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Bullying: An Age-old Problem That Needs New Solutions



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Bullying has been around for as long as anyone can remember. Indeed, bullying is a common theme in stories about childhood and adolescence, from 19th century authors like Charles Dickens in his classic novels, *Oliver Twist* (1) and *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (2), to Eleanor Estes 1944 book *The Hundred Dresses* (3), and more recently Nick Hornby's 2002 novel, *About a Boy* (4). It is only in recent years, however, that bullying has begun to receive serious research attention within the scientific community, with the first systematic studies on bullying emerging in the 1970s by Norwegian researcher, Dan Olweus (e.g., (5)). Today, bullying is recognized as a worldwide issue for children and youth around the globe (e.g., see (6, 7)), and research on the topic increasing exponentially.

Media attention to the tragic deaths of youth who were victims of bullying has raised public awareness in countries around the world (e.g. (8)), and our rapidly growing capacity for global communication has given rise to an unprecedented international exchange of information, as well as cross-national studies of the issue (e.g. (9)). Given such worldwide collaboration and attention, our understanding of the complexity and significance of the problem of [school bullying](#) has increased dramatically over the past two decades. Although questions still outnumber answers, we are beginning to unravel the many facets of bullying and victimization that our children are facing. With this knowledge, we are also beginning to find effective ways to reduce bullying. However, we still have much work to do to translate research knowledge into effective practice.

In this special edition of Education.com, we have invited established research scholars from around the world to provide summaries of their research on this topic in hopes of providing readers with insight into our current understanding of this problem and what can be done about it. As reflected in the articles included in this special issue, research has shown that bullying is a common but very complicated problem that affects all of our children, if not directly as bullies and/or victims, indirectly as witnesses to interpersonal violence. Given the complexity of the issue, the solutions are not simple ones, at least not as simple as we'd hoped.

What is Bullying?

Much of the research on bullying has followed a three-part definition of bullying initially developed by Dan Olweus (10, 11):

“A person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons.”

There are three critical components in this definition.

- First, bullying is an intentional act. The child who bullies wants to harm the victim; it is no accident.
- Second, bullying is characterized by repeated occurrences. Bullying is not generally considered a random act nor a single incident. Rather, a child is repeatedly picked on by another child or is the target of harassment from a whole group of children. It is the repeated nature of bullying that causes anxiety and apprehension in victims, such that the anticipation of bullying becomes as problematic as the bullying itself.
- Third, and particularly important, bullying is characterized by a power differential. A fight between two kids of equal power is not bullying; bullying is an unfair fight where the child who bullies has some advantage or power over the child who is victimized.

Bullying is about power – the abuse of power (12). Bullying is not the same as “playing around”. It is not the one-on-one fisticuffs that is often justified by reactions such as “boys will be boys”. It is not a fair fight and cannot be treated as such.

These power differences distinguish bullying from other forms of aggression and create unique challenges for parents, educators, and researchers who want to help reduce bullying behaviors. These power differences also make telling kids to “stand up to bullies” ill advised, as such efforts are far more likely to fail than succeed. The long term outcomes associated with such abuse of power are particularly disconcerting (see (13)). For example, researchers in Canada (14) have shown that children who bully may be learning to use power and aggression as an effective way to deal with others and these tactics can be carried on in later relationships, leading to dating aggression, and possibly workplace harassment and family abuse.

In understanding bullying, it is also important to recognize that power can take many different forms. We typically think of physical power – the big kid picking on the little kid, the older student harassing the younger student. Power can also come in numbers, as in when a group of students pick on another child. In fact, the earliest studies of bullying focused on “mobbing”, a form of collective aggression (15). Less readily recognized, however, are social forms of power. One individual can have an advantage over another in terms of greater academic or athletic prowess, or greater social status or popularity within the larger peer group. The power differential that characterizes bullying makes it very tricky for students to defend themselves against some perpetrators, especially those who wield social power. What if the bullies in the school are popular students and everyone wants to be in their group? What if a student who bullies other kids in a small town is the son of the town sheriff? What if a student who is sending nasty text messages is the daughter of the school board president? Standing up to bullies can be very risky for children and youth.

Beware of traditional stereotypes of bullies as social outcasts who resort to violence because they have no other options. Research from Europe shows that many bullies actually have high levels of social skills and social intelligence (e.g., 16, 17, 18, 19).

