School bullying, a pattern of harmful aggression between students, is prevalent in the United States (Finkelhor, Vanderminden, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2014; Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014). According to a recent national survey of children, 29.8% of students in the United States report being bullied at school (Finkelhor et al., 2014). Other reports suggest the overall percentage might be higher. For example, Harris Interactive and GLSEN (2005) reported that 65% of teens have been harassed or assaulted over the course of one school year, and teachers are just as likely as students to say that bullying is a serious problem in their school. Middle school students seem to be at highest risk (Robers et al., 2014). The National Center of Educational Statistics cites rates of bullying and cyber-bullying in middle school that are higher than those in high schools (Robers et al., 2014). The high incidence of bullying is of critical importance to school counselors in middle schools because both children who bully and those who are bullied are at a higher risk for interpersonal (Kim, Leventhal, Koh, Hubbard, & Boyce, 2006) and academic problems (Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2011); and school climate and safety for all children can be compromised (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2011; Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008). In a 2011 position

Defenders, or children who help victims, are studied less often than children who bully or are victims of bullying. In this study, the authors examined middle schools students’ perceived normative pressure from significant others to help victims. Findings suggest that normative pressure from best friends mediated gender and defending, and the interaction of age and best friends’ pressure was significantly related to defending. The article suggests implications for bullying prevention in middle schools.

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The primary focus of bullying-related research has changed over time from focusing primarily on bullies and their victims, with little emphasis on social context, to examining bullying as a group phenomenon with various roles being played by most children. In fact, a growing number of researchers assert that bullying only happens as a group process (Sutton & Smith, 1999) and that it is most appropriate to study bullying as emerging from socioecological contexts that are conducive to its occurrence (Furlong et al., 2003). When bullying situations occur, children adopt a number of social roles that include bully, victim, outsider (i.e., bystander), assistant (i.e., children who actively help the bully) and reinforcer (i.e., children who cheer the bully; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). However, in many bullying situations, not every child participates or stands by without intervening. Children who act deliberately in some way to prevent or intervene in bullying appear to be different, with fewer children defending than participating or being bystanders (Hawkins et al., 2001) and estimates vary depending on how defending is measured (Barhight, Hubbard, & Hyde, 2013) and how peer groups are defined (Sutton & Smith, 1999). In fact, some studies indicate that defending is less predictable from year to year than bullying behavior, and more influenced by social factors, such as classroom context and friendship groups (Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli, & Cowie, 2003; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998). For example, some research suggests that many children identified as defenders pass along their defending role to other children from one year to the next, meaning that less than half of children identified as defenders one year will be identified as defenders the following year (Menesini et al., 2003). Although the defending role does not seem to be as consistent as other roles, being identified as a defender has been shown to highly correlate with having friends who are also defenders (Salmivalli et al., 1998). Given these findings, it makes sense that the influence of same-sex peer groups, especially friendships, may be of particular importance in supporting defenders in their role. However, only a few studies have explored the relationship between close friendship groups and a tendency to defend in bullying situations.
Rigby and Johnson (2006) also found that a child’s reported willingness to intervene in an imagined bullying scenario varied according to gender, level in school (i.e., primary vs. secondary), and the normative expectations of selected significant others. Boys’ self-reports of willingness to defend were more related to friends’ expectations to defend than to their parents’ expectations, while girls were more influenced by parents (Rigby & Johnson, 2006). For girls in secondary school, but not for boys, normative pressure from both parents was related to their decision to support a victim, while boys’ expected pressure from their fathers was related to their willingness to defend (Rigby & Johnson, 2006). In their study, Rigby and Johnson (2006) did not test for whether normative pressure from parents, teachers, and friends to defend victims of bullying could potentially mediate or moderate the associations between gender and defending. Because normative pressure could potentially be impacted by counseling interventions, these associations are of particular interest to school counselors.

Although peer dynamics are usually forefront in middle adolescence, parents and teachers, too, are likely helping to create social contexts that either mitigate or promote school bullying behavior (Espelage & Swearer, 2010). For example, an approximate 33% of a nationwide sample of U.S. teachers admitted to bullying students “a few times” or “frequently” (Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, & Brethour, 2006). In one study, 27.8 to 34.6% of children reported that their parents expect them to avoid interfering with bullying (Rigby, 2005). Parents and teachers can also positively influence defending behavior, depending on what students perceive their expectations to be (Rigby & Johnson, 2006). Defending behavior can also be increased by classroom antibullying norms (Salmivalli et al., 1998), especially when teachers make clear their expectations regarding bullying (Aceves, Hinshaw, Mendoza-Denton, & Page-Gould, 2010). The converse, that classroom norms support bullying and not defending, is upheld when students perceive teachers to be ineffective at defending or even allowing bullying (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003; Unnever & Cornell, 2004). When antibullying norms are prevalent, the classroom context is shaped toward prosocial behavior, antibullying, or defending behavior.

