

Forgiveness Intervention for South Korean Female Adolescent Aggressive Victims

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## Abstract

We investigated an intervention designed to help female aggressive victims improve their levels of psychological and school adjustment. Adolescent aggressive victims are youth who demonstrate heightened levels of aggressive behavior and are frequently victimized by others. A program focused on the psychology of forgiveness was implemented and tested against both an alternative skillstreaming program and a no-treatment control group. Forty-eight female adolescent aggressive victims in South Korea (age 12 to 21 years) were recruited from a middle school and a juvenile correctional facility. Participants were randomly assigned to groups. Both forgiveness and skillstreaming interventions were implemented in a small-group format for 12 weeks. Participants in the forgiveness group reported significant decreases in anger, hostile attribution, aggression, and delinquency at posttest and follow-up; they also reported significant increases in empathy at posttest and follow-up and grades at posttest. We discuss implications for the psychological development of adolescent aggressive victims.

*Keywords:* forgiveness, aggressive victims, adjustment, behavioral problems, intervention

## Forgiveness Intervention for South Korean Female Adolescent Aggressive Victims

Recently, psychologists have shown a heightened degree of interest in aggressive victims, an understudied subgroup of youth initially identified by Olweus (1978). Aggressive victims are adolescents who act aggressively toward others and who are victims of others' aggression (Olweus, 1978). Aggressive victims are thought to be at greater risk for psychological, behavioral, and academic problems than those who are aggressors only or victims only (Graham, Bellmore, & Mize, 2006; Toblin, Schwartz, Gorman, & Abou-ezzedine, 2005; Wienke, Green, Karver, & Gesten, 2009).

Practitioners and educators need interventions that can specifically help female aggressive victims. This group of adolescents experiences more internalizing problems such as peer rejection, depression, anxiety, and loneliness than their male peers (Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003; Putallaz & Bierman, 2004). Yet there are no known intervention studies that focus on female adolescent aggressive victims exclusively. Forgiveness education is a promising intervention approach that can reduce anger (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) and may help aggressive victims overcome their pervasive difficulties. In this study we compared a forgiveness intervention to a skillstreaming program among South Korean female adolescent aggressive victims. The interventions were implemented and tested in a middle school and in a juvenile correctional facility to explore the seriousness of issues forgiveness programs can address.

### **Aggressive Victims**

Researchers exploring the relationship between social-cognition and aggression use different methods of classifying adolescents as aggressive victims. Therefore the incidence of

aggressive victim status reported in the literature varies considerably. For example, only 2% of Rigby's (1994) sample met criteria for aggressive victim status while 15% of Austin and Joseph's (1996) sample met criteria for aggressive victim status. Regardless of the methods used for identifying aggressive victims, researchers consistently find these youth are at-risk for negative developmental trajectories.

Aggressive victims exhibit internalizing and externalizing problems, deficits in social functioning, and academic difficulties. Researchers find aggressive victims experience greater depression, loneliness, and anxiety than other youth (Graham et al., 2006; Toblin et al., 2005). Aggressive victims are also involved in more criminal acts and exhibit more aggressive behavior than their peers (Ragatz, Anderson, Fremouw, & Schwartz, 2011). Social functioning may be particularly problematic for this group. Several studies have shown that aggressive victims are rejected at a higher rate than youth who are aggressors only or victims only (Schwartz, 2000). In addition, Perren and Alsaker (2006) found aggressive victims are less sociable and have fewer playmates than their peers. Aggressive victims also experience academic challenges. They tend to perform worse academically and are less engaged in school than their peers (Graham et al., 2006; Schwartz, 2000). Studies of South Korean aggressive victims find they experience similar threats to healthy development (Park, 2003; Yang, Kim, Kim, Shin, & Yoon, 2006).

Aggressive victims clearly encounter serious risks to their development. Researchers and practitioners need to understand how patterns of aggression and victimization develop in order to create effective interventions that can help this group of youth. Social-cognitive models of aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Huesmann & Reynolds, 2001) describe and explain how aggressive behavior patterns develop. Researchers have applied these models to aggressive

victims. For example, Crick and Dodge (1994) proposed a model in which aggressive behavior results from adolescents' perceptions of social cues and their attributions regarding the intent of others. Crick and Dodge (1994) posit some youth develop hostile attribution biases in which they interpret non-hostile cues as threatening. These youth frequently respond to perceived threats with aggressive behavior. Another social-cognitive model described by Huesmann and Reynolds (2001) focuses on scripts, beliefs, and observational learning. In this model, adolescents select aggressive scripts when the situations, the adolescents' emotional states, and the adolescents' beliefs about the world suggest aggressive behavior will result in desired outcomes.

According to these models, aggressive victims develop consistent ways of thinking that lead to high rates of aggressive behavior. For example, their experiences of being targets of others' aggression could result in angry emotional states and hostile attribution biases that, in turn, lead to the development and use of scripts supporting aggressive behavior. Once developed, aggressive social-cognition and associated behavior patterns become automatic and remain stable (Huesmann & Reynolds, 2001).

Many interventions for adolescent aggressors attempt to change social-cognition by teaching adolescents how to accurately interpret social cues and by providing scripts for prosocial behavior. A representative program is Aggression Replacement Training (ART, Glick, 2003). The ART program employs skillstreaming, anger control, and moral education to teach prosocial skills and shape behavior. Evaluation studies demonstrate ART is effective in reducing aggressive and disruptive behavior (Glick, 2003; Gundersen & Svartdal, 2006).

The amelioration of resentment and anger resulting from past victimization is not addressed in social-cognitive interventions, but may be important for treating aggression. Day, Gerace,

Wilson, and Howells (2008) argue therapeutic approaches targeting aggressive individuals could benefit from including forgiveness. We believe the forgiveness process (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) can address both the social-cognitive dimensions of aggression and the anger resulting from past victimization. Through forgiveness youth may learn to interpret social cues with less hostile bias and anger which could change their maladaptive behavior. Some evidence supports this assertion. For example, Shechtman and Nachshol (1996) conducted an intervention for aggressive adolescents that taught participants to identify and understand emotions associated with anger and victimization. The intervention reduced aggressive behavior.

