1st grade (22.1% of the sample) and 13–14 years in the 2nd grade (18.8% of the sample).

2.2. Instruments

Coping Strategies Questionnaire. This questionnaire allows us to measure the different strategies preferred by students to handle peer victimization [22,47,48]. In a similar way to previous studies [48], students have to indicate what strategies they prefer use to cope with relational, physical and verbal peer victimization situations. Firstly, a brief description of three types of peer victimization situations is included: relational (a classmate has ignored you on purpose to make you feel bad), physical (a classmate has hit you) and verbal (a classmate has insulted or made fun of you). For all three situations, students have to indicate if in a similar situation they have used (or if they consider that they use them if they had to cope with a similar situation) any of the following coping strategies: "ask a friend for help", "ask a teacher for help", "ask my parents for help", "not ask anyone for help", "fighting back", "avoid the aggressor" and "ask the aggressor why". For each peer victimization situation (relational, physical, verbal), students have to indicate if they have used (or would use) each of the seven above proposed coping strategies. They can indicate more than one coping strategy in each victimization situation.

Peer Victimization Scale [5]. This scale includes 11 items that evaluate how often adolescents have experienced peer victimization situations. These items are grouped into three factors: relational victimization, physical victimization and verbal victimization. Relational victimization includes three items describing situations such as being a victim of malicious rumors or being socially isolated (e.g., "A classmate told others not to have anything to do with me"). Physical victimization has four items describing situations such as being hit or pushed (e.g., "A classmate hit me"). Verbal victimization has four items describing situations such as being insulted or called a nickname (e.g., "A classmate insulted me"). The response range of the items goes from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*a lot*). The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of these three factors in the study sample is 0.72, 0.85, and 0.83, respectively.

Classroom Environment Scale [49,50]. This scale allows for different issues of the classroom itself (e.g., organization, innovation) and students' perception of the interpersonal relationships in the classroom, to be evaluated. In this study, as we were interested in the interpersonal relationships (among classmates and teacher–students), we considered only the three subscales on the interpersonal relationships dimension: involvement, 10 items about the perception of the degree of students' interest and participation in class activities (e.g., "Students put a lot of energy into what they do here"); affiliation, 10 items about the perception of friendship that students feel for one another (e.g., "Students in this class get to know each other really well"); teacher Support, 10 items about students' perception of support and help from teachers (e.g., "Teachers show interest in students"). For each item, the answer options are true–false. In this study, the internal consistency (Cronbach's α) of the involvement, affiliation and teacher support subscales are 0.69, 0.63 and 0.73, respectively. The internal consistency of the interpersonal relationships dimension, integrated by these three subscales, is 0.82.

2.3. Procedure

Initially, we telephoned the schools to offer them the possibility of participating in this research study about school co-existence and to request a meeting to explain them the objectives of this research in detail. During the meetings held with school staff, we explained the objectives and requested their collaboration. We informed them about the relevance of preventing bullying and the need to better understand students' coping strategies to handle peer aggression, and we also offered them the possibility of providing them with guidance to improve co-existence at their school, if they wished, once the research had ended. The four contacted schools accepted to participate in this study. Students' families were also informed about the research proposal by letter, which indicated that all the data would be confidentially used. After receiving this information, they were asked to provide consent for their children to participate. Less than 2% of parents stated that they did not wish their children to participate in this study. Students anonymously and voluntarily filled out the scales during a regular class period (50 min in elementary schools, 40 min in CSE schools). Trained researchers administered the instruments and informed students that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, their data were confidential, and they could drop out of the study at any time. No-one refused to participate in this research. This study was approved by The Ethics Committee of the University of Valencia (Protocol Number: H1456762885511).

