Overview  In this chapter we will discuss the importance of considering risk—and alternatively, protective—factors for peer victimization that occur at multiple levels of children’s ecological context, with the goal that this review will be useful for both basic research and prevention and intervention efforts. We will begin by defining peer victimization and identifying several well-established personal characteristics that place children at greater or lesser risk for being the targets of their peers’ aggression. However, the majority of our review of risk and protective factors will focus on features of the child’s context, and we will separate these contextual influences into those occurring across five levels of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological taxonomy. We will then discuss the implications of these ecological risk and protective factors for prevention and intervention efforts and review prior prevention and intervention studies that have considered multiple contextual levels. We will conclude that studies that have failed to consider higher levels of contextual risk factors have been less effective than is desired and will offer suggestions for considering these ecological factors in future empirical and applied work.

Introduction and Background

Defining Peer Victimization

Peer victimization refers to being the target of aggression by peers. Two aspect of this definition merit attention. First, aggressive behavior refers to acts that are intended to hurt another person (Parke & Slaby, 1983) and includes behaviors that are either direct (physical aggression such as hitting, verbal aggression such as taunting) or indirect (social or relational aggression such as excluding from groups or spreading gossip; see Archer & Coyne, 2005), as well as those whose primary goal is to obtain rewards (instrumental aggression) or those enacted in response to a perceived threat (reactive aggression; see Card & Little, 2006a). These behaviors
also subsume behaviors defined as bullying (Olweus, 1978), a topic that has recently witnessed considerable popularization (e.g., Espelage & Swearer, 2004). Thus, aggressive behaviors consist of a fairly wide range of acts. However, individual differences in these behaviors tend to be highly correlated (for a meta-analytic review of intercorrelations between overt and relational forms, see Card et al., 2007; for a meta-analytic review of intercorrelations between instrumental and reactive forms, see Card & Little, 2006a), as are individual differences in tendencies to be victimized by these various forms (e.g., Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996; Prinstein et al., 2001). Given the high overlap among these different aspects of aggression and victimization, we will generally consider peer victimization undifferentiated by form or function in this chapter.

A second aspect of our definition of peer victimization that merits mention is that it is directed toward the child by peers. Typically, this means youths of similar age to the victim (often in same grade) and, as typically measured in a closed setting (e.g., schools), usually implies others who are in a similar or overlapping ecological context as the child. The implication of this latter observation for the present review is that many of the same ecological factors that have been found to promote aggressive behavior will in turn also promote youths being victimized by their peers. Although important areas for research and prevention in their own right, we will not consider in this chapter victimization that children receive from parents or other adults, siblings, or from unspecified others in the community (e.g., neighborhood violence); several other overviews of these broader aspects of victimization are available (e.g., Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Finkelhor et al., 2005).

Victims of peer aggression have only recently been a focus of attention relative to research on aggressors (see Ladd, 2005; Olweus, 2001; for an early, overlooked exception, see Burk, 1897). Empirical attention to peer victimization emerged with the work of Dan Olweus in Norway and Sweden during the 1970s (Olweus, 1978, 2001) but did not receive much attention in the United States until the work of David Perry and colleagues in the late 1980s (Perry et al., 1988). Since this time research on peer victimization has increased exponentially, and there now exist hundreds of studies on the topic (see Card, 2003). Importantly, research has also been conducted across a range of countries, and results converge to indicate that peer victimization is a common problem predictive of maladjustment across all countries studied (see Smith et al., 1999).

**Individual Characteristics and Peer Victimization**

Considerable attention has been devoted to understanding the individual characteristics that are associated with being victimized by peers. Because we have reviewed these individual characteristics associated with peer victimization elsewhere (Card, 2003; Card et al., 2007), we will only briefly review these findings. Specifically, we will briefly review evidence regarding relations of peer victimization with