### **Forgiveness Programs**

Forgiveness is a personal decision to respond to a person (or people) who committed a considerable injustice with beneficence rather than resentment and anger (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Worthington, 2005). Although people who forgive develop positive attitudes toward the offender(s), forgiveness can be distinguished from condoning or excusing the offense (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Forgiveness interventions and educational programs have improved psychological adjustment for a variety of at-risk and clinical adult populations (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Greenberg, Warwar, & Malcolm, 2010). In a meta-analysis Baskin and Enright (2004) demonstrated that forgiveness programs reduced participants' anger, depression, and anxiety. The programs also increased participants' self-esteem.

Forgiveness programs have been proposed as an approach to addressing anger in children who encounter stressful life events. Enright and colleagues (e.g. Enright, Knutson, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007) studied forgiveness education in developmental ecologies (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) troubled by economic hardships and intergroup conflicts. In

these studies, children in the forgiveness groups showed greater reductions in anger and depression than children in the control groups. Other forgiveness interventions have produced similar results for parentally love-deprived adolescents (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995) and youth coping with their parents' divorce (Freedman & Knupp, 2003).

A study by Gambaro, Enright, Baskin, and Klatt (2008) is particularly noteworthy. Gambaro et al. conducted a forgiveness program with elementary school students with high levels of anger. This study not only explored the psychological and behavioral benefits of forgiveness, but began to investigate the extent to which forgiveness could affect general social-cognitive scripts. Students in the forgiveness group showed greater improvements on psychological, behavioral, and academic measures than children in the control group. Although Gambaro et al. showed the value of forgiveness for at-risk children, the research was conducted with a small number of participants (n=12), at a single school, and with a single counselor. There is a need to replicate this study with a more rigorous research design and with youth experiencing more serious threats to healthy development.

### **The Current Study**

We compared a forgiveness program to a skillstreaming program and a no-treatment control condition with South Korean female adolescent aggressive victims on adjustment indicators including hostile attributions, anger, aggression, delinquency, and academic grades. These are social-cognitive, psychological, and behavioral symptoms aggressive victims experience. Forgiveness may be particularly effective for aggressive victims for several reasons. First, it can address victimization which is one of the underlying causes of anger. Second, the forgiveness process (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) has components such as awareness of current

coping strategies, reframing the offender, and development of a new worldview that could disrupt the stable social-cognitive patterns that support aggression. Third, previous research indicates forgiveness can effectively address the psychological, behavioral, and academic, challenges aggressive victims experience. Finally, a forgiveness intervention is appropriate for a middle school sample. Intervening in middle school is early enough in life to address the negative outcomes associated with aggressive victim status and middle school adolescents have the cognitive abilities that can promote forgiveness (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989).

This study extends the work of Gambaro et al. (2008) by using a larger sample, two intervention locations, and multiple counselors. Similar to Gambaro et al. (2008) we implemented the interventions in a school classroom. To strengthen the research design, we also implemented the program in a juvenile correctional facility in which both the offenses youth experienced and the behavioral and emotional problems they exhibited were severe. Our goal was to investigate the severity of problems forgiveness education could effectively address.

A skillstreaming program was selected as the alternative treatment because it is a research based program commonly used in schools. The skillstreaming program used techniques such as modeling, role playing, and feedback to influence social-information processing and provide the participants with prosocial scripts for behavior. This program was an appropriate comparison treatment for two reasons. First, it has empirical support (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997). Therefore we could reasonably expect it to be effective. Second, skillstreaming was sufficiently different than forgiveness to compare. Skillstreaming focuses primarily on developing new social skills, whereas forgiveness involves an internal transformation.



We hypothesized participants in the forgiveness group would exhibit greater gains in forgiveness, empathy, and grades than participants in the two control groups. We also hypothesized participants in the forgiveness group would show greater reductions in anger, hostile attributions, aggression, and delinquency than participants in the two control conditions.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

**Setting.** Female adolescents in a South Korean middle school and correctional facility participated in this study. An all-female sample was targeted because this at-risk group has been under-researched (Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001). Two different settings were selected to test the effectiveness of the forgiveness program in one common developmental context, and one in which problems were more serious. The public middle school had approximately 800 students and was located in a low SES neighborhood of Seoul. South Korean middle schools include grades 7, 8, and 9. The 7<sup>th</sup> grade class, which was the target population for this study, had 122 female students. The female juvenile correctional facility had approximately 130 inmates and was located in the Gyeonggi province of South Korea. These adolescents had committed crimes ranging from the “victimless” (prostitution, drug abuse) to the violent (aggravated battery).

**Screening Procedures.** We administered screening instruments to 103 middle school students (84% of initial contacts) who had proper consent and 120 adolescents (92%) in the correctional facility who had facility approval. Aggressive victims were identified by a multi-informant approach. Self reports, peer reports, and teacher reports were used to assess physical, verbal, and relational forms of aggression and victimization. The assessment instruments were similar to those used in previous research (e.g. Crick, 1997). Students self-reported aggression

they perpetrated (e.g. “I tease a peer”) and victimization they experienced (e.g. “A peer spread rumors about me”) during the previous year on a 3-point scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 2 (*Very often*). Students also rated their peers’ prosocial behavior, aggression, and victimization. In addition, teachers rated each student’s aggression and victimization with a 4- point scale ranging from 0 (*Never aggressive/victimised*) to 3 (*Frequently aggressive/victimised*). Scores were not aggregated across informants. Following other published literature (Austin & Joseph, 1996; Mynard & Joseph, 1997), the middle school adolescents were classified as aggressive victims if each informant rated them in the upper third of the middle school cohort on both aggression and delinquency. We applied a more lenient criterion for adolescents in the correctional facility because they already had histories of delinquent and aggressive behaviors such as assault. These adolescents were identified as aggressive victims if their aggression and delinquency scores from each informant were above the mean of the correctional facility group. Fifty adolescents, 26 in the middle school and 24 in the correctional facility were identified as aggressive victims. After the initial screening, potential participants were told about the study and completed the pretest measures. Two middle school participants were removed from data analysis after the pretest because they reported “no hurt” on the forgiveness scale. The focus of the forgiveness program was to reduce anger resulting from interpersonal hurts, therefore these two youth were not appropriate participants.