2.4. Data Analyses

First, descriptive statistics were used to identify the proportions of students who had used (or would use) the different coping strategies ("ask a friend for help", "ask a teacher for help", "ask parents for help", "not ask anyone for help", "fighting back", "avoid the aggressor" and "ask the aggressor why") when facing (or if they would have to face) each different peer victimization type (relational, physical, verbal). Differences in the proportion of using the coping strategies were tested for all the peer victimization types using Cochran's test (which is suitable for comparing three paired proportions or more). Chi-square test was used to test for differences in proportions across independent groups (e.g., groups defined by gender, grade, victimizations status and perceived classroom social climate). In this study, differences in the proportion of preferred coping strategies according to students' gender and school grade were tested. Possible differences in the proportion of preferred coping strategies according to students' victimization status (non-victimized vs. victimized students) were also analyzed. Following the criteria used by other previous studies [51,52], we considered that students had a victimized status when their scores for this variable exceeded the mean plus one standard deviation. The students with scores above the mean score for relational victimization by one standard deviation (score > 2.38; $M = 1.61$, $SD = 0.77$) were assigned to the "relational victimized" group; those whose scores exceeded the mean score for physical victimization by one standard

deviation (score > 2.55; *M* = 1.67, *SD* = 0.88) were assigned to the "physical victimized" group; those with scores over the mean score for verbal victimization by one standard deviation (score > 3.20; *M* = 2.13, *SD* = 1.07) were assigned to the "verbal victimized" group. We compared the preferred coping strategies against relational, physical and verbal peer victimization in the victimized students with the preferred coping strategies in the non-victimized students. Finally, differences in the proportion of preferred coping strategies according to students' perceived classroom climate were tested. To differentiate between the students with more positive and more negative classroom climate perceptions, the perception of the classroom climate variable was dichotomized according to the 75th and 25th percentiles similarly to previous studies [53]. Those students whose scores went above the 75th percentile in the perception of class-room social climate variable (the students who more positively perceived the interpersonal relationships in their classroom) were compared to those students whose scores went below the 25th percentile (more negatively perceived the interpersonal relationships in their classroom) as to their choice of different coping strategies against relational, physical and verbal peer victimization. All the analyses were performed with the SPSS-26 statistical package.

3. Results

3.1. Differences in Coping Strategies According to Peer Victimization Type

Table 1 shows the results of the analysis carried out to test for differences in the percentages of students who used (or would use) each coping strategy to handle different peer victimization types (relational, physical, verbal). The results of the Cochran's tests showed that students preferred using different strategies depending on the victimization type they suffered. Thus, in order to handle relational victimization (Cochran's Q (6) = 154.70; *p* < 0.001), the most widely used (or preferred) strategies were "ask parents for help" (39.0% of the students) and "avoid the aggressor" (38.6%). For physical (Cochran's Q (6) = 258.02; *p* < 0.001) and verbal victimization (Cochran's Q (6) = 92.56; *p* < 0.001), the most widely used (or preferred) strategy was "ask a teacher for help". Almost half the students (49.3%) chose to ask a teacher for help against a physical aggression by a classmate and 40.0% against a verbal aggression. Nevertheless, some students did not ask (or would not ask) anyone for help when they suffered (or should they suffer) peer victimization: 19% for relational, 13.6% for physical and 18.4% for verbal victimization.

Table 1. Preferred coping strategies according to victimization type.

	Relational Victimization	Physical Victimization	Verbal Victimization
Ask a friend for help	22.1%	13.8%	18.4%
Ask a teacher for help	29.6%	49.3%	40.0%
Ask my parents for help	39.0%	35.1%	29.5%
Not ask anyone for help	19.0%	13.6%	18.4%
Fighting back	11.1%	20.9%	18.6%
Avoid the aggressor	38.6%	15.4%	28.7%
Ask the aggressor why	34.9%	29.2%	23.8%

