

ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTION OF BULLYING: WHO IS THE VICTIM? WHO IS THE BULLY? WHAT CAN BE DONE TO STOP BULLYING?

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this study was to describe adolescents' perceptions and experiences of bullying: their thoughts about why children and adolescents are bullied, their ideas about why some bully others, and what they believe is important in order to stop bullying. The adolescents were asked about experiences throughout their school years. The study group was comprised of 119 high school students, with a mean age of 17.1 ($SD = 1.2$). Of the adolescents who reported, 39% indicated that they had been bullied at some time during their school years and 28% said that they had bullied others; 13% reported being both victims and bullies. The ages during which most students had been bullied at school were between 7 and 9 years. Bullies reported that most of the bullying took place when they were 10 to 12 years old. The most common reason as to why individuals are bullied was that they have a different appearance. The participants believe that those who bully suffer from low self-esteem. The most common response to the question "What do you think makes bullying stop?" was that the bully matures. The next most frequent response was that the victim stood up for himself/herself. Those who were not involved in bullying during their school years had a much stronger belief that victims can stand up for themselves than did the victims themselves.

One of the most distressing experiences for a child or adolescent is being bullied, especially when it occurs over a prolonged period of time (Whitney, Nabuzoka, & Smith, 1992). Bullying, however, is a relatively common problem among children and adolescents. Approximately 15% of Swedish schoolchildren are involved either as victims or bullies (Olweus 1993), and even a greater number are involved if assistants to the bully or defenders of the victim are included (Salmivalli, 1999).

Several researchers have found that boys are more often involved in bullying than girls, both as bullies and victims (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1994). However, although boys engage in more physical ag-

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gression and bullying, the sex difference is less pronounced for verbal bullying and is sometimes the reverse for indirect bullying (Smith, 2004).

School-based surveys of reports of being bullied reveal a fairly steady downward trend through ages 8 to 16 (Smith, Madsen, & Moody, 1999). One reason may be that older students of high school age often bully the younger students (Smith, 2004). Accordingly, Olweus (1994) found that more than 50% of bullied children in the lowest grades (8- and 9-year-olds) reported that older students bullied them.

Although bullying has been widely investigated, it appears that adults are aware of only a small amount of the bullying behavior found in schools. Several studies have further indicated that many students do not agree with the view of adults and researchers as the specific types of behavior that should be regarded as bullying (Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker, 1999). Thus, there is a need for studies of students' views about the mechanisms involved in bullying. Such information may provide for better ways to prevent bullying and how to intervene when it occurs.

In a previous study involving 960 10-year-olds their thoughts about who gets bullied were discussed (Erling & Hwang, 2004). The most common characteristic noted was that children who are bullied have a different appearance. Others have also found the same pattern. When Boulton and Underwood (1992) interviewed 75 children about why they thought that other children get bullied, they found that the most common response was that victims were small, weak, and soft. In a study by Björkqvist, Ekman, and Lagerspetz (1982) bullied victims of both sexes considered themselves to be less attractive than others. In another Finnish study the bullied children had lower teacher ratings for physical strength and were also more often regarded as fat (Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Berts, & King, 1982). Perry, Hodges, and Egan (2001) state accordingly that it may be premature to rule out a role of physical deviations in chronic victimization. In the present study our aim is to learn more about adolescents' views of who gets bullied.

There is agreement that bullying children and adolescents share many of the characteristics of generally more aggressive children and adolescents, including hot temperament, a less fortunate family background, and a view of relationships that values aggression and bullying as a means of achieving power and influence in a tough peer environment (Olweus, 1999). However, an area of dispute is whether bullies have low self-esteem. Some writers note evidence that they do (O'Moore, 2000), others indicate that they do not (Olweus, 1997), and still others that there is no difference between bullies, victims, and

those who are both bullies and victims (bully-victims) (Seals & Young, 2003). Others have found bully-victims to be those with the lowest self-esteem (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). Boulton and Underwood (1992) asked the children in their interview study: "What makes bullies pick on other children?" They found that the most common response by bullies was that the victim provoked them. Most victims indicated that it was because they were smaller or weaker than the bully or did not fight back. Thus, a second aim of the present study was to describe how adolescents perceive bullies.