The final sample had 48 participants ( $M = 15.79$  years,  $SD = 2.09$ ), 24 ( $M = 14.21$  years,  $SD = 0.37$ ) from the middle school and 24 ( $M = 17.37$  years,  $SD = 1.90$ ) from the correctional facility. The sample from the correctional facility was significantly older ( $t = 8.00, p < .0001$ ) than the sample from the middle school. The means and standard deviations for measures of

aggression and victimization are presented in Table 1. The percentage of participants classified as aggressive victims in both the middle school and the correctional facility samples is consistent with other published research (Austin & Joseph, 1996).

After pretesting, participants were randomly assigned to the forgiveness, skillstreaming, or no-treatment conditions. There were six groups, three in each institution. Each group had eight participants. Participants completed posttests after the programs were finished. Follow-up testing was completed eight weeks after the posttest. All of the middle school participants completed the pretest, intervention, posttest, and follow-up test. Nine participants in the correctional facility (3 in each group) dropped out of the programs immediately after completing the intervention and did not complete the follow-up assessment. Seven of these adolescents were released earlier than expected and two did not want to participate in the follow-up testing.

### **Intervention Programs**

The forgiveness and skillstreaming programs used a small group format, had the same number of sessions, and met for the same length of time. Both interventions were conducted by two female facilitators: a Korean-licensed psychologist and a doctoral candidate with four years of experience studying the psychology of forgiveness and implementing interventions with adolescents. The doctoral candidate and the psychologist had multiple meetings over a two-month period to discuss key concepts and procedures for the forgiveness and skillstreaming programs. To assess fidelity in both programs, intervention sessions were randomly video-recorded. For each intervention, three research team members selected five of the 12 sessions across the facilitators and examined them for consistency. The team members evaluated whether or not the major activities and the discussion questions in the program manuals were presented in

the sessions. The individual raters recorded any activities and questions that were not delivered. The raters all agreed the major activities and discussion questions were presented adequately in both programs. To avoid therapist effects, the psychologist implemented the forgiveness program and the doctoral candidate implemented the skillstreaming program in one school, and they reversed roles in the other. The psychologist was blind to the research hypotheses and expressed no preference for either program. Neither facilitator worked for either institution.

**Forgiveness Program.** “Getting along with Peers: A Forgiveness Program for Aggressive Victims” was created on the basis of the book, *Forgiveness is a Choice* (Enright, 2001). The program was translated into Korean, and appropriate adaptations were made for age and culture. The program curriculum consisted of hypothetical stories with twelve themes and questions for journaling activities. The curriculum addressed the four phases of the Forgiveness Process Model (FPM, Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). As participants progressed through the FPM they explored their experience of hurt, their views of the perpetrator(s), and the degree of pain they were feeling. The participants then learned about forgiveness and decided to forgive their offenders. Next, participants began the work of forgiveness which included reframing the offender. In the reframing process participants learned to see the offender as a full person, rather than just a perpetrator. Exercises designed to promote empathy were introduced at this point of the program. In the final part of the process participants reflected on what they learned from the hurtful experience and the work they completed to forgive their offenders. The forgiveness program was 12 weeks long. In the first 7-weeks, participants were encouraged to develop empathy toward their aggressors. Each participant identified her aggressor, described the aggression and its consequences, and shared her feelings. In the last five weeks of the program, the participants

focused on the people they victimized. The participants identified their victims, described what happened to the victims, and contemplated the degree of hurt the victims experienced.

**Skillstreaming Program.** The skillstreaming program used the book *Skillstreaming the Adolescent* (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997). The program was designed to enhance prosocial skills such as empathy, negotiation, assertiveness, self-control, and perspective-taking. The skillstreaming program consisted of two processes, skill acquisition and transfer, by which aggressive youths learned specific prosocial skills and developed positive motivational attitudes. The skillstreaming curriculum had 50 skills, 12 were part of the intervention here including: Joining In, Convincing Others, Giving a Compliment, Knowing and Expressing Your Feelings, Understanding the Feelings of Others, Dealing with Someone Else's Anger, Responding to Teasing, Keeping Out of Fights, Dealing with Group Pressure, Apologizing, Using Self-Control, and Standing Up for Your Rights. Each skill was presented in a series of nine behavioral steps, which were modeled by a trainer and role-played by each participant. The adolescents in this group were shown several examples of behavior that constituted the skills above; given several guided opportunities to practice and rehearse these behaviors; provided praise and feedback on how well they role-played; and encouraged to engage in the acquired behavior in school and family settings. This program was 12 weeks long and each session taught one skill.

**No-Treatment Condition.** In the middle school, interventions took place during after-school programming. Students in the no-treatment group participated in recreational activities while the other participants completed intervention activities. In the correctional facility, interventions took place during career development classes. Adolescents in the no-treatment group participated in vocational training while the other participants completed the interventions.

## Measures

We administered self-report measures of forgiveness, empathy, anger, hostile attributions, delinquency, and aggression at pretest, posttest, and follow-up. Teachers were blind to student groupings and rated each participant on delinquency and aggression. Teachers also reported participants' grades in Korean, mathematics, and English at pretest and posttest.

