

Bullying in Childhood

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Introduction

Bullying among children has long been acknowledged as commonplace, especially in school settings, as is evident from accounts of bullying among English school boys by Thomas Hughes (1857) in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. In many respects the situation at school for many children has not changed over the last 150 years (see Rigby, 1997a). What has changed, however, is the degree of attention being paid to the issue of school bullying, both in the press and in educational and research journals.

The impetus for the upsurge in interest in bullying came through the work of the Swedish psychologist, Dan Olweus, beginning in the 1970s. His work, originally focusing on the nature and prevalence of bullying between schoolboys in Scandinavia, stimulated similar research elsewhere, in the 1980s in Britain and other parts of Europe, then more widely in Australia and North America. It is now evident from the recently published book on national perspectives on bullying (Smith et al., 1999), that bullying among children, both boys and girls, is an issue of worldwide interest.

Over the last 10 years data has been steadily accumulating about bullying across age groups from early childhood to late adolescence. In this review I examine the prevalence nature and effects of bullying as experienced by children under 12 years of age, principally in school settings.

The problem of definition

As is common in new areas of study, there has been, and continues to be, a diversity of views as to how bullying can most usefully be defined. An early formulation focused only on the desire or intention of the bully to hurt another person; for example, one popular

definition was “the wilful, conscious desire to hurt another and put him/her under stress” (Tattum & Tattum, 1992). This definition, however, proved unsatisfactory to more behaviorally inclined researchers such as Olweus (1993) who saw bullying as essentially “negative” behavior, not merely a desire to hurt which may or may not be expressed. It also became clear that “bullying” needed to be distinguished from aggression in general. Hence, more recently, writers in this area have generally emphasized that bullying can only occur when there is imbalance of power between aggressor and victim (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1996; Smith & Sharp 1994). There is still some dispute as to whether one should limit the term “bullying” to a sequence of negative actions, that is, repeated aggression, as Olweus has suggested, or to accept (as in common usage) that the term can sometimes be used to describe a one-off experience, as Randall (1996) has argued.

Smith and Sharp (1994) have provided what is arguably the most comprehensive and parsimonious definition of bullying as “the systematic abuse of power.” By including the term “abuse” in the definition, one is forced to consider what in a given situation is the proper or appropriate use of power. This would appear to depend upon prevailing norms and cultural mores and these may differ from place to place and from time to time. A school prefect in a nineteenth-century English boarding school could chastise his fag for not cleaning his boots without being accused of bullying him. Not so today. A degree of cultural relativity must be accepted in examinations of what constitutes bullying.

Methods of Investigation

Self-report questionnaire

This is by far the most commonly used method for investigating the prevalence of bullying and other aspects of the phenomenon. Probably the most frequently used instrument of this kind is that developed by Olweus and subsequently modified for an English language version (Smith & Sharp, 1994). Another widely used self-report questionnaire is the Peer Relations Questionnaire or PRQ (Rigby & Slee, 1993a), which has been used with over 40,000 schoolchildren in Australasia and in other English-speaking countries.

These and similar questionnaires typically provide a definition of bullying with illustrations in terms easily understood by children. Versions have been developed which are mainly pictorial and suitable (with teacher assistance) for children in the early years of primary school (Smith & Levan, 1995: given in Sharp, 1999). It is typically emphasized that a power imbalance is an essential part of the definition; for example, by asserting that “it is not bullying when students of the same strength or power have the occasional fight or quarrel.” In order to maximize reliability, such questionnaires are answered anonymously.

The question is sometimes raised as to whether student respondents are apt to confuse bullying (in which there is an imbalance of power) with aggression generally. This may sometimes occur, despite the emphasis provided, but it is notable that when students are asked to make drawings to illustrate bullying they typically depict a smaller figure being attacked by a larger person or group of persons (see Rigby, 1996).

A further problem is that bullying is frequently construed by children (and others, too!)

as physical in nature. It is therefore necessary to provide examples of other, psychological forms of bullying, such as that conveyed through verbal abuse and exclusion. Self-report questionnaires typically enable respondents to indicate which of the various means of bullying have been applied to them over a stipulated time period and how often.