3.2. Gender Differences in Coping Strategies against Peer Victimization

Regarding gender differences, the results indicated some significant differences between boys and girls in their preferred coping strategies (see Table 2). In relational victimization situations, girls asked (or would ask) a friend (χ^2 (1) = 12.397; *p* < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.164) and their parents for help (χ^2 (1) = 14.918; *p* < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.176) more than boys. In physical victimization situations, girls chose the strategies of "ask a friend for help" (χ^2 (1) = 5.114; *p* = 0.024; Cramer's V = 0.103), "ask a teacher for help" (χ^2 (1) = 12.306; *p* < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.160), "ask their parents for help" (χ^2 (1) = 39.246; *p* < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.286) and "ask the aggressor why" (χ^2 (1) = 9.185; *p* = 0.002; Cramer's V = 0.138) more than boys; while boys chose the strategies of "not ask anyone for

help "(χ^2 (1) = 10.402; *p* = 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.147) and "fighting back" (χ^2 (1) = 12.657; *p* = < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.163) more than girls. Similarly to physical victimization, in verbal peer victimization situations, girls chose the strategies of "ask a friend for help" (χ^2 (1) = 10.691; *p* = 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.150), "ask a teacher for help" (χ^2 (1) = 3.849; *p* = 0.05; Cramer's V = 0.090), "ask their parents for help" (χ^2 (1) = 22.166; *p* < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.215) and "ask the aggressor why" (χ^2 (1) = 8.269; *p* = 0.004; Cramer's V = 0.132) more than boys; while boys chose the strategies of "not ask anyone for help" (χ^2 (1) = 4.682; *p* = 0.03; Cramer's V = 0.099) and "fighting back" (χ^2 (1) = 6.261; *p* = 0.012; Cramer's V = 0.114) more than girls.

Table 2. Coping strategies against peer victimization preferred by boys and girls.

	Relational Victimization	Physical Victimization	Verbal Victimization
	Boys–Girls	Boys–Girls	Boys–Girls
Ask a friend for help	15.6–29.3% ***	10.4–17.5% *	12.9–24.5% **
Ask a teacher for help	28.1–31.4%	41.6–57.6% ***	35.7–44.5% *
Ask my parents for help	30.8–48.0% ***	22.0–49.3% ***	20.1–39.7% ***
Not ask anyone for help	22.0–15.7%	18.4–8.3% **	22.1–14.4% *
Fighting back	13.6–8.3%	27.2–14.0% ***	22.9–14.0% *
Avoid the aggressor	40.0–37.1%	14.4–16.6%	27.7–29.7%
Ask the aggressor why	31.2–38.9%	23.2–35.8% **	18.5–29.7% **

Note: *** *p* < 0.001; ** *p* < 0.01; * *p* < 0.05.

3.3. Differences in Coping Strategies According to Students' School Grade

The coping strategies against peer victimization preferred by students from different school grades are shown in Table 3. Significant differences were noted when comparing school grades, with younger students preferring to use the coping strategy "ask a teacher for help" to a greater extent than older ones. The results showed that this coping strategy was preferred less by students as they moved up school grades, and this decrease was observed in the three victimization types: relational (χ^2 (4) = 58.804; *p* < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.350), physical (χ^2 (4) = 31.033; *p* < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.255) and verbal (χ^2 (4) = 42.514; *p* < 0.001; Cramer's V = 0.298). More than half the students (57%) asked (or would ask) a teacher for help to cope with relational victimization in the elementary 4th grade, while only 11.1% of the students chose this coping strategy in the CSE 2nd grade; 68% of the students asked (or would ask) a teacher for help against a physical victimization situation in the elementary 4th grade, but only 30% did (or would do) in the CSE 2nd grade; 31.4% of students of elementary 4th grade asked (or would ask) a teacher for help against verbal victimization, but only 8.9% chose this coping strategy in the CSE 2nd grade.

Table 3. Coping strategies against peer victimization according to school grade.