**Psychological Adjustment.** The Enright Forgiveness Inventory for Children (EFI-C; Enright, 1993) is a 30-item scale which measures cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of forgiveness. Sample items include "would you be polite to him/her?" or "do you think of ways to get even with the person?" Each item is rated on a 4 point scale with 1 (*Yes*), 2 (*A little bit yes*), 3 (*A little bit no*) or 4 (*No*). Scores range from 30 to 120, with high scores representing higher willingness to forgive. The EFI-C was translated into Korean and back-translated for validity. The alpha coefficient was .94, similar to previous studies (Gambaro et al., 2008).

We used a modified 10-item version of the Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents (IECA; Bryant, 1982). The IECA assesses a respondent's vicarious emotional responsiveness to others as opposed to the accuracy of cognitive understanding of others' experiences (Bryant, 1982). Of the original 22 items, half depicted male behavior and were eliminated. An additional item was deleted because of its irrelevance in South Korea. The remaining items were translated into Korean. Items included, "I get upset when I see a girl being hurt," or "seeing a girl who is crying makes me feel like crying" and were assessed with a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*Very often*). Total scores range from 4 to 40, with higher scores representing greater empathy. In this study, the alpha coefficient was .64, similar to the original scale (Bryant, 1982).

Anger was evaluated with the State Anger scale of the State-Trait Anger Expression

Inventory (STAXI, Spielberger, Jacobs, Russell, & Crane, 1983). The State Anger scale assesses how angry a respondent is currently feeling with 10 items. It uses a 4-point scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*Very much*). Anger scores range from 10 to 40. Sample items are “I feel irritated” or “I feel mad.” We used a Korean version (STAXI-K) standardized for an adolescent population (Lee & Cho, 1999). In this study, the alpha coefficient was .93.

Based on previous research a questionnaire was created to measure hostile attributions (e.g. Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Seven stories depicted peer provocation in which the intent of the provocateur was ambiguous. One example story described a gym class in which students were told to get in line. One child ran to the front of the line and another child bumped into her. As the first child fell, the other child took first place in line. Participants were asked to imagine they were the victims and answer a question gauging the provocateur’s intent. Intention was rated using a 4-point scale with scores of 1 (*No*), 2 (*Maybe*), 3 (*Probably*) or 4 (*Definitely*). Participants’ responses across the stories were summed. Scores ranged from 7 to 28 with higher scores representing greater hostile attribution. The alpha coefficient in this sample was .84.

**Behavior Problems.** We used the teacher report form (TRF) and the youth report form (YSR) of The Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) to assess delinquency and aggression. The TRF was completed by a teacher who knew the participants for at least 2 months. Example items were “I (or the pupil) argue(s) a lot” or “I (or the pupil) destroy(s) things belonging to others”. Items were rated on a 3-point scale of 0 (*Not true*), 1 (*Somewhat or Sometimes*), or 2 (*Very or Often true*). The YSR was translated into Korean and standardized for Korean adolescents, whereas the TRF was translated into Korean but not standardized (Oh, Ha, Lee, & Hong, 2001). In this sample, the alpha coefficients of aggression and delinquency were .

68 and .84 for self reports respectively and .86 and .94 for teacher reports respectively.

**Academic Performance.** Grades in Korean, math, and English, were obtained from the middle school as independent indicators of school adjustment and academic improvement. Classroom teachers reported participant exam scores from before and after the intervention. Participants' scores ranged from 0 to 100 for each subject. To avoid ceiling effects, only participants who had earned less than 95 points in a subject at pretest were included in the analysis. This reduced the sample size of some groups; the groups in these analyses ranged from 5 – 8. Grade data were not available from the correctional facility because the curriculum did not include academic subjects.

## Results

We decided to combine the data from both institutions while developing the research design for two reasons. First, the variable of interest was the forgiveness program which was used in both institutions. We used ANOVA to compare scores on the forgiveness measure for the two institutions at pretest, posttest, and follow-up. The groups did not differ on this important variable. Second, we wanted to have more statistical power to detect differences between the treatments; we were more interested in the comparisons between the treatments than comparisons between the institutions. However, we included school as a between group factor in our analyses to understand the effect the middle school and correctional facility had on the data.

Table 2 shows the physical and psychological hurts the participants described on the EFI-C. Incidents involving peer relationships were the most common. The adults mentioned by participants in the middle school were usually teachers, whereas those mentioned by participants in the correctional facility were usually parents. Although there were differences in the types of



offenses and offenders, every victim viewed the incidents as significantly hurtful and unfair.

Means and standard deviations for all measures at pretest, posttest, and follow-up are reported in Table 3. Repeated measure MANOVA analyses were conducted on psychological adjustment, behavioral problems, and academic performance to examine main (school, group) and interaction (school x group) effects. Because several of the participants in the correctional facility were released before follow-up testing, Time was assessed separately. School and Group served as between-group factors and Time and Reporters were within-group factors.

**Psychological Adjustment.** Multivariate effects were found to be significant for School,  $F(2, 38) = 3.55, p < .05$ , and Time X Group interaction,  $F(2, 38) = 7.87, p < .001$ , for pretest to posttest analyses. Univariate analyses for School revealed significant differences between the institutions on anger,  $F(1,42) = 9.97, p < .05$ , indicating that adolescents in the correctional facility ( $M = 19.76, SD = 5.98$ ) had higher levels of anger than those in the middle school ( $M = 14.50, SD = 6.33$ ). Univariate analyses for the Time X Group interactions showed significant differences on forgiveness,  $F(2, 42) = 13.91, p < .05$ ; empathy,  $F(2, 42) = 3.50, p < .05$ ; anger,  $F(2, 42) = 5.17, p < .01$ ; and hostile attribution,  $F(2, 42) = 7.08, p < .01$ . To understand these differences in greater depth, we conducted post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction. The family wise alpha for these comparisons was set at .05. These comparisons revealed: the forgiveness group experienced increased forgiveness,  $t(15) = -3.83, p < .01$ , while the skillstreaming and no-treatment groups experienced decreased forgiveness,  $t(15) = 3.45, p < .05$ , and  $t(15) = 2.36, p < .05$ , respectively; the forgiveness group experienced increased empathy,  $t(12) = -3.41, p < .05$ , while the skillstreaming group did not change,  $t(12) = .20, p = ns$ , and the no-treatment group experienced decreased empathy,  $t(12) = 2.58, p < .05$ ; the forgiveness group