The incidence of bullying seems to peak sometime in middle school; however, findings regarding the influence of age on the relationship between gender and defending behavior are mixed. For example, Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) found that children in the fifth and sixth grades were less likely to be defenders than children in the fourth grade. Conversely, Salmivali-
Defending was more likely in females than in males, and in children who believed that their mothers, fathers, best friends, and favorite teachers expected them to support victims of bullying.

- Does normative pressure to help victims (i.e., from mother, father, best friends, or favorite teachers) mediate or moderate the relationship between gender and defending behavior?
- Does age moderate the relationship between normative pressure to help victims, and defending behavior?
- Does age moderate the relationship between gender and defending behavior?

**Method**

**Participants**
Participants were 274 students from four public middle schools in a county in the southeastern United States. One hundred sixty-eight participants (61%) were female and 101 (37%) male. Five participants (2%) did not indicate their gender. Eighty-nine students (32%) were in sixth grade, 64 (23%) in seventh, and 121 (44%) in eighth. The mean age of participants was 12.97 years (SD = .97, median age = 13.07). Students’ ages ranged from 10.55 to 14.95 years. Twenty-four students did not report their age.

The sample makeup seemed to resemble the population of the county sampled, with the important exception of gender (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), with girls slightly more represented than boys. Students were provided a list of ethnicities, from which they could endorse all that applied. A total of 75 students (27%) identified as African American, 175 (64%) as White, 19 (7%) as Asian, 5 (2%) as Pacific Islander, 45 (16%) as Hispanic/Latino(a), 20 (7%) as Native American/American Indian, 3 (1%) as Alaskan Native, and 31 (11%) as Other. The percentage of participants choosing a single category was 51 (19%) African American, 130 (47%) White, 8 (3%) Asian, 1 (.4%) Pacific Islander, 20 (7%) Hispanic/Latino(a), 1 (.4%) Alaskan Native, and 2 (1%) Other. Fifty-five (20%) participants selected multiple racial–cultural identities. Six students (2%) did not respond to this item.

**Procedures**
Upon receiving approval from the university institutional review board and from local school administrators, the researchers sought informed consent from students and parents at four middle schools. A convenience sample was used based on partnering with school counselors in the county, and then on cooperation of teachers at each school to make class time available for the survey. The researchers assumed a 20% response rate and solicited participation from 525 students to attempt a minimum sample size of 105. Using an accuracy table (Algina & Olejnik, 2003), the authors estimated that a correlation from a sample size of 105 would estimate a population correlation within ± .15 to ± .20.

After the authors gathered completed parental consent forms, they passed out instrumentation packets in classrooms to students who received consent from parents to participate. The packets were distributed to students in two alternating forms, with half of the students responding to a vignette about a bully and victim who were both boys, and the other half responding to a vignette in which both bully and victim were girls. Immediately after participants completed the survey, a researcher or a proxy, such as the school counselor, collected the surveys.

**Measures**

The Self-Report Defender Scale. The defender scale is one of six scales on the Participant Role Questionnaire (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Salmivalli et al., 1998). The version of the defender scale chosen was a six-item scale used in three prior studies (Salmivalli, 1998; Salmivalli et al., 1998; Salmivalli et al., 1999). On the defender scale, participants indicate how often (0 = Never, 1 = Sometimes, 2 = Always) in bullying situations they engage in the following behaviors: “Comforts the victim in the bullying situation,” “Tells others to stop bullying,” “Says to the others that bullying is stupid,” “Tries to make the others stop bullying,” “Encourages the victim to tell the teacher about the bullying.” Responses for the six items were averaged to obtain a 0-2 score range for the overall scale.