The peer nomination method

This approach involves respondents identifying students in their class who are involved in bully/victim interactions. It has been used in a variety of studies (e.g., Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Rigby & Slee, 1999). It has the important advantage of drawing upon the judgments of a number of students who have been able to observe their peers over a period of time. Where a high consensus emerges that a student is acting as a “bully” or a “victim” (in ways that are specified) it can be taken that the information is reliable. A problem with this approach is that it is seen by some educational and research bodies as unethical, on the grounds that respondents may be placed in an invidious position in reporting negatively upon their peers. Nevertheless, the approach is widely used, and may be justified as long as respondents are given the option of not making judgments of their peers’ behavior if they dislike doing so. A further related issue concerns the use to which such data might be put. It is wise to make it clear that the results would be available in confidence to the researchers only and not accessible by school authorities.

Interviews

Interviewing children about bullying is sometimes undertaken, for example, in studies by Rigby and Slee (1990) and Williams, Chambers, Logan, and Robinson (1996). This option has some advantages. One can ensure, through further clarification, that the respondent understands the question being asked (as opposed to misreading or misinterpreting a written question); one can assess the extent to which the respondent is genuinely and sincerely engaged in the exercise; and, most important of all, one can obtain information from children who could not read a written questionnaire. The difficulty remains, however, that respondents may be loath to provide information about themselves when it reflects on them being aggressive (and culpable), or victimized by others (and thereby reveals weaknesses they would like to hide).

Teacher reports

A convenient way of obtaining data in children’s bullying behavior is to ask class teachers to rate the behavior of each child (see Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997). For children in primary schools in which teachers see a great deal of children in their class this is a viable option. Where there are several teachers who have observed a child’s behavior, inter-rater reliability can be usefully assessed. In secondary schools in which students are normally taught by a wide range of instructors, data from teacher assessments of behavior are far less

reliable. Further, we know that most bullying takes place not in the classroom where the teacher can often see it, but rather at recess or on the way to and from school when the teacher is not present. This approach should therefore be confined to obtaining information about younger children under relatively close supervision from teachers and in circumstances when other approaches, for example, the anonymous questionnaire, are not practicable.

Phone-ins

A further source of data on bullying in childhood comes from records of children's calls to public services that provide opportunities for children to share their problems with a counselor and receive brief counseling or advice. Kids Help Line in Australia provides one such service (see <http://203.37.145.243/INFO7/contents.htm>). Although data collected in this way is extensive (some 6,000 children phoned in about bullying in 1999) this method inevitably elicits calls predominantly from older children who are more able to use the service.

Direct observational methods

This approach has a strong appeal because it circumvents the problem of obtaining socially desirable verbal responses to (possibly) misunderstood questions. It can also be carried out in a naturalistic setting, for instance in school playgrounds at recess times. It may nevertheless be difficult to observe the behavior of interest unobtrusively, especially at close quarters. To some extent, this difficulty may be overcome by making use of video and audio recordings, as was undertaken in observations of bullying behavior between Canadian primary school children (Craig & Pepler, 1995; Pepler & Craig, 1995). This involved setting up a video camera overlooking the playground. During filming each child in the study wore a small remote microphone and pocket-sized transmitter. The remote microphone picked up not only the "target's" speech but also that of those around him or her. The children were instructed to play as they normally did during lunch and recess.

This method has provided much data in a form that can be carefully and minutely coded and interpreted at a later stage. However, one must still reckon with the artificiality of children having to carry recording devices in the knowledge that what they say and do could be accessed by researchers. Also this research method may be considered by some ethical bodies as too intrusive. Its chief value appears to lie in enabling researchers to identify a range of bullying behaviors in a naturalistic setting, and more especially how children respond (or more often fail to respond) to bullying episodes that are taking place around them.