experienced decreased anger,  $t(12) = 2.18, p < .05$ , while the skillstreaming and no-treatment groups did not experience a change,  $t(12) = 1.93, p = ns$ , and  $t(12) = -1.81, p = ns$ , respectively; and the forgiveness group experienced decreased hostile attributions,  $t(12) = 3.16, p < .01$ , while the skillstreaming group did not change,  $t(12) = .22, p = ns$ , and the no-treatment group increased hostile attributions,  $t(12) = -3.56, p < .01$ .

Multivariate effects were significant for Time X Group interaction for pretest to follow-up test,  $F(2, 29) = 4.61, p < .001$ . Univariate analyses for the Time X Group interactions showed significant differences on forgiveness,  $F(2, 27) = 7.81, p < .01$ ; empathy,  $F(2, 27) = 5.07, p < .05$ ; hostile attribution,  $F(2, 27) = 13.73, p < .001$ . We conducted post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction to investigate these differences. The family wise alpha for these comparisons was set at .05. These comparisons revealed: the forgiveness group experienced increased forgiveness,  $t(12) = -2.58, p < .05$ , while the skillstreaming group did not experience change,  $t(12) = -1.84, p = ns$ , and the no-treatment group experienced decreased forgiveness,  $t(12) = 2.70, p < .05$ ; the forgiveness group experienced increased empathy,  $t(12) = -3.41, p < .05$ , while the skillstreaming group did not change,  $t(12) = .20, p = ns$ , and the no-treatment group experienced decreased empathy,  $t(12) = 2.58, p < .05$ ; the forgiveness group experienced decreased hostile attributions,  $t(12) = 3.16, p < .01$ , while the skillstreaming group did not change,  $t(12) = .22, p = ns$ , and the no-treatment group experienced increased hostile attributions,  $t(12) = -3.56, p < .01$ .

**Behavior Problems.** Multivariate effects were significant for School,  $F(2, 38) = 20.43, p < .001$ ; Time,  $F(2, 38) = 2.78, p < .05$ ; and Time X Group interaction,  $F(2, 38) = 2.43, p < .05$ , in the pretest to posttest analyses. Univariate analyses for School showed significant differences on

all behavioral outcome variables: self-reported aggression ( $M_{\text{middle}} = 9.67$ ,  $SD_{\text{middle}} = 4.78$ ,  $M_{\text{correctional}} = 12.71$ ,  $SD_{\text{correctional}} = 5.57$ )  $F(1, 42) = 4.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ; teacher-reported aggression ( $M_{\text{middle}} = 3.13$ ,  $SD_{\text{middle}} = 2.02$ ,  $M_{\text{correctional}} = 13.59$ ,  $SD_{\text{correctional}} = 10.64$ )  $F(1, 42) = 5.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ; self-reported delinquency ( $M_{\text{middle}} = 2.25$ ,  $SD_{\text{middle}} = 1.96$ ,  $M_{\text{correctional}} = 7.96$ ,  $SD_{\text{correctional}} = 3.31$ )  $F(1, 42) = 58.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and teacher-reported delinquency ( $M_{\text{middle}} = 1.13$ ,  $SD_{\text{middle}} = 1.80$ ,  $M_{\text{correctional}} = 4.71$ ,  $SD_{\text{correctional}} = 3.56$ )  $F(1, 42) = 26.96$ ,  $p < .001$ . The adolescents in the correctional facility had higher ratings than those in the middle school for each variable. For Time, the univariate tests on teacher reported aggression were significant,  $F(1, 42) = 6.59$ ,  $p < .05$ , showing an increase in aggression over time. Univariate analyses for the Time X Group interactions showed significant differences on self-reported aggression,  $F(2, 42) = 10.02$ ,  $p < .001$ , and self-reported delinquency,  $F(2, 42) = 5.19$ ,  $p < .01$ . We conducted post hoc comparisons on the univariate tests using the Bonferroni correction. The family wise alpha for these comparisons was set at .05. These comparisons revealed: the forgiveness group self-reported decreased aggression,  $t(15) = 3.63$ ,  $p < .05$ , while the skillstreaming group did not change,  $t(15) = -1.24$ ,  $p = \text{ns}$ , and the no-treatment group self-reported increased aggression,  $t(15) = -3.57$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and the forgiveness group self-reported decreased delinquency,  $t(15) = 2.58$ ,  $p < .05$ , while the skillstreaming,  $t(15) = -.44$ ,  $p = \text{ns}$ , and no-treatment,  $t(15) = -1.28$ ,  $p = \text{ns}$ , groups did not change.

In the self-report data, multivariate effects of School,  $F(2, 29) = 26.79$ ,  $p < .001$ , and Time X Group interaction,  $F(2, 29) = 3.04$ ,  $p < .05$ , were significant from pretest to follow-up. The univariate tests for School showed group differences on self-reported delinquency ( $M_{\text{middle}} = 1.12$ ,  $SD_{\text{middle}} = 1.79$ ,  $M_{\text{correctional}} = 8.27$ ,  $SD_{\text{correctional}} = 2.89$ )  $F(1, 30) = 51.40$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants in

the correctional facility had higher self-reported delinquency than participants in the middle school. The results of univariate tests for the Time X Group interaction showed differences on self-reported delinquency,  $F(2, 30) = 5.56, p < .01$ . We conducted post hoc comparisons on the univariate tests using the Bonferroni correction. The family wise alpha for these comparisons was set at .05. These comparisons revealed the forgiveness group self-reported decreased delinquency,  $t(12) = 3.18, p < .01$ , while the skillstreaming group,  $t(12) = -.87, p = ns$ , and the no-treatment group,  $t(12) = -1.48, p = ns$ , did not change.