Versions of the defender scale, including the one used in this study, have been administered to children in middle school grades (Gini, 2006;
Goossens et al., 2006; Salmivalli, Hutunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997; Salmivalli et al., 1998; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Salmivalli et al., 2005; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). According to Salmivalli et al. (1998), internal reliability for the six-item scale fell within a range of coefficient alphas, $\alpha = .84$ to $\alpha = .94$, which was a range reported that included all of the participant role scales. Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaianistiemi, and Lagerspetz (1999) reported a reliability of $.90$ on the defender scale. In the current study, internal consistency for standardized Defender Scale scores was lower, but sufficient at $\alpha = .69$. Removing any item from the scale appeared to reduce internal consistency or not increase it. Principal factor analysis for the scale suggested that it is appropriate to interpret the scale as representing a single factor.

**Normative pressure to help victims.**

Rigby (2005) developed a four-item scale to determine students’ perception that their mother, father, friends, and teacher would expect them to support a victim or support a bully. Four hypothetical bullying situations were illustrated, followed by the stem, “Tell what various people would expect you to do when each type of bullying takes place.” Participants then read and responded to the following four items, “My mother would expect me to,” “My father would expect me to,” “My best friend(s) would expect me to,” and “My favorite teacher(s) would expect me to” for each of the four bullying situations. Responses to each item used a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly support the bully, 2 = Support the bully, 3 = Do nothing, 4 = Support the victim, and 5 = Strongly support the victim). Lower scores on this scale represent a perceived social expectation to support a bully. Participants were asked to omit any item regarding parental expectations if that parent was not living, indicated by, “Please omit any question about a parent if that parent is no longer alive.”

For the purposes of the current study, the authors modified the scale to permit the calculation of internal reliability of the normative pressure instrument from each independent source (i.e., mother, father, friends, and teachers). Because of the application of this scale in the literature and its potential value in future research, the authors created and analyzed an expanded version of the scale. In the present study, instead of using illustrations, the authors described four separate vignettes of bullying situations, which represented direct physical (e.g., hitting and shoving), direct verbal/social (e.g., name calling and teasing), indirect physical (e.g., stealing), and indirect social/verbal bullying (e.g., ostracizing). For example, the item related to stealing read, “Imagine that you are witnessing a bullying situation, and that there are others witnessing it also. You see one child taking another child’s things.” Each of the four items concerning normative pressure from peers, parents, and teachers were then administered four times as applied to the four bullying scenarios.

The authors’ adaptation of Rigby’s (2005) original procedure necessitated preliminary reliability and validity analysis of the instrument as used in the current study. Although the authors did not do extensive pilot testing, they did consult with two counselor educators and a research methodologist about the construction of the scale. They also conducted a principal factor analysis with varimax orthogonal rotation for easier interpretation of factor loadings. The resulting factors resembled the subscales as used in Rigby (2005), Rigby and Johnson (2006), and as intended for use in this study. However, instead of indicating unique expectations from mother and father, perceived parental expectations seemed to cluster together based on the type of bullying described. Even so, in the design for the current study, perceived parental expectations were assessed separately for mother and father, as planned, in order to address the study’s research questions. Internal consistencies were $\alpha = .90$ for the total Normative Pressure scale, $\alpha = .855$ for normative pressure from teachers, and $\alpha = .82$ for pressure from friends. Normative pressure to help victims from mother and father were $\alpha = .83$ and $.84$ respectively.

**AT THIS AGE [MIDDLE SCHOOL], CLOSE FRIENDS ARE OF CONSIDERABLE INFLUENCE ON BEHAVIOR AND A POTENTIAL FOCUS OF BULLYING INTERVENTION.**

**Demographic survey.** A demographic questionnaire asked for date of birth, biological gender, and race/ethnicity. The demographic form appeared after the other scales to avoid priming gender at the beginning of the survey. Birth dates were solicited as two items, asking the year first to avoid the participant error of writing the current year instead of the birth year.

**Data Analyses**

Various descriptive and correlational analyses were employed in the study. Assumptions of all data analytic methods were met. First, the authors conducted Pearson Product Moment correlational analyses between defending and all other study variables (i.e., gender, normative pressure to help victims, and age). Next, they used regression analyses using procedures to test for mediation and moderation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). Prior to conducting the regression analyses, the authors replaced some missing data with the average response for each item. Schafer and Graham (2002) recommend that missing data be viewed as an opportunity to make inferences about missing values rather than to simply retain observations otherwise deleted. To avoid such a reduction in the current study, the authors replaced no more than one
This finding continues from prior research, which found that children choose other defenders not only when they witnessed bullying, but when they were supported by family members who expected them to support victims of bullying. The results indicate that perceived normative pressure from family members, friends, teachers, and other significant others can influence defending behavior over time. A significant negative relationship was found between biological gender and defending behavior, with boys reporting lower levels of defending behavior than girls. There was also a significant positive relationship between perceived normative pressure from favorite friends and defending behavior. Additionally, there was a significant zero-order relationship between defending behavior and perceived normative pressure from parents.