A third aim was to describe what adolescents believe to be important in order to stop bullying. Several anti-bullying interventions have been developed and all schools in Sweden are required by law to have an anti-bullying plan. What do the adolescents believe has in fact been effective? To our knowledge, no previous study has directly asked adolescents this question. Special areas of focus are: Who gets bullied? Who bullies others? What is important in order to stop bullying? A further aim was to determine whether there are differences in the perceptions of victims, bullies, bully-victims, and uninvolved adolescents.

METHOD

Participants

The study group was comprised of 119 adolescents, 48 boys and 71 girls from six classes at two high schools in Göteborg, the second largest city in Sweden. Participants were 15 to 20 years old ($M = 17.1$, $S = 1.2$).

Psychological assessment. Since we were interested in the participants' experience of bullying during all their years at school, we asked questions about each specific age period according to the Swedish school system, which is divided into four periods: 7 to 9 years, 10 to 12 years, 13 to 15 years, and 16 to 18 years. We asked if they had been a victim of bullying or had bullied others in each age period. A definition of bullying was given at the beginning of the questionnaire (Olweus 1999)

Three open-ended questions were posed: "According to you, why do you think individuals are bullied?" "According to you, why do some children and adolescents bully others?" and "What do you think makes bullying stop?"

Procedure

In six classes from two high schools, students were asked whether they wished to participate before they filled out the questionnaire; 95% agreed to participate in the study.

RESULTS

Thirty-nine percent of the students reported that they had been bullied at some time during their school years (see Table 1), 20% stated that they had bullied others, and of these 13% reported being both bullies and victims (bully-victims). There were no significant differences in the proportion of boys and girls who were victims or bullies.

The age period during which most students had been bullied was between 7 and 9 years (see Table 2). Few students reported being bullied during high school (16 to 18 years). Eight of the bullied students reported that they had been bullied during more than one school period. Three of these reported being bullied during both the period of 7 to 9 years and the period of 10 to 12 years. Two had been bullied during 10 to 12 and 13 to 15 years of age, and three during periods 7 to 9, 10 to 12, and 13 to 15.

Table 1

Percentage of adolescents that reported being victims of bullying, bullies or both bullies and victims (bully-victim) during their school years.

| | Total (N=119) | Boys (N=71) | Girls (N=48) |
|--------------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Victim of bullying | 39 | 46 | 34 |
| Bully | 28 | 29 | 27 |
| Bully-victim | 13 | 15 | 11 |

Table 2

Time period in school during which bullied students were bullied.

| | Total (N=46) | Boys (N=22) | Girls (N=24) |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| 7-9 years | n=23 | n=11 | n=12 |
| 10-12 years | n=18 | n=10 | n=8 |
| 13-15 years | n=12 | n=3 | n=9 |
| 16-18 years | n=3 | n=1 | n=2 |

The bullies reported that most of the bullying took place when they were 10 to 12 years old (see Table 3). Almost half of the bullies reported that they bullied others during more than one time period: six in the 7 to 9 and 10 to 12 periods, four in both the 10 to 12 and 13 to 15 periods, three during 7 to 9, 10 to 12, and 13 to 15 periods, and one during all periods.

Of the 15 students who were bully-victims, 10 had been bullied during an earlier time period than the time they bullied others, 4 were bullies and victims during the same period, and only one bullied others before being a victim of bullying.

Who gets bullied? The adolescents' answers to the question "Why do you think children and adolescents are bullied?" were coded into five categories. Each student could include several statements in his or her definition. The categories were: (1) Victim's appearance, example: thin, fat, ugly; (2) victim's behavior, example: behaves strangely, talks with different dialect, shy, insecure; (3) Characteristics of bullies, example: bullies think they are cool, bullies want to feel superior, bullies want to show that they have power; (4) Social background, example: different culture, religion, economic situation. (5) Other, example: bad luck, the victim has no friends, the victim bullies others.

Table 3

Time period in school during which bullying students bullied others.

| | Total (N=33) | Boys (N=14) | Girls (N=19) |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| 7-9 years | n=11 | n=4 | n=7 |
| 10-12 years | n=22 | n=8 | n=14 |
| 13-15 years | n=16 | n=10 | n=6 |
| 16-18 years | n=3 | n=2 | n=1 |

As shown in Table 4, the most common response of the adolescents as to why individuals are bullied was that they have a different appearance; this was irrespective of whether the individuals were victims of bullying, bullied others, were bully-victims or were uninvolved in bullying. The next most frequent response by the total group was related to the bullied individuals' behavior. The third most frequent response by the total group was characteristics of bullies; 12% of the victims' answers were in this category but none of the bullies gave this answer to the question.