**Grades.** Multivariate effects for Grades were significant for Time only,  $F(2, 38) = 8.34, p < .01$ . The univariate tests for Time showed significant differences for Korean,  $F(1, 12) = 12.62, p < .01$ , and math,  $F(1, 12) = 11.43, p < .01$ . Grades in Korean increased over time, whereas grades in math decreased over time. The multivariate effects for the Time X Group interaction were not significant,  $F(2, 38) = 1.67, p = ns$ . This was potentially due to a lack of power (i.e.  $n < 8$ ), therefore two univariate tests for Time X Group interaction were conducted to explore a potential impact. The interaction was significant for both Korean,  $F(2, 12) = 4.77, p < .05$ , and math,  $F(2, 12) = 5.03, p < .05$ . We conducted post hoc comparisons on the univariate tests using the Bonferroni correction. The family wise alpha for these comparisons was set at .05. These comparisons revealed the forgiveness group improved in both Korean,  $t(5) = -3.32, p < .05$ , and English,  $t(6) = -3.54, p < .05$ , over time. The skillstreaming and no-treatment groups did not change on either Korean,  $t(6) = -2.42, p = ns$ ,  $t(4) = -1.83, p = ns$ , respectively or math  $t(7) = -.62, p = ns$ , and  $t(6) = 2.05, p = ns$ , respectively.

**Effect Sizes.** To compare the effect sizes in the current study with those reported in Baskin and Enright's (2004) meta-analysis, we applied the same formula they used ( $g = (ME - MC)/SP$ )

to the posttest scores for the forgiveness group (ME) and the skillstreaming group (MC). The standardized effect size  $d$  for each outcome was calculated by applying the formula  $d = [1 - 3 / (4N - 9)]g$  (Hedges & Olkin, 1985). The effect sizes were as follows: forgiveness = 1.05, empathy = 0.62, anger = 0.63, hostile attribution = 1.04, delinquency = 0.16, aggression = 0.52, Korean = 1.09, math = 0.28, and English = 0.37. The values for forgiveness, empathy, anger, hostile attribution, and Korean were interpreted as being large and the values for delinquency, aggression, English, and math were interpreted as moderate to small. The effect sizes for the psychological health variables are consistent with those reported in Baskin and Enright (2004).

### **Discussion**

Research shows aggressive victims do not fare well in psychological adjustment, behavioral regulation, and academic functioning. This study builds on the work of Gambaro et al. (2008) and demonstrates the potential of forgiveness interventions to improve psychological, behavioral, and academic adjustment among female adolescent aggressive victims. Participants in the forgiveness intervention experienced increases in forgiveness, empathy, and grades. They also experienced decreases in anger, hostile attributions, and delinquent behaviors. These improvements were not observed in the other groups, but were maintained at an 8-week follow-up. Consistent with other research on forgiveness (Baskin & Enright, 2004), the effect sizes of many outcomes were judged as moderate to large suggesting the potential impediments to aggressive victims' development can be reduced with forgiveness intervention. The effect sizes for aggression and delinquency were smaller than the effect sizes for the psychological variables. Behavior may take longer to change, or be more resistant to change.

Developmental research has shown that aggressive victims have difficulty reading social

cues, often over-interpreting the actions of others as hostile (Dodge & Schwartz, 1997). One potentially important aspect of forgiveness education is its focus on cognitive reframing.

Participants, while acknowledging the wrong that the offender perpetrated, are encouraged to see the offender as fully human and even vulnerable. Perhaps this closer scrutiny of the offender's behavior helps participants distinguish an offender's actual hostile intent from behavior that was wrong but not intended to be so serious. Additionally, once the participants see how hurt they were because of an offender's actions, they may better understand how hurtful their own actions were for others. Considering social-cognitive models of aggression, the observed changes in hostile attribution and empathy in this study are important. If participants' hostile attribution biases are reduced they will likely engage in less reactive aggressive behavior. In addition, increased empathy can help them understand that their behavior has hurt others and they may be less likely to choose cognitive scripts that support aggressive behavior.

Combining strategies that address social-cognition with strategies that reduce anger seems to be a key in reversing the psychological, behavioral, and academic difficulties observed in aggressive victims (Gambaro et al., 2008). Forgiveness involves two internal transformations. First, improved perspective taking, the central cognitive component of forgiveness education, helps adolescents accurately interpret social cues and enact appropriate behavioral responses. Second, reduced anger and increased empathy, the central affective transformations of forgiveness education, help adolescents choose prosocial behaviors over aggression and delinquency. Interventions that alter behavior without a substantial internal transformation might leave participants with residual anger and they may find it easier to respond with aggression when interpersonal conflict arises.

We believe the improvements in grades observed in this study are important to note. Ma, Phelps, Lerner, and Lerner (2009) suggest interventions for aggressive youth should address academic competence. The forgiveness intervention did not have a specific academic component. However, emotional distress may have a role in the relation between aggressive victimization and academic achievement (Gambaro et al., 2008; Ma et al., 2009). Children who are distressed emotionally have low levels of engagement in and motivation for school activities (Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004). In this study, participants who received forgiveness education experienced positive changes in psychological well-being and increases in academic performance. Forgiveness education may influence academic achievement by improving psychological adjustment giving youth greater resources to concentrate on school. We believe this hypothesized mediational relationship should be investigated in future studies.

To build on existing research (Gambaro et al., 2008), we implemented a forgiveness program in multiple settings. Our results indicate forgiveness intervention can be successful in both a common school setting and in a setting in which youth are experiencing significant difficulties with psychological adjustment, behavioral regulation, and academic functioning.