Table 1: Pearson Product Moment Correlations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Pearson r</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biological Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)</td>
<td>0.13**</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>&lt; .0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Pressure from Mother</td>
<td>-0.13***</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>&lt; .0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Pressure from Father</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Pressure from Best Friends</td>
<td>0.24****</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>&lt; .0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Pressure from Friends</td>
<td>0.30****</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>&lt; .0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Pressure from Teacher</td>
<td>0.31****</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>&lt; .0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Pressure from Other Peers</td>
<td>0.32****</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>&lt; .0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)</td>
<td>0.13**</td>
<td>266</td>
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<tr>
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<td>266</td>
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<td>265</td>
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<td>0.32****</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>&lt; .0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significant relationships were found between defending behavior and perceived normative pressure from family members, friends, teachers, and other significant others. These findings support the idea that perceived normative pressure from significant others can influence defending behavior over time.

Significant positive relationships were found between defending behavior and perceived normative pressure from favorite friends and defending behavior. Additionally, there was a significant zero-order relationship between defending behavior and perceived normative pressure from parents.
port for the hypothesis that normative pressure from friends mediates the relationship between gender and defending behavior.

The authors examined moderating relationships between defending and normative pressure from mother, father, best friends, and favorite teachers to see if any of them varied as a function of participant gender. Mothers’ and fathers’ normative pressure were not considered because no significant gender differences were found. Friend pressure predicted defending more strongly in boys, $r(96) = .62, p < .0001$, than in girls, $r(159) = .30, p < .0001$. Teacher pressure did not predict defending for girls, but did so for boys, $r(96) = .35, p < .001$ (see Figure 2). For boys, normative pressure from their best friends and teachers increased their defending, but this pattern did not hold true for girls.

The researchers conducted the same moderation analyses with participant age as the moderator, normative pressure from all measured sources as predictor variables, and defending as the dependent variable. A significant moderating effect emerged for pressure from friends, indicating that the relationship between defending and friend pressure was higher for children above the sample’s mean age, $r(129) = .47, p < .0001$, than for children at or below the mean age, $r(109) = .35, p < .001$ (see Figure 3). Within this sample of students, in grades 6-8, the effect of friends’ pressure on defending is stronger for older students. That is, age and friend pressure interact to predict defending behavior.

**DISCUSSION**

To better understand defending in middle school students, this study closely examined relationships between gender, age, normative pressure of significant others, and defending. In this regard, the findings make some relatively distinctive contributions to the study of defending in middle adolescence (ages 10-15), expanding on those of Rigby and Johnson (2006), who used a similar study design but focused on younger children (ages 6-9). In contrast to Rigby and Johnson’s (2006) study, the outlook for normative pressure to defend appears more favorable among the middle school students surveyed. In the current study, 66% to 85% of participants reported that their friends expected them to defend, whereas the range was 35% to 74% in Rigby and Johnson (2006), implying that, at this age, close friends are of considerable influence on behavior and a potential focus of bullying intervention.

As in prior studies, the findings in the current study indicated that girls defended more than boys. However, compared to prior research, these findings suggested a somewhat weaker relationship between defending and
Gender, with girls only slightly more likely than boys to self-report defending behaviors and perceived expectations to defend. Thus, this finding is less consistent with Salmivalli and Voeten’s (2004) assertion that gender itself is the most powerful predictor of defending and more consistent with studies that find a relationship between gender and defending that is influenced by children’s identified participant roles (Goossens et al., 2006; Menesini et al., 2003; Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Salmivalli et al., 1998; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Salmivalli et al., 2005; Sutton & Smith, 1999). These findings support the evidence that the relationship between gender and defending is a complex interaction between gender and children’s social context (Goossens et al., 2006; Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Sutton & Smith, 1999). Findings of this study lend veracity to the notion that the normative pressure of significant others is conspicuously related to middle school children’s tendency to help the victims of bullying (Aceves et al., 2010; Rigby & Johnson, 2006). All normative pressure sources—mother, father, best friends, and favorite teachers—were significantly related to defending. Although Rigby and Johnson (2006) did not test for mediation between gender and normative pressure to help victims, their reports showed higher predictive power of parental pressure among girls than among boys, higher predictive power of friend pressure among boys, and no apparent gender differences for teacher pressure. Although normative pressure to help victims of bullying appears to be most significant for close friends, the current findings and prior research make clear that adult relationships matter, too (Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). The authors found some evidence of higher predictive power for both friend and teacher pressure among boys, but no gender differences for parental pressure. Normative pressure from best friends was the only variable found to mediate the relationship between gender and defending. In this case, gender predicts normative pressure from best friends, which, in turn, predicts defending. In this middle school sample, boys reported that they defend more when they believe their friends expect them to. Therefore, these findings support those of Rigby and Johnson (2006), who also found the importance of normative pressure of friends for boys to defend.