	Relational Victimization				
	El. 4th grade	El. 5th grade	El. 6th grade	CSE-1st	CSE-2nd
Ask a friend for help	18.0%	14.3%	27.2%	23.6%	27.8%
Ask a teacher for help	57.0% ***	34.1% ***	27.2% ***	17.9% ***	11.1% ***
Ask my parents for help	46.0%	33.0%	37.0%	42.5%	35.6%
Not ask anyone for help	19.0% ***	34.1% ***	26.1% ***	8.5% ***	8.9% ***
Fighting back	11.0%	14.3%	12.0%	8.5%	10.0%

Table 3. *Cont.*

	Relational Victimization				
Avoid the aggressor	24.0% ***	30.8% ***	37.0% ***	47.2% ***	54.4% ***
Ask the aggressor why	38.0%	37.4%	33.7%	31.1%	34.4%
	Physical Victimization				
	El. 4th grade	El. 5th grade	El. 6th grade	CSE-1st	CSE-2nd
Ask a friend for help	16.2%	8.8%	20.7%	10.4%	13.3%
Ask a teacher for help	68.0% ***	53.8% ***	52.2% ***	41.5% ***	30.0% ***
Ask my parents for help	44.0%	34.1%	38.0%	26.4%	33.3%
Not ask anyone for help	8.0% ***	27.5% ***	23.9% ***	5.7% ***	4.4% ***
Fighting back	11.0% **	15.4% **	19.6% **	28.3% **	30.0% **
Avoid the aggressor	16.0%	14.3%	21.7%	9.4%	16.7%
Ask the aggressor why	43.0% *	26.4% *	28.3% *	24.5% *	23.3% *
	Verbal Victimization				
	El. 4th grade	El. 5th grade	El. 6th grade	CSE-1st	CSE-2nd
Ask a friend for help	17.2%	13.2%	25.0%	14.2%	23.3%
Ask a teacher for help	31.4% ***	19.9% ***	23.6% ***	16.2% ***	8.9% ***
Ask my parents for help	39.4%	31.9%	30.4%	24.5%	21.1%
Not ask anyone for help	20.2% ***	31.9% ***	21.7% ***	10.4% ***	8.9% ***
Fighting back	12.1%	12.1%	20.7%	24.5%	23.3%
Avoid the aggressor	20.2%	29.7%	28.3%	29.2%	36.7%
Ask the aggressor why	33.3%	24.2%	18.5%	22.6%	20.0%

Note: El. = Elementary; CSE-1st = compulsory secondary education—1st grade (12–13 years old); CES-2nd = compulsory secondary education—2nd grade (13–14 years old). *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

The higher percentage of students who preferred to not ask anyone for help against relational (χ^2 (4) = 30.012; $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.250), physical (χ^2 (4) = 38.078; $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.282) and verbal peer victimization (χ^2 (4) = 21.848; $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.214) was observed in the elementary 5th grade. Older students preferred to cope with peer relational victimization by avoiding the aggressor (χ^2 (4) = 24.266; $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.225): only 24% of the students in the elementary 4th grade preferred this coping strategy, while 54.4% of the students in the CSE 2nd grade preferred this. Older students also preferred to cope with physical victimization by fighting back the aggressor (χ^2 (4) = 15.736; $p = 0.003$; Cramer's V = 0.181): only 11% of the elementary 4th grade students indicated using (or that they would use) this strategy, while 28.3 and 30% in the CSE 1st and 2nd grade, respectively, indicated using (or that they would use) it. In a physical peer victimization situation, younger students (4th grade) preferred the coping strategy of "ask the aggressor why" more than older students (χ^2 (4) = 12.213; $p = 0.016$; Cramer's V = 0.160): 43.0% of the students in the elementary 4th grade preferred this coping strategy, while 23.3% of the students in the CSE 2nd grade preferred this.