It is important to note, we found main effects for school on anger, aggression, and delinquency from pretest to posttest and on delinquency from pretest to follow-up. In each case, the correctional facility youth were higher on these variables than the middle school youth. Baskin and Enright (2004) found forgiveness interventions are effective for adults in clinical settings. They also concluded the length and format, individual vs. group, influenced the effectiveness of the interventions. It is possible the school differences found in this study could be reduced or eliminated with a longer intervention delivered in an individual format. It is also

possible that the benefits of forgiveness take longer to emerge for more serious issues. Whereas there were school differences on anger, aggression, and delinquency at posttest, there were only school differences on delinquency at follow-up. The differences between the two institutions complicate the interpretation of the results. We cannot know, for example, if one of the samples was primarily responsible for the observed treatment effects. In addition, the uniqueness of the sample limits the generalizability of the results.

In this study we combined the data from both schools in order to increase the statistical power to find differences between the interventions which was our main focus. To build on Gambaro et al. (2008), we selected two different school settings. Although we investigated main effects for school, we did so at a broad level. Further research could investigate these differences more closely. Different populations of youth will likely have unique needs. For example, a review of Table 2 indicates the adolescents in the correctional facility reported many sexual abuse related events. Forgiveness has been effective for victims of sexual abuse (Freedman & Enright, 1996), however these youth might benefit from cognitive-behavioral therapy specifically designed to treat sexual abuse (Ross & O'Carroll, 2004). In this study, forgiveness seems to be effective for both groups. Further research targeting the specific needs of each group could identify the best methods of implementing forgiveness interventions with different groups and the best methods of combining forgiveness with other forms of treatment.

This study used a multi-informant method for screening participants and for assessing changes in behavioral problems. Discrepancies between self and teacher reports of aggression and delinquency were observed in the current study. Teachers reported no change in aggression and delinquency, whereas participants self-reported reductions in both behaviors. This is not a



surprising result given reports from different informants have not agreed in other research (e.g. Schwartz et al., 2001; Wienke et al., 2009). There are limitations of both self-report and teacher-report measures of aggression that are important to consider when interpreting our results. First, both self-reports and teacher-reports are susceptible to bias. There is evidence that self-reports underestimate aggression due to a self-serving bias (Österman et al., 1994) and that teachers' impressions of students labeled as aggressive may affect their behavioral assessments (Teglasi & Rothman, 2001). Second, aggressive behavior is multifaceted and is difficult to measure in its entirety. No single measure, whether self-report or teacher-report, can capture all types of aggression (e.g. physical, verbal, passive, reactive, instrumental, etc.) across all contexts (McCloskey & Coccaro, 2004). In this study, participants may have perceived change in their behavior that teachers did not notice. Future research should address this issue.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this study employed a strong research design and the results are consistent with other research, the study has several limitations. First, the size of each group ( $n = 8$ ) was small and therefore results need to be interpreted with some caution. This is particularly true for the follow-up data for the correctional facility participants. Due to early release and a desire to stop participating, nine adolescents in the correctional facility dropped out of the study. This not only reduced the sample size, but may have also introduced a source of systematic error if the participants who dropped out differed from those who did not. Second, the school sample consisted of only 7<sup>th</sup> grade females. This study cannot determine if forgiveness intervention would be appropriate for other age groups. The sample from the correctional facility was significantly older providing some evidence forgiveness intervention could work for older

aggressive victims as well. However this should be investigated with further research. Third, we used different criteria for identifying aggressive victims in the middle school than in the correctional facility. Existing literature does not have a consistent standard for identifying aggressive victims. The criteria we used for the middle school were consistent with previous research, but also likely to result in a higher incidence of aggressive victims than reported in some studies. We used more lenient criteria for identifying aggressive victims in the correctional facility than we used in the middle school because the correctional facility youth were already identified as having behavioral problems. If our criteria were too lenient, our samples might include youth who were not experiencing the negative outcomes most aggressive victims do. Therefore these youth may have had greater ability to change. If this is the case, our results overestimate the potential positive impact of forgiveness intervention for aggressive victims. Fourth, this study did not reevaluate participants' status as aggressive victims at follow-up. It is possible the psychological, social, and academic gains from the forgiveness group would fade over time if they continue to act aggressively and receive others' aggression.

There is little doubt that aggressive victim status is associated with negative outcomes. The data from this study provide evidence that learning to forgive an offender has the potential to help aggressive victims. Widespread positive impacts on aggressive victims' psychological health and development can result from healing past hurts and helping aggressive victims reconcile themselves as both aggressors and victims.

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Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations for Aggression and Victimization*

|                          | Aggression            |                       |                             | Victimization         |                       |                             |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
|                          | Self-Report<br>M (SD) | Peer Rating<br>M (SD) | Teacher<br>Rating<br>M (SD) | Self-Report<br>M (SD) | Peer Rating<br>M (SD) | Teacher<br>Rating<br>M (SD) |
| Middle<br>School         | 1.47 (.23)            | 1.27 (.24)            | 1.29 (.46)                  | 1.54 (.33)            | 1.31 (.31)            | 1.29 (.46)                  |
| Correctional<br>Facility | 2.08 (.41)            | 1.24 (.25)            | 1.58 (.58)                  | 1.81 (.30)            | 1.25 (.29)            | 1.67 (.70)                  |