The authors found that defending and friends’ pressure to help victims increased with age, a moderating effect not explored in Rigby and Johnson’s (2006) study. This finding also is consistent with prior evidence that defending victims is more common among older middle school students (Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Salmivalli et al., 1998). Students in middle school are beginning to consider peers as more important to their world than they had before. Therefore, it seems plausible that the normative pressure students feel to defend against bullying is most likely to come from established peer groups, which may be more common in the older middle school grades. This finding can also be linked to find-
ings in prior studies that adolescents befriend like-minded peers as close friends (Salmivalli et al., 1998; Veenstra & Steglich, 2012). Not only might children choose other defenders as friends, but these peer groups also may influence defending behavior over time. Differences between the current findings and those of Rigby and Johnson (2006) are likely attributable to the current study’s examination of an older population of students, use of a modified measure of normative pressure to defend, and use of a different analytic procedure. The authors also studied defending in the United States whereas Rigby and Johnson’s (2006) study was conducted in Australia. However, as examined above, the current study builds on this original study in specific and important ways.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELING

School counselors can play a prominent role in providing comprehensive counseling interventions to increase defending and mitigate bullying; this is consistent with the direct services outlined in the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012). Furthermore, prevention of bullying is a cornerstone of creating a safe school climate that is conducive to learning (ASCA, 2011). Nowhere is this aim more critical than in middle schools, where bullying tends to be at its peak (Robers et al., 2014). Fortunately, defending may also be at its highest in middle school. School counselors who become aware of children who defend and how they are persuaded will find ways to incorporate this knowledge into their comprehensive programs. In addition, defender-aware counselor educators will be able to provide counselors-in-training with a more complex picture of how girls and boys in middle school respond to bullying in prosocial ways. Therefore, broader knowledge about children who defend and the social contexts that influence them is important for counselor educators, counselors-in-training, and practitioners.

Implementing prodefending interventions may improve existing antibullying efforts, making middle school environments safer for children. Given the potentially higher rates of defending in the middle school years, the authors recommend providing basic defending interventions as early as primary grades, with programs increasing in scope and intensity throughout middle school, and decreasing again as students enter high school. Bullying prevention efforts can include individual, small-group, and large-group interventions that focus on increasing children’s awareness of the importance of defending and empathy for victims, as well as teaching safe strategies for defending (Salmivalli, 2010; 2014). School counseling programs should also be systemic, focusing not only on the isolated conflicts between children but on promoting defending in the social environments in which children live.

Peer-focused interventions to address conflict resolution skills have been recommended as a developmentally appropriate counseling modality, with particular implication for middle school students (Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway, 2007; ASCA, 2015). Using a peer-focused conflict resolution model, counseling programs may be specifically targeted toward educating children about positive defending and encouraging appropriate defending behaviors (Salmivalli, 2010; 2014). However, although these programs are recommended, they should be applied with caution. If peers intervene inappropriately in bullying situations, programs can be unhelpful or harmful. Prior research suggests that peer-focused antibullying programs can have unintended and, potentially, aversive results when peer dynamics are not carefully considered (see

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**PEER-HELPING PROGRAMS SHOULD BE INCLUSIVE, WITH EFFORTS DIRECTED TOWARD A SAFER SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT, NOT AS REMEDIATION FOR CHILDREN WHO BULLY OR ARE VICTIMIZED.**
OPPORTUNITIES FOR AN OPEN DISCUSSION OF GENDERED

Peer-helping programs should be inclusive, with efforts directed toward a safer school environment, not as remediation for children who bully or are victimized. The research makes clear that there are harmful consequences for both groups of children (Kim et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2011). It is important for school counselors to advocate not only for using transformative language but also for replacing punitive strategies that target individuals as aggressors with strategies to shape peer culture toward defending. In working within peer groups, the authors also recommend choosing language carefully, especially in terms of “defending” and “defender,” which may imply an affinity with victimized students and enmity against those who bully, or recognize the safety of the victimized child but not of the child who bullies.