Students certainly recognize this. In fact, in one high school, we found (20) that over 60% of the students surveyed agreed that “bullies are popular,” and that “some of the coolest kids in school are bullies.” As adults, it is not always clear that we recognize the behavior of high status, popular students as bullying, especially given that bullying is sometimes difficult to distinguish from playful aggression or teasing. In some cases, we may be giving some students the “benefit of the doubt” and in doing so unintentionally condone their behavior. Moreover, it may be difficult to convince students that bullying is unacceptable when it is a strategy used effectively by high status individuals to maintain power within the peer group (see (12)).

The strategies that students use to bully others can also vary. Physical bullying includes direct physical aggression or attacks on another individual (hitting, kicking, beating up, pushing, spitting, etc.). It can also take the form of property damage or theft. In western countries at least, physical bullying is perhaps the traditional stereotype of bullying, but it is certainly not the only form bullying takes. Bullying can also be

verbal in nature. Verbal bullying includes teasing, mocking, name calling, and other forms of verbal humiliation and intimidation, as well as threats, coercion and extortion. It can also include racist, sexist and/or homophobic taunts. Social or relational bullying involves the use of relationships to harass others through gossip, public humiliation and/or embarrassment, rumor-spreading, alienation and exclusion from the group, and/or setting another up to take the blame for something. More recently, researchers have distinguished cyber or [electronic bullying](#) in which individuals use the Internet, email or text messaging to threaten, hurt, single out, embarrass, spread rumors or reveal secrets about others. Interestingly, although adults tend to be especially concerned about physical and electronic bullying, student reports indicate that it is social and relational bullying that are experienced far more often.

How Common is Bullying?

When young people, aged 11, 13 and 15 were asked to report on their experiences with bullying and victimization within the preceding two months, prevalence rates ranged from 1% to 50% across 25 countries in Europe and North America (9). Overall, about 35% of students reported bullying others at least once over the previous two months while about 34% of respondents reported being victimized at least once (21). For 11%, peer victimization occurred 2 or 3 times or more in the preceding two months. The figures vary considerably across countries, ranging from 9 to 73% for bullying others and from 2 to 36% for victimization.

How Stable is Bullying?

Some researchers have found that bullying and victimization are fairly stable characteristics in that the same children tend to bully or be bullied over several years in school (22, 23, 24, 25). However, other research indicates that the majority of children admit to being bullies and victims at least occasionally, and most do not continue in these roles. For example, in a 3-year study of middle school students (26), only 13% of the children remained in their roles of bully, victim or bully-victim across the middle school years; 87% changed their roles during that period. Similarly, over an 8-year period, from elementary to secondary school, other researchers (27) have found that only 16.5% of the children who were bullies at age 8 were still bullies at age 16, and only 9% of children who were victimized continued to be victims. Thus, change is certainly possible, and it is the responsibility of adults to help children learn to use power in appropriate ways. Of particular concern, however, are those youth whose experiences as a bully or victim persist, given the many long-term consequences associated with stable patterns of bullying and victimization (see (13)).

How Complicated Could It Be?

As several articles in this special edition indicate, researchers and educators have come to understand that bullying is not just a problem that is inherent in a troubled child, nor is it just a problem between two people (bully and victim), something that has been called “the dyadic bias”(28). Rather, bullying reflects a problem in interpersonal relationships that also must be considered as a group phenomenon. Indeed, students can be involved in bullying in many different ways: as bullies, as victims and as witnesses. When elementary students were videotaped at school, it was found that peers were present as witnesses to bullying 85% of the time (29), though they seldom intervened on behalf of the victim. Children tend to adopt very different roles in bullying (11, 30). In addition to bully and victim, some children serve as assistants or reinforcers for the bully, others remain outsiders who just walk away or passively watch, and a small but important group of students will act to defend the child being victimized. As demonstrated in the articles included here, it is the complex nature of bullying that has captured the attention of researchers. It is also the complexity of bullying that makes efforts to reduce and eliminate bullying particularly challenging.

Educators need to develop prevention and intervention strategies that address the needs of all children involved (bullies, victims and witnesses) and to coordinate efforts across elementary, middle, and high schools and the community. We know that zero tolerance policies are not effective in stopping aggression in schools

(31), and expulsion also appears to be ineffective (32). Although there are many examples of schools that have been successful in drastically reducing levels of school bullying, many such efforts fail (see (33, 34) for reviews). The task ahead is to take what we now know about the complexity of bullying and translate it into effective practice, in homes, schools and communities. This special issue of *education.com* represents an exciting effort to link established researchers in the area of bullying and peer victimization with educators who are in the trenches working directly with students in schools and with parents who are trying to help their children grow up to be competent and caring adults. We hope that this special issue is useful to teachers, administrators, parents, and students who are dealing directly with bullying so that together we can make all children safe from peer harassment and victimization.

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