3.4. Differences in Coping Strategies According to Students' Victimization Status

The percentages of students who preferred each coping strategy, testing for differences between students who suffered peer victimization and those who were not victimized by their peers, are shown in Table 4. The obtained results revealed only one significant difference between victimized and non-victimized students in their preferred coping strategies: "not ask anyone for help". The students who had suffered peer victimization showed higher percentages for preferring this coping strategy compared to those students who had never been peer victimized (relational victimization: χ^2 (1) = 7.722; $p = 0.005$; Cramer's V = 0.175; physical: χ^2 (1) = 3.713; $p = 0.054$; Cramer's V = 0.125; verbal: χ^2 (1) = 6.620; $p = 0.01$; Cramer's V = 0.205). To cope with peer relational victimization situations, 14.5% of the students who had not been victimized reported that they would not ask anyone for help,

while 29.1% of the victimized students indicated this option. For physical victimization situations, 9.6% of the non-victimized students reported that they would not ask anyone for help, while 18.6% of the victimized students indicated this. Against verbal victimization, 11.8% of the non-victimized students reported that they would not ask anyone for help, and 28.4% of the victimized students pointed out this option.

Table 4. Coping strategies against peer victimization according to victimization status.

	Relational Victimization	Physical Victimization	Verbal Victimization
	Non Vict.–Vict.	Non Vict.–Vict.	Non Vict.–Vict.
Ask a friend for help	18.7–16.3%	15.7–17.1%	22.4–16.0%
Ask a teacher for help	28.3–39.5%	44.9–48.6%	31.6–44.4%
Ask my parents for help	38.6–40.7%	40.1–28.6%	27.6–32.1%
Not ask anyone for help	14.5–29.1% **	9.6–18.6% *	11.8–28.4% **
Fighting back	7.8–14.0%	22.8–20.0%	18.4–16.0%
Avoid the aggressor	39.8–30.2%	14.4–14.3%	23.7–25.9%
Ask the aggressor why	32.5–37.2%	31.1–34.3%	32.9–25.9%

Note: Non Vict. = non-victimized students; Vict. = victimized students; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p = 0.054$.

3.5. Differences in Coping Strategies According to Students' Perception of Classroom Social Climate

The percentages of the students who preferred each coping strategy to handle peer victimization according to their perception (positive vs. negative) of the social climate in their classroom are shown in Table 5. The obtained results indicated some significant differences in the coping strategies preferred by students with positive and negative perceptions of the quality of the interpersonal relationships in their classroom. In relational peer victimization situations, those students who positively perceived the classroom social climate chose the strategies of "ask a teacher for help" (χ^2 (1) = 6.749; $p = 0.009$; Cramer's V = 0.166) and "ask the aggressor why" (χ^2 (1) = 14.877; $p < 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.246) more than those students who negatively perceived the classroom climate. In these situations, almost half (48.8%) of the students who positively perceived the classroom social climate asked (or would ask) the aggressor why, while only one in four (25%) students who perceived it negatively asked (or would ask) the aggressor why.

Table 5. Coping strategies against peer victimization according to the classroom social climate perception.

	Relational Victimization	Physical Victimization	Verbal Victimization
	Neg.C.C.–Posit.C.C.	Neg.C.–Posit.C.C.	Neg.C.C.–Posit.C.C.
Ask a friend for help	26.6–20.7%	9.7–13.3%	16.1–17.5%
Ask a teacher for help	18.5–33.1% **	35.5–54.5% **	29.8–47.5% **
Ask my parents for help	29.8–38.0%	28.2–33.9%	20.2–30.0%
Not ask anyone for help	16.1–21.5%	8.9–18.2% *	13.7–18.3%
Fighting back	11.3–8.3%	26.6–10.7% **	25.8–11.7% **
Avoid the aggressor	47.6–35.5%	10.5–21.5% **	27.4–30.8%
Ask the aggressor why	25.0–48.8% ***	22.6–37.2% *	19.4–28.3%

Note: Neg.C.C. = negative classroom climate; Posit.C.C. = positive classroom climate. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