Why do some children and adolescents bully others? The adolescents' answers to the question "Why do some children and adolescents bully others?" were coded into nine categories. Each student could include several statements in his or her definition. The categories were: (1) The bully has problems, example: the bully has psychological problems, the bully has family problems; (2) The bully has low self-esteem, example: the bully is mean to others in order to feel better; (3) The bully feels cool, example: the bully thinks he or she is better than others, the bully wants to impress others; (4) The bully is jealous of the victim, example: the bully envies the victim in some way; (5) Lack of respect, example: the bully lacks respect for other people; (6) The bully is annoyed with the victim, example: the bully is annoyed with the victim's

Table 4.

Percentage of adolescents who used the different categories in their answers to the question: "Why do you think children are bullied?". Each adolescent could include several statements in his or her definition.

| <u>Category</u> | <u>%</u> |
|----------------------------|----------|
| Victims appearance | 40% |
| Victims behaviour | 36% |
| Characteristics of bullies | 7% |
| Social background | 8% |
| Other | 5% |

appearance or behavior; (7) The bully is also a victim, example: the bully is a victim of bullying and wants to give back; (8) Peer pressure, example: if someone dislikes a person, perhaps he or she can make others dislike that person as well; (9) Other, example: the bully is afraid that he/she would be bullied, there is no reason.

As shown in Table 5, a recurrent answer as to why some adolescents bully others was that the bully suffers from low self-esteem. The next most frequent response was related to the bully feeling cool. The category "The bully has problems" was coded for 15% of the statements in the total group. However, as many as 23% of the victims and only 4% of the bullies gave answers that were coded into this category: $\chi^2(1) = 4.32, p < .05$.

What makes bullying stop? The adolescents' answers to the question "What do you think makes bullying stop?" were coded into nine catego-

Table 5.

Percentage of adolescents who used the different categories in their answers to the question: "Why do some children and adolescents bully others?". Each adolescent could include several statements in his or her definition.

| <u>Category</u> | <u>%</u> |
|--------------------------------------|----------|
| The bully has low self-esteem | 28% |
| The bully feels cool | 26% |
| The bully has problems | 15% |
| Peer pressure | 9% |
| The bully is annoyed with the victim | 5% |
| The bully is jealous of the victim | 4% |
| Lack of respect | 4% |
| The bully is also a victim | 4% |
| Other | 5% |

ries. Each student could include several statements in his or her definition. The categories were: (1) The victim changes class or school, example: the victim moves; (2) The victim stands up for himself/herself, example: the victim becomes psychologically stronger, is fed up and dares to stand up for himself/herself; (3) The victim stops being differ-

ent from others, example: the victim gets the right clothes, the victim loses weight; (4) The bully matures, example: the bully gets older; (5) The bully becomes tired of bullying, example: the bully finds other victims; (6) The bully feels a sense of guilt, example: the bully realizes that it is wrong to bully others and feels badly; (7) Adults intervene, example: the school, teachers or others intervene; (8) The victim gets revenge; (9) Other, example: the victim does not care anymore, the victim makes new friends.

As shown in Table 6, 43% of the statements suggest that what is important in order to stop bullying has to do with the victim; 36% noted that it has to do with the bully, and 14% that it has to do with adults intervening. The single most common reply was that the bully matures. The next most frequent response was the victim standing up for himself/herself. Of those who were uninvolved in bullying during their school years, 24% of their statements were coded in this category, while only 4% of the victims' answers were coded in this category: $\chi^2(1) = 8.29, p < .01$. The category "The bully matures" was more common among those who were uninvolved in bullying (31%) than among victims (15%); $\chi^2(1) = 4.12, p < .05$. Among the victims, the category "Adults intervene" was most common (21%); those who were uninvolved used this category less frequently (9%); $\chi^2(1) = 3.85, p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

Participants were asked about their experience of bullying over their entire time in school. As expected, most victims had been bullied at younger ages, 7 to 9 years, and the bullies bullied others most often at a later period, 10 to 12 years. The age-related decline in the risk for becoming a victim of bullying can, according to Smith and Madsen (1999), be explained primarily by younger children being among a greater number of children who are older than they are and who are in a position to bully them, and that younger children have not yet acquired the social and assertiveness skills to deal effectively with bullying.