Bullying in Early Childhood

Bullying behavior can often be observed between very young children, for example between siblings in a family context. This is distinct from “conflict” which may arise over a struggle for possession of a prized toy and cease when the issue of ownership has been resolved. When an older and more powerful child persistently seeks to hurt a weaker sibling, this can legitimately be called bullying. Yet systematic studies of such behavior in the family context are notably lacking and for an examination of bullying in early childhood we must turn to studies conducted in preschool and kindergarten settings. Even here, compared with studies undertaken in primary and secondary schools, there have been relatively few systematic inquiries. To some extent this may be due to the difficulties of obtaining reliable data from the self-reports of the young children, especially through the use of questionnaires, which constitute the most widely used method of generating data on bullying and are more appropriately answered by older, more literate children. For younger children alternative and time-consuming methods are needed, such as one-to-one interviews with children and with teachers, and the use of direct observational methods.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research may be illustrated by a study based mainly upon direct observations of children’s interpersonal behavior undertaken at four early childhood centers in Canberra, Australia in 1994 (Main, 1999). Some 98 hours of nonparticipant observation focused on the behavior of infants (6 weeks to 18 months), toddlers (18 months to 3 years) and preschoolers (3 years to 5 years). In addition 20 hours of semistructured interviews were conducted with 17 staff members of the selected child care organizations. Main reported that in all the subgroups (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers) a relatively few children were responsible for initiating aggressive actions which included pushing, biting, and hitting. Altogether 1,441 violent incidents were observed. In many cases a clear imbalance of power was apparent. For example:

Tom is running around poking many children. He has a texta lid on his finger, and smiles as he pokes the children hard with it. He comes over to the observer and pokes her with his finger and says, “Do you want to see my powerful finger?” (The Observer responds that she is not interested because he had poked her with it.) He runs off and continues to poke children with it. A little later, when the children have moved inside, he grabs Rob and pushes his face hard into a pillow and holds him down. Rob is very distressed. A member of staff suggests that Tom does some hammering. Tom replies, “No! I don’t have to!”

Main suggests that in general the children’s aggressive behavior could not be explained as deriving from an “inability to share,” and that the support that many early childhood educators give to the “principles of free play” with minimal intervention from teachers actually encourages bullying behavior in young children (see also Davies, 1997).

In many cases the motivation for acts of bullying appeared to be “for fun.”

A preschool boy throws a sandpit spade at a toddler girl as she comes out of the toddler's room. He misses and laughs with the other boys sitting with him. Then he grabs a sandpit spade from her and hits her hard on the body with it.

Not uncommonly, the observed behavior included a variety of bullying acts: aggressive gestures, physical attack, and verbal abuse.

Jim (a preschool boy) goes over to the corner where Sal is playing with a group of girls on a pile of pillows. He growls at them, putting his face very close to theirs and grimacing. They scream and grab the pillows around them. Jim tells them to share the pillows. He then lies down on the pillows and the girls say "We had them first." Jim does not respond and the girls move away, going back only to retrieve their shoes. Jim then moves from the pillows and gets a piece of string. He grabs Sybi and puts the string around her neck, pulling it around her neck. Sybi cries. A member of staff comes over and tells him to play with Ian. He turns to Sybi and says "Cry baby." Jim then goes over to Melanie and, smiling, pulls her hair.

Although this research does not provide detailed statistical data on the incidence of bullying among preschool children, it clearly demonstrates its nature and prevalence.

Quantitative research

Much quantitative research has focused upon students who are frequently the targets of aggression from peers, but are not necessarily being bullied in the sense of being victimized by those more powerful than themselves. They may simply be more often involved in fights or quarrels. Hence results from studies that do not make a distinction between bullying (where there is an imbalance of power) and peer aggression (where no such imbalance may be present) arguably need to be differentiated.

A study of peer victimization in early childhood that fits into the broader category of peer aggression is that of Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996). They interviewed 200 students attending kindergarten (105 males and 95 females) at the beginning of their school year. The mean age of these children was 5.5 years. They were asked to say whether any of the children in their class had done any of the following things to them, and, if so, how often another student had: (i) picked on them; (ii) hit them; (iii) said mean things to them; (iv) said bad things about them to other kids at school. Responses were scored as 1 "never", 2 "sometimes", and 3 "a lot". The internal consistency of this measure ($\alpha = .74$), suggests that children at this age who were repeatedly targeted tended to be treated negatively in a number of different ways. In short, there appears to be support for the generality of their concept of peer victimization.

Taking the view that a victimized child is one who is *repeatedly* treated badly, the criterion for identifying "victims" was scoring above the midpoint on the scale. Some 20.5% were identified in this way. The authors claim a significant level of agreement between children identified as victims in this way and the judgments of teachers based upon direct observations. Further, they claim that this estimate of the extent of peer victimization in U.S. kindergartens is, in fact, not very different from that reported by Olweus (1993) for Norwegian second-grade students among whom some 17% reported being victims of school

bullying. Here, then, is a suggestion that the “victimized” children in the study by Kochenderfer and Ladd are in the same category as those reported as being bullied in the sense employed by Olweus.