In physical victimization situations, significant differences between students with negative and positive perceptions of the classroom social climate in their preference for many coping strategies were observed: "ask a teacher for help" (χ^2 (1) = 8.994 $p = 0.003$; Cramer's V = 0.192), "not ask anyone for help" (χ^2 (1) = 4.555; $p = 0.033$; Cramer's V = 0.136), "fighting back" (χ^2 (1) = 10.133; $p = 0.001$; Cramer's V = 0.203), "avoid the aggressor" (χ^2 (1) = 5.540; $p = 0.019$; Cramer's V = 0.150) and "ask the aggressor why" (χ^2 (1) = 6.249;

$p = 0.012$; Cramer's V = 0.160). The students with a positive perception of the classroom social climate preferred to use the coping strategies of "ask the teacher for help", "avoid the aggressor", "ask the aggressor why" and "not ask anyone for help" more and preferred to use the coping strategy of "fighting back" less, compared to those who negatively perceived the classroom social climate. Finally, some differences appeared in the coping strategies preferred by students to handle verbal peer victimization situations according to how they perceived the classroom social climate. The results indicated significant differences between them for the strategies of "ask a teacher for help" (χ^2 (1) = 8.032; $p = 0.005$; Cramer's V = 0.181) and "fighting back" (χ^2 (1) = 7.970; $p = 0.005$; Cramer's V = 0.181). Almost half (47.5%) the students who positively perceived the classroom social climate preferred to ask a teacher for help in a verbal peer victimization situation, and only 29.8% of the students who negatively perceived the classroom social climate preferred it. Moreover, 25.8% of the students with a negative perception of the classroom climate chose the "fighting back" strategy, while only 11.7% of those with a positive perception of the classroom climate chose this coping strategy.

4. Discussion

The results obtained with the present study showed differences in the coping strategies preferred according to the victimization type (relational, physical, verbal) that students faced. In addition, interesting differences in the coping strategies preferred by students to handle peer victimization according to their gender, school grade, victimization status and perceived classroom social climate were observed. The obtained results indicated that students preferred asking a teacher for help when they suffered verbal or physical peer victimization but were less likely to ask for this help in relational victimization situations. Students perhaps believe that teachers are less able to help them with these situations or that teachers perceive relational victimization as a less serious peer victimization type. However, although some teachers may consider this, rejection and social isolation from peers have very negative consequences on victims' psychosocial adjustment [54]. Thus, it would be worth increasing both teachers' knowledge about the negative consequences of relational victimization and their resources to improve the social integration of all students. In a relational victimization situation, the two strategies most preferred by students were to ask their parents for help and to avoid the aggressor. Some previous studies have highlighted the frequent use of the avoidance coping strategy to handle relational peer victimization [17,30,55]. This study confirmed it and showed the relevance of parental support to cope with these situations. Although avoidance could lower the probability of subsequent victimizations, as previously pointed out [30], victims also need support from their family.

Social support from parents, teachers and friends is relevant for boys and girls, and help-seeking is considered an effective coping strategy [12,22,24,56–58]. However, previous studies have noted that girls ask for help more than boys when they suffer peer victimization [16,18,33]. In the present study, girls preferred to ask their parents and friends for help more than boys in relational, physical and verbal victimization situations, and they preferred to ask teachers for help more in physical and verbal victimization situations. In contrast, boys chose fighting back when suffering physical and verbal victimization more than girls. These gender differences might be explained by the Newman's [40] theory of adaptative and non-adaptative help-seeking for peer harassment. This theory proposes that victims are engaged in a complex decision-making process about how to cope with this stressful situation, and whether it is appropriate for them to ask for help or not [16]. Although help-seeking can offer them social support and reduce the probability of subsequent aggressions, this strategy might also have unintended adverse effects [39,59,60]. Victims may be perceived by their peers as being weak, because they cannot cope with this situation on their own [16]. These potential negative effects of seeking help may act as barriers to disclose to others the aggression they suffer [40,61,62]. Victims' perceptions of potential costs, lack of potential benefit and the desire to solve conflicts independently

could stop them from seeking help, especially from adults. For boys, the perceived cost of help-seeking could be higher, because they are socialized to be more autonomous and stronger than girls [63]. During the socialization process, boys and girls acquire differentiated gender identities, which involve distinct cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral styles assigned to each gender [63]. This differential socialization for boys and girls could increase the cost of asking for help in boys, because help-seeking would more negatively affect their gender identity and become a behavior perceived more negatively by their peers. Although future qualitative studies should analyze the reasons why boys do not ask for help as much as girls in more depth, developing interventions aimed to foster in boys the belief that asking for help is not a weakness could reduce peer victimization situations and help to prevent bullying.