Interestingly, almost half of the bullies reported that they bullied others during more than one time period. The bully-victims had been bullied for the most part during an earlier time period than they bullied others. Some were bullies and victims during the same period. Only one individual bullied others before being a victim of bullying.

In this study approximately the same proportion of boys and girls were victims of bullying and were bullies. Other studies have found that more boys than girls are involved in bullying, both as victims and

Table 6.

Percentage of adolescents who used the different categories in their answers to the question: "What do you think makes bullying stop?". Each adolescent could include several statements in his or her definition.

| <u>Category</u> | <u>%</u> |
|--|----------|
| The bully matures | 24% |
| The victim stands up for himself/herself | 15% |
| Adults intervene | 14% |
| The victim changes class or school | 12% |
| The victim stops being different | 12% |
| The bully gets a sense of guilt | 7% |
| The bully becomes tired of bullying | 5% |
| The victim gets revenge | 4% |
| Other | 7% |

bullies (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1994). One reason for the discrepancy could be that bullying patterns among boys and girls vary. Bullying by physical means is, however, less common among girls; girls typically use more subtle and indirect ways of harassment such as slandering, spreading rumors, intentionally excluding someone from

the group, and manipulating friendship relations (Olweus, 1997). It may be that the adolescents in the present study were also aware of the more indirect ways of bullying since bullying has been the focus for special concern in Swedish schools. Hence, it may be that more girls report being involved.

The most common response by the adolescents as to why individuals are bullied was that they have a different appearance. This is the same pattern found in the previous study of 10-year-old children (Erlilng & Hwang, 2004). It seems that both adolescents and 10-year-olds believe that this is an important characteristic in this context. Sweeting and West (2001) studied whether physical appearance is actually related to bullying and found that it was, with bullied children being rated less attractive. Weight and BMI were also related to teasing/bullying frequency, wherein the heaviest children (but not the thinnest) were twice as likely to be victimized. In yet another study, Voss and Mulligan (2000) proposed that short pupils might be at greater risk of being bullied by peers. Ninety-two short normal adolescents who had been below the third centile for height at school entry were compared with 117 controls matched for sex and age. Results showed that significantly more short students reported being currently bullied, and short boys were twice as likely to be victims. Thus, the possibility that bullied children differ physically from their peers should not be dismissed (Rigby, 2002). Both 10-year-old children and adolescents believe this to be an important risk factor for bullying.

The most common response the adolescents gave as to why some adolescents bully others was that bullies suffer from low self-esteem. This response is interesting since the question of whether or not bullies actually have low self-esteem has yielded contradictory results in earlier research (O'Moore, 2000; Olweus, 1997; Seals & Young, 2003; O'Moore & Kirkeham, 2001).

The most common response adolescents gave to the question "What do you think makes bullying stop?" was that the bully matures. The next most frequent response in the total group had to do with the victim standing up for himself/herself. Adolescents who were uninformed in bullying during their school years had a much stronger belief that victims can stand up for themselves, a category that very few of the victims used. In line with this, participants in a study by Oliver, Hoover, and Hazler (1994) tended to believe that bullied students were at least partly to blame for their own victimization.

A larger proportion of victims than bullies used the category "Victim stops being different." Several victims reported that the bullying stopped when they no longer deviated so greatly from their peers, for

example by losing weight or when a case of acne cleared up. The same pattern was found in a follow-up study of boys who had been victimized by their peers in school; the former victims had "normalized" in many ways as young adults by the age of 23 (Olweus, 1999). This was seen as a consequence of the fact that the boys, after having left school, had considerably greater freedom to choose their own social environments.

Unfortunately, only 14% of the answers were related to adults having intervened. This may indicate that adolescents have little faith in adults' ability to stop bullying. Whitney and Smith (1993) also found that when the participants in their study asked whether teachers would intervene if they detected bullying, only half reported that they would do so. In our study, however, this was the most frequently used category for victims (21%).

In sum, Swedish adolescents tend to believe that those who are bullied have a different appearance and that those who bully others suffer from low self-esteem. They believe that in order to stop bullying the bully needs to mature. Unfortunately, few mention intervention by adults as a way to stop bullying.

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