Middle school students who defend perceive that they are expected to support their peers, a belief that may be more predictive of their behavior than their gender alone. Therefore, the authors suggest that prodefending programs should attend less to gender per se or gender-specific intervention (e.g., girls’ groups or boys’ groups) and more to gendered understandings of children’s peer behaviors. For example, boys may not naturally be less likely to defend, although they may be hampered from defending by the cultural expectation that boys do not defend. According to the findings of this study, although girls defend more, boys who perceive that they are expected to defend often do. Counseling modalities, including large, small, and individual interventions, are opportunities for an open discussion of gendered expectations around defending behavior. At the middle school age, students’ friendship groups are increasingly complex and children are capable of social sophistication in all of their relationships, including understanding gender-normed expectations from significant others to behave in certain ways. Although counseling interventions aimed at increasing children’s perceptions of defending behavior are likely to help, peer group influence, particularly in the form of close friends, may push back and assert the original expectations. Exploring with children the ways in which they view their own expectations to defend and what they believe are the expectations of others might improve their ability to make defending choices that are not as subject to gendered, or peer-pressured, expectations. These recommendations are buoyed by the finding that parents, friends, and peers all seemed to have influence on children’s tendency to defend. Because bullying is considered as a middle school phenomenon that occurs between children, many well-meaning parents and teachers might not be fully aware of the normative pressures that they, too, exert. For example, boys and girls similarly viewed a normative pressure to defend from their parents. Teachers and parents can be involved in acknowledging their influence on children’s behavior and acting on it in meaningful ways. The authors recommend that significant others examine their own ideas and behaviors around defending, model effective defending behaviors, and communicate their expectations to children to defend in appropriate ways. For school counselors, reaching out and winning the hearts and minds of students, teachers, and families may be prerequisites to implementing defending interventions. Last, both defending and bullying are complex social phenomena, shifting with the changing dynamics of school climate and the broader societal environments in which schools exist. Counselors, educators, and policymakers should keep an observant eye on the workings of the social groups of middle school students and on emerging research on the role of defenders.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The current study was a correlational study in which predictors were not manipulated. Therefore, directional assumptions of causality in mediation diagrams can be misleading. Furthermore, the study is cross-sectional, which prevents the assessment of stability of the behaviors or measurements (and the relationships and treatment effects) relevant to the study. This limitation may be of particular concern given that defending is not always a stable attribute for students from one year to the next. Unfortunately, analyses of the present study
cannot help determine the stability of defending scores or of the relationship between defending scores and scores of normative pressure from best friends over time.

This study relies on self-report for all variables. Of primary concern is the inherent confound in asking students to guess at the expectations of their significant others. Furthermore, reporting on either one’s own defending behavior or others’ expectations may be subject to a socially desirable response because children may want to make themselves, and their mothers, fathers, friends, and teachers, look good. Similarly, students with missing responses to certain items on the questionnaire may be meaningfully different both from students who left other items blank and students who responded completely.

The normative pressure measurement procedure used in the present study was adapted from a four-item procedure created by Rigby (2005), who did not allege it to have the properties of an intentionally developed scale. In a time when researchers recommend the exploration of the socioecological contexts in which bullying and defending occur, developing valid ways to measure social influences, such as normative pressure, will be useful. The modification of the measure used in this study was intended as a first step toward the development of a more valid and reliable scale to measure normative pressure to defend. The implication for future research is that developing measures of prosocial influences that are perceived norms for children will likely be of great help.

Future research might explore cultural reasons for the differences in the reported relationship between gender and defending, because many of these prior studies related to bullying and defending have been conducted in various countries (e.g., Finland, Italy, United Kingdom). Furthermore, methodologies varied from study to study, including how defending is measured.

Normative pressure within close relationships might have an effect on children’s helping behaviors toward victims of bullying. Results suggested close friends may play a crucial role in the gender differences apparent in children’s defending behavior, and parents appeared to have some influence. In fact, concerned adults might be able to play a conscious role in helping shape the way friends influence defending. Future research should focus on cultivating agreement among researchers on the definition and effects of defending in schools and on experimentally testing the causal assumptions of normative pressure and defending.

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