Newman's theory is also useful for explaining why students of upper grades ask (would ask) less for help from teachers than students of lower grades do (would do). The results of this study, as it was hypothesized, showed a marked decrease in help-seeking from teachers to cope with physical, verbal and relational victimization from the elementary 4th grade to the first two CSE grades. Older students may perceive that seeking help from teachers has a higher cost for them. As Boulton et al. [16] pointed out, as students advance towards adolescence, they become more aware that seeking help from teachers is not normative in their peer groups and anticipate negative reactions from their peers. Adolescents have developed more socio-cognitive abilities and are expected to be able to solve their interpersonal problems without seeking help from their teachers. In fact, many teachers expect adolescents to solve their social problems without their help. Moreover, from elementary to CSE, important organizational changes come into play (e.g., more classes, more teachers) that make the teacher–student relationship less close at CSE schools, and it is likely more difficult that students ask teachers for their help. Although our data showed that the percentage of students who preferred asking a teacher for help to cope with peer victimization lowered throughout school grades, it was in the last two elementary grades when a higher percentage of students indicated that they did not prefer telling anyone about the aggression (physical, verbal, relational) suffered. In the last elementary grades, students (10–11 years old) reach adolescence and are more aware of the cost of help-seeking and desire to solve their problems independently. Adolescents' stronger desire of autonomy from adults [64,65] could explain the highest percentages of students who chose to not ask anyone for help in the last elementary grades. By considering these data, prevention programs should pay more attention to analyze the need to ask for help and to not silence peers' aggressions, especially in the students of these grades.

Regarding differences according to school grade, the data also showed that the highest percentages of preferring to fight back the aggressor when faced with physical aggression were observed for the first two CSE grades. At the beginning of CSE, students are more concerned about their social reputation with their peers [16], and they may believe that fighting back the aggressor when they suffer physical aggression can help them to gain their peers' respect. Although this strategy can make victims feel more in control of the situation and offer a self-image of less weakness, it can have negative outcomes for their psychological well-being [12]. Therefore, intervention programs that aim to prevent bullying should teach students of these school grades alternative ways to deal with peer victimization without using violence by analyzing their beliefs about social reputation and what behaviors are considered a weakness with peer victimization. The strategy of fighting back was chosen more to cope with physical victimization by the students in the first two CSE grades compared to the students of other grades. However, the avoidance strategy was the most preferred by the students in the first two CSE grades to cope with relational victimization. Some previous studies [17,30] have suggested that avoidance is chosen more by students to handle relational peer victimization. The results of the present study support this statement in CSE, but not in the elementary 4th and 5th grades. Older students could be more aware of this strategy being useful to reduce subsequent relational aggressions and would also be able to perform emotional distancing in this situation. Future studies

should further analyze to what extent this strategy can be useful for CSE students and the differences in how it is used by elementary and CSE students.

When considering victimization status, only one coping strategy showed significant differences. Victimized students chose the strategy of not asking anyone for help to cope with relational, verbal and physical peer victimization more than non-victimized students. Although Boulton et al. [16] observed that victimized students used the coping strategy of asking a teacher for help less, this difference was not confirmed. The difference obtained in the present study is interesting and may be related to their little trust in receiving help from the social environment. By asking for less help, students would have less available social support. Social support is essential for reducing the negative psychological consequences of peer victimization [51,57,66–68], but many victimized students may have difficulties in accessing it. Moreover, as no significant differences were found in the other coping strategies, classmates may differently perceive the same coping strategies depending on whether it was carried out by a victimized or non-victimized student. Victimized students could be associated with some social labels like "weak" or "easy victim", which would increase their risk of suffering repeated peer victimization situations, even if they used effective coping strategies. Therefore, it would be necessary to carry out interventions with all the students in each classroom to analyze their classmates' social perception of victimized students.

