Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: Victimization happens when a person is on the receiving end of cruel or unjust treatment. According to a Science Daily article, “researchers estimate that as many as 75% of children and youth report experiencing some sort of peer victimization.” I'm Emily Yeap.

Dr. Leslie Echols, assistant professor of psychology at Missouri State University, focuses her research on peer victimization, specifically among middle school and early adolescent youth. She joins me today to discuss her current research and new project starting in spring 2020.

Dr. Leslie E.: First, I look at the risk factors for youth and the things that make certain youth more vulnerable to victimization. I look a lot at characteristics of the kids, but then also characteristics of their friends. The other area is in the intervention realm where I'm actually trying to reduce victimization. So I'm getting ready to start a program in the spring that will run for three years in some local schools to help identify the kids who are victimized and then help them with some coping skills and then also reduce their victimization at school.

Emily Yeap: There's one reason why Echols is particularly concerned about victimization among middle school youth.

Dr. Leslie E.: Social status and fitting in is so important during that stage of life that being victimized really has pretty far reaching effects. It not only impacts their emotional adjustment like mental health, depression, loneliness, self-worth, social anxiety, all of those things, but it also can have a large impact on their academic trajectory. They're more likely to have physical symptoms. Those effects are just so widespread that being victimized in middle school can have impact on your long-term trajectory in several ways.

Emily Yeap: With regard to identifying victimization, what should parents or teachers look out for?

Dr. Leslie E.: There are different types of aggression, so there's physical aggression, there's verbal aggression. There's something called relational aggression, which is probably the hardest to detect and it most often occurs among girls. This is when girls spread rumors about each other. They exclude each other from the peer group. A lot of those things are invisible to parents and teachers because it's so subtle. Instead of really looking for the victimization itself, we have to look at things like social withdrawal, isolation, depression. Not that if you struggle with depression or you're isolated, you're necessarily victimized, but those are indicators that would give us cause to maybe explore the possibility that there is some victimization going on.

Emily Yeap: In the program Echols is bringing to the schools, students who are being victimized will receive some coping skills.

Dr. Leslie E.: One of the tricky things about addressing victimization in middle school is that we can't seem to make it go away. We would love for it to, but it's such a part of that stage of development because of the fact that kids are trying so hard to fit in and social status is really important.

And so in our program, we will try to reduce aggression and bullying at school, but we also want to help victims themselves cope when it happens to them because we know it will happen to certain students. And one of the really important things that you can focus on is helping kids see that it doesn't just happen to them. That it is something that happens in that stage of life. And it happens to a lot of people because one of the worst things for kids who get victimized is to believe that it's something about me, it's nothing that I can change. We call that a negative attribution style and that can be really detrimental to their mental health and put them in a position where they get repeatedly victimized.

Some of the other things we try to remind victims of is it's important not to let the person who is bullying you see that it affects you. Please go home and talk to mom or dad or a teacher or a friend and tell them how it makes you feel so that you don't have to hold that in, but don't let the person know that it's bothering you because that could give them ammunition. Often times, kids who are victimized are perceived as the easy targets and other kids think it's fun to push someone else's buttons. And those kids may not realize how much they're actually damaging someone, so it's not necessarily done intentionally, but it is done consciously because they know the kids who are going to get upset and blow up and cause a scene and for whatever reason, developmentally that's sort of exciting to them. And so we want to reduce that reaction as much as possible so that kids are not targets of victimization.

Emily Yeap: That was Dr. Leslie Echols, assistant professor of psychology at Missouri State. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information contact the Office of University Communications at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.