Kochenderfer and Ladd also examined the question of whether at this age children identified as victims continued to be victims of peer aggression. They report that there were some 8% of respondents who were identified as victims on the basis of self-reports 6 months later. This suggests that a small minority of children had over this period continued to be “victims.” Almost twice as many initial victims no longer met the criterion of repeatedly victimized.

Somewhat similar research with young children has been conducted in a series of studies by Crick and others. Again these authors did not differentiate between “peer aggression” and “bullying.” However, they have examined an aspect of aggression of interest to research into bullying, one generally seen as prevalent more especially among senior students, namely, relational aggression. In a study by Crick, Casas, and Mosher (1997) with children ($N = 65$) between 3 to 5 years, it was reported that relational kinds of bullying were evident among boys and girls, but more commonly among girls, and could be differentiated from other forms of aggressive behavior. To identify different kinds of aggressive behavior teachers were asked to rate children in their class according to how often they acted in various aggressive ways with their peers. Ways assumed to be “relational” included: (i) tells others not to play with or be a peer’s friend; (ii) tries to get others to dislike a peer; and (iii) when mad at a peer, keeps that peer away from being in the peer group. Analysis confirmed that ratings on these and similar items were loaded on a different factor from that associated with verbal and physical overt forms of aggression. At the same time, scale scores based on “relational” items correlated highly ($r = >.7$) with scale scores for other nonrelational items, suggesting that children whose aggression is expressed in a relational manner tend to be aggressive in other ways. Similar findings were reported using data derived from peer ratings.

In a further study by Crick, Casas, and Ku (1999) a focus was on children in the same age range who were continually victimized by others. Again teacher ratings constituted the main method of acquiring relevant data. For example, teachers were asked to identify children who “get pushed and shoved” (overt victimization) and those who “get left out when someone is mad with him/her” (relational victimization). Again, using factor analyses, the researchers were able to show that being victimized relationally could be differentiated from overt forms. Crick et al. also provided results that suggest that being victimized at this age is relatively stable over a 1-month interval. For relational bullying the test–retest correlation was moderately high ($r = .63$); for physical victimization, lower but still significant ($r = .37$). This appears to conflict with the finding reported by Kochenderfer and Ladd who reported low levels of stability for peer victimization. These differences may be due to Kochenderfer and Ladd using children’s self-report data as opposed to teacher ratings, and assessing stability over a 6-month period rather than over 1 month.

In the study by Crick et al. (1999) it was also possible to examine the correlations between acting aggressively and being victimized by peers. Correlations between physical aggressiveness and being physically victimized were moderately strong: .65 for boys and .65 for girls. Corresponding correlations for relational aggression and victimization were .45 and .58. These results appear to be at variance with results obtained from research in

which bullying behavior (implying an imbalance of power) has been specifically studied. For example, Rigby and Slee (1993b) reported correlations for older students between reliable scales assessing bullying others and being victimized by others that were not significantly different from zero. It is possible that among very young students the more severely victimized children do tend to engage more in aggressive behavior toward others, as the correlations provided by Crick et al. suggest, and that with increasing maturity they become more submissive. However, a more likely explanation for the differences lies in the different ways in which being victimized or being an aggressor is conceptualized; that is, as occurring in situations in which one party cannot defend itself adequately due to a power imbalance (the bullying situation), or as occurring whenever there is peer aggression more generally. Until studies are conducted which clearly differentiate between bullying and peer aggression more generally this important question will not be resolved.

Bullying in Later Childhood

Estimates of the incidence and nature of bullying and related attitudes can be assessed more reliably by questionnaire among older students. Further, the bulk of research with older children has been based upon a conceptualization of bullying that identifies bullying as occurring only where there is an imbalance of power.

Peer victimization

There is general agreement that the incidence of reported victimization declines with age. This appears to be the case from the earliest years of school to the end of secondary schooling. The decline is evident in the period between 8 and 11 years, as illustrated in the data (see Table 28.1) for a large sample of Australian schoolchildren ($N = 3440$). These data were collected over a 4-year period using the PRQ (Rigby & Slee, 1993a). The criterion for "being bullied" was reporting being bullied at least once a week during the current year of schooling.