The coping strategies preferred by students also differed according to the classroom social climate. The students who perceived a more positive classroom social climate (closer relationships with classmates and teachers) preferred seeking help from teachers to cope with physical, verbal and relational peer victimization more than those who perceived a negative social classroom climate. A positive classroom climate has been previously related to reduce social exclusion [69] and is considered a protective factor for preventing student risk behavior and violence [70–74]. Our results confirmed the relevance of students' perception of their classrooms as a place characterized by high interactional quality between students and teacher–students in relation to their willingness to ask a teacher for help when faced with a peer victimization situation [75,76]. However, the students with a more positive perception of classroom social climate not only showed more willingness to ask a teacher for help, but also chose other coping strategies that could be effective in reducing subsequent victimizations more, such as asking the aggressor why. The students who more positively perceived the classroom climate seemed to feel more confident about their own abilities, the quality of the relationships with their classmates and teachers' support to solve interpersonal problems with classmates by opting for peaceful strategies such as asking why. So, they would attempt to solve problems with their classmates by peaceful strategies and would choose the fighting back strategy less in physical or verbal peer victimization situations. This greater confidence in their own ability could also explain why they chose the strategy of not asking anyone for help more. Their reasons for choosing this strategy could vastly differ from the reasons why victimized students chose it. Whereas the students who perceived a positive classroom climate would have had more opportunity to further develop their social skills and enhance their self-confidence, victimized students would choose to not ask anyone for help, because they could feel lack of confidence in the capacity of the social environment to help them. The aforementioned tentative explanatory differences in students' reasons to choose the "not ask anyone for help" strategy need to be analyzed in more depth by future studies, because they could be a key element in intervention programs to prevent bullying. The results from this study do not allow us to know the differential reasons why victimized students and those students with a more positive perception of classroom social climate would choose this strategy. Despite this limitation, the obtained data showed how the classroom social climate was a powerful contextual factor related to the coping strategies that students preferred.

This study also has some other limitations that must be considered. This is a cross-sectional study, so it did not allow us to establish causality between variables. Therefore, longitudinal studies are necessary to analyze possible causal relations. It would also be

worth including qualitative methods, for example in-depth interviews or discussion groups, in which students could explain the reasons why they prefer some coping strategies. The reasons for choosing the same strategy could different according to personal and contextual factors. The outcomes of using different coping strategies should be analyzed in more depth. Along with students' perceptions, it would be interesting to know the perceptions of teachers and parents about how students use these strategies.

5. Conclusions

Some differences appear in the coping strategies preferred by students to handle peer victimization according to their personal and contextual factors. Students' gender, school grade, victimization status and perceived classroom climate are factors related to their preferences for some coping strategies, and the relevance of these factors should be more deeply considered in intervention programs to prevent bullying. So, although many intervention programs [24,25,77] propose the objectives of enhancing the quality of the relationships among students, favoring their social integration and improving their social competences, it is also necessary to pay more attention to increase the quality of teacher–students relationship. This relationship needs to be particularly improved in the first CES grades, where students seem to perceive less confidence and closeness with their teachers and is more difficult for them to ask their help.

Moreover, some other issues should also be included in these intervention programs. For example, it would be useful to explore the reasons why boys ask for help less than girls, their beliefs in gender roles and their perception of what it is to be weak people. It would also be necessary to include in these programs some activities that aim to analyze more broadly the reasons why a victimized student might choose to not ask anyone for help. Such activities, performed with all the students in their classroom, could be very useful for victimized students by helping them to overcome barriers to seek help when they suffer peer aggression.

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