Table 2

*Types of Hurts Participants Reported*

| Group          | Institution                                                     |                                                        |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
|                | Middle School                                                   | Correctional Facility                                  |
| Forgiveness    | Classmates spread rumors.                                       | Older students hit me.                                 |
|                | Classmates did not let me hang out with them.                   | Classmates harassed me. (2)                            |
|                | A close friend lied to me.                                      | Classmates made fun of me.                             |
|                | A close friend called me names. (2)                             | A boyfriend sold me for sex.                           |
|                | A classroom teacher always treated me unfairly.                 | My mother divorced my father and abandoned me.         |
|                | A boy classmate teased me.                                      | My dad raped me.                                       |
|                | My brother stole my money.                                      | My boss threatened me if I didn't do "favors."         |
| Skillstreaming | A classmate spread rumors. (3)                                  | Older students hit me.                                 |
|                | Friends did not talk with me and ignored me.                    | Classmates teased me. (2)                              |
|                | A close friend sent me an email calling me names.               | A close friend lied to me.                             |
|                | A classroom teacher called me horrible, filthy names.           | A close friend stole my money.                         |
|                | Older students hit me.                                          | My mother abandoned me.                                |
|                | My grandmother always favored my brother over me.               | My dad hit me when he is drunk.                        |
|                |                                                                 | My parents gave me up for adoption.                    |
| No Treatment   | A friend spread rumors. (2)                                     | Older students hit me. (2)                             |
|                | I asked a close friend for a favor and she turned me down flat. | Older students spoke harshly to me.                    |
|                | A close friend spread lies about me. (2)                        | Classmates made fun of me.                             |
|                | A classroom teacher ignored me and treated me like an object.   | A close friend stole my money.                         |
|                | A friend's uncle tried to molest me.                            | A close friend had an affair with my boyfriend.        |
|                | My mother wouldn't let me study abroad.                         | Male classmates touched my body sexually when I slept. |
|                |                                                                 | My parents never loved and they hit me.                |

Table 3  
Means and Standard Deviations for Each Outcome Measure

|                                    | Forgiveness        |                     |                         | Skillstreaming     |                     |                         | No-Treatment Control |                     |                         |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
|                                    | Pre-test<br>M (SD) | Post-test<br>M (SD) | Follow-<br>up<br>M (SD) | Pre-test<br>M (SD) | Post-test<br>M (SD) | Follow-<br>up<br>M (SD) | Pre-test<br>M (SD)   | Post-test<br>M (SD) | Follow-<br>up<br>M (SD) |
| <b>Psychological Adjustment</b>    |                    |                     |                         |                    |                     |                         |                      |                     |                         |
| Forgiveness                        | 58.4<br>(15.1)     | 74.9<br>(18.3)      | 73.2<br>(19.4)          | 68.8<br>(13.3)     | 57.8<br>(13.5)      | 64.5<br>(11.6)          | 68.4<br>(14.7)       | 55.9<br>(16.6)      | 58.5<br>(15.3)          |
| Empathy                            | 28.1<br>(3.8)      | 31.0<br>(4.8)       | 31.2<br>(1.9)           | 28.0<br>(4.0)      | 27.6<br>(5.9)       | 27.2<br>(5.2)           | 29.0<br>(3.6)        | 28.4<br>(4.6)       | 28.1<br>(3.2)           |
| Anger                              | 17.1<br>(8.1)      | 13.8<br>(7.3)       | 12.4<br>(2.7)           | 15.4<br>(5.4)      | 18.1<br>(6.2)       | 12.6<br>(3.5)           | 15.6<br>(6.6)        | 19.4<br>(9.1)       | 15.7<br>(6.8)           |
| Hostile<br>Attributions            | 16.3<br>(4.6)      | 13.4<br>(3.9)       | 12.0<br>(3.7)           | 15.4<br>(4.7)      | 17.8<br>(4.4)       | 14.2<br>(3.8)           | 14.1<br>(4.7)        | 15.6<br>(5.3)       | 16.1<br>(5.4)           |
| <b>Behavioral Problems</b>         |                    |                     |                         |                    |                     |                         |                      |                     |                         |
| Delinquency<br>(Self Report)       | 6.1<br>(3.9)       | 4.5<br>(3.5)        | 4.5<br>(3.5)            | 4.5<br>(4.6)       | 4.8<br>(3.6)        | 3.8<br>(3.3)            | 5.5<br>(4.2)         | 6.1<br>(4.9)        | 5.2<br>(4.6)            |
| Delinquency<br>(Teacher<br>Report) | 2.0<br>(3.3)       | 2.3<br>(2.5)        | —                       | 1.9<br>(2.8)       | 2.8<br>(3.5)        | —                       | 1.9<br>(2.9)         | 3.7<br>(4.1)        | —                       |
| Aggression<br>(Self Report)        | 13.1<br>(4.3)      | 8.5<br>(4.3)        | 11.5<br>(4.3)           | 9.5<br>(7.2)       | 11.4<br>(6.7)       | 9.0<br>(5.6)            | 11.2<br>(5.9)        | 13.7<br>(5.2)       | 14.4<br>(7.9)           |
| Aggression<br>(Teacher<br>Report)  | 6.4<br>(8.4)       | 6.6<br>(8.9)        | —                       | 4.9<br>(8.0)       | 8.4<br>(10.5)       | —                       | 5.9<br>(8.1)         | 8.6<br>(9.3)        | —                       |
| <b>Grades</b>                      |                    |                     |                         |                    |                     |                         |                      |                     |                         |
| Korean                             | 79.5<br>(7.1)      | 90.2<br>(3.3)       | —                       | 73.3<br>(17.8)     | 76.4<br>(20.2)      | —                       | 78.2<br>(16.7)       | 83.6<br>(15.3)      | —                       |
| Math                               | 68.2<br>(27.6)     | 64.4<br>(22.1)      | —                       | 62.7<br>(25.3)     | 56.3<br>(31.0)      | —                       | 70.2<br>(21.9)       | 60.2<br>(19.3)      | —                       |
| English                            | 65.8<br>(18.1)     | 73.3<br>(19.4)      | —                       | 62.3<br>(22.3)     | 64.1<br>(27.3)      | —                       | 73.7<br>(21.9)       | 70.4<br>(24.3)      | —                       |

Note. Dashes indicate no data were collected for this category.