Evidence for the near ubiquity of this trend among children between the ages of 7 and 11 is included in a paper by Smith, Madsen, and Moody (1999). They cite figures from

Table 28.1 Percentages of Students Reporting being Bullied Weekly in Australian Schools (Ns range from 176 to 803)

	<i>Ages in years</i>			
	8	9	10	11
Boys	48.0	30.7	24.3	22.5
Girls	33.3	32.9	26.1	20.8

large-scale studies undertaken by Olweus (1993) in Norway and in Sweden; by Whitney and Smith (1993) in England; by Rigby (1996, 1997c) in Australia; and by O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith (1997) in Ireland. In each case for both boys and girls a steady decline is evident over these years. This is despite the fact that somewhat different criteria were used by the researchers to define "being bullied"; for instance, Olweus has used, on occasions, "now and then"; Rigby, "at least once a week." However, in one American study which obtained data using peer nominations, no evidence of a decline in peer victimization was found for children between the ages of 8 and 12 years (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988).

Below the age of 8 years the PRQ and similar questionnaires have limited value as a means of assessing the incidence of peer victimization. Smith, Madsen, and Moody (1999) have argued it is likely that bullying may be conceived in a somewhat different way according to the maturity of the respondent, and results for groups varying widely in age may not be strictly comparable. It is possible that 8 year olds see bullying in a somewhat different way from 11 year olds. Further research is needed to address this possibility.

The content of peer victimization

In assessing the incidence of peer victimization some studies have sought to examine specific kinds of aggressive acts to which victims in different age groups may be subjected. Typically, studies have differentiated between being a victim of physical, verbal, and relational aggression. Results using the PRQ in Australia include measures using such indices. Their relative frequency according to age and gender groups is given in Table 28.2. For each of the indices of victimization there is over the age range of 8 to 11 a trend towards a lower incidence of occurrence. The proportions of students reporting being victimized to not being victimized for each of the ways of being victimized and for each sex group differ significantly ($p < .05$ by chi square).

Table 28.2 Percentages of Students Reporting Peer Victimization of Different Kinds (Ns range from 172 to 765)

	<i>Ages in years</i>			
	8	9	10	11
Being called hurtful names				
Boys	65.1	58.5	53.8	51.8
Girls	58.2	61.9	53.2	53.0
Being left out of things				
Boys	54.3	45.1	37.7	33.9
Girls	58.2	52.2	50.5	45.3
Being hit or kicked				
Boys	66.7	54.1	43.0	34.0
Girls	43.4	39.9	29.5	22.9

Table 28.3 Percentages of Students Reporting Bullying Others More Than “Once or Twice” During the Year (Ns range from 176 to 803)

	<i>Ages in years</i>			
	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>11</i>
Boys				
As an individual	13.6	11.3	10.5	10.0
As a group member	12.5	12.2	9.3	9.7
Girls				
As an individual	3.0	5.8	6.3	6.5
As a group member	2.5	4.9	4.1	4.5

Perpetrators of Bullying

Among children between 8 and 11 years there is little evidence of a change in the tendency to bully others. The figures for Australian students completing the PRQ (given in Table 28.3) indicate that within groups of boys and also within groups of girls the proportions of self-reported bullies, both individually and in groups do not change from year to year. This finding is consistent with research reported elsewhere (e.g., Olweus, 1993).

The differences between the proportions of students in the different age groups are small and nonsignificant (for each of the comparisons by chi square, $p > .05$). From this it would appear that the tendency to engage in bullying others is relatively stable between the ages of 8 to 11 years, whether perpetrated by individuals or as members of a group; and as a boy or as a girl.

Reactions to Being Bullied

Little attention has been paid to how students react emotionally to being bullied. In a study with Australian students, again using the PRQ, respondents were asked to say how they generally reacted to being bullied by another student. Results are given in Table 28.4 for those students who admitted that they had been bullied at least once at school, that is, approximately 50% of students of each sex.

Among boys the proportions of kinds of reactions differed significantly according to age group (chi square 29.6, $p < .001$). The percentages of boys claiming that they were “not bothered” by it increased steadily from 33.1% at 8 years to 52.3% at 11 years. Somewhat similar results have been reported for English school children who with increasing age were less likely to cry when they were bullied and more likely to ignore the bullying (Smith & Shu, 2000). We may speculate as to whether the bullying experienced by boys at age 8 is more severe than that at age 11; or alternatively whether boys become more resilient (or

Table 28.4 Percentages of Students Reporting Having Reacted to Bullying in Different Ways (Ns range from 146 to 587)

	<i>Ages in years</i>			
	8	9	10	11
Boys				
Not bothered	33.1	40.9	44.1	52.3
Angry	34.7	39.3	36.3	29.8
Sad	32.0	19.8	19.6	17.8
Girls				
Not bothered	30.8	31.3	30.0	33.7
Angry	19.2	23.0	20.9	26.1
Sad	50.0	47.7	49.1	40.2

perhaps more prone to adopt a macho attitude) with increasing years. Among girls, age proved to be unrelated to reaction tendencies (chi square 8.6, $p > .05$).

Numerous studies have recently been carried out on the effects of bullying on the well-being and health of children. Most of these are correlational in design, and establish that primary school children who are frequently victimized are more likely to have low self-esteem (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Mynard & Joseph, 1997) and to suffer psychological distress such as depression (Slee, 1995) and not sleeping well, headaches, and bed-wetting (Williams, Chambers, Logan, & Robinson, 1996). In addition, several longitudinal studies have established that peer victimization commonly leads to a loss in self-esteem (Egan & Perry, 1998) and social maladjustment, as indicated by increased loneliness and absenteeism from school (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997).

Reported Reasons for Bullying

According to Boulton and Underwood (1992), the most common reason given by children is that victims provoke bullying, a view more frequently expressed by bullies. An Australian study canvassed seven possible reasons (derived from prior discussions with children in this age group) that students might give if they did bully a peer. Respondents could answer "yes" or "no" in relation to each proposed reason. Approximately 16% of respondents omitted to respond to one or more of these questions. Responses of children aged 8 to 11 years who did answer are given in Table 28.5.

The order of frequency of endorsing reasons was similar for boys and girls. (There is one exception – boys placed "for fun" higher than did girls; girls placed "because others were doing it" higher.) In endorsing the main two reasons, it appears that respondents were (as in the earlier study by Boulton & Underwood) looking for justification and perhaps choosing

Table 28.5 Percentages of Students Between the Ages of 8 and 11 Years Indicating That if They Bullied Someone it Would be for Specified Reasons (Ns range from 1535 to 1770)

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>
Because they annoyed me	68.2	60.7
To get even	64.0	46.0
For fun	16.0	10.0
Because others were doing it	14.0	13.3
Because they were wimps	11.3	7.0
To show how tough one is	11.3	7.0
To get things or money from them	6.1	4.2

the least socially undesirable options. At the same time, substantial numbers of respondents acknowledged they could bully others for fun, because others were doing so, because they saw some peers as deserving to be bullied because they were “wimps,” and in order to impress others with their toughness. Relatively few saw bullying as a means they might employ for extortionary purposes. Significant age trends ($p < .001$) for both boys and girls were evident for two of the reasons: with increasing age students were more inclined to justify their bullying along the lines that “they had annoyed me” and “to get even.”

Attitudes to Victims of Bullying

Attitudes to victims were examined by Rigby and Slee (1991), using a reliable 20-item scale ($\alpha = .78$) assessing provictim attitude. Sample items were: “It’s a good thing to help children who can’t defend themselves” and “I wouldn’t be friends with kids who let themselves be pushed around” (reverse scored). Scores for 314 boys and 353 girls between the ages of 8 and 15 indicated that most students were generally supportive of victims: for example, some 80.9% agreed with the statement: “I like it when someone stands up for kids who are bullied.” This result showing a clear majority support for victims was subsequently replicated in England with final year primary school children of around 11 years (Randall, 1995). In the Australian study for both boys and girls there was a significant decline in support for victims between 8 and 11 years. Consistent with this finding in Italy, Fonzi et al. (1999) have reported a trend toward less help being given by peers to victims up until middle school, which begins in Italy at age 11. These results are in some ways counter-intuitive. One might expect that with an increase in the capacity for empathy with increasing maturity (see Damon, 1983) support for victims would gradually increase rather than decrease.

Another index relating to children’s attitudes to bullying is that of a readiness to talk with other students about the issue. The Australian study included this question: “Would you be interested in talking about the problem of bullying at school with other students to see what can be done about stopping it?”. The results provide a contrast between the

Table 28.6 Percentages of Students Responding According to their Interest in Talking with Others about Stopping Bullying (Ns range from 174 to 770)

	<i>Ages in years</i>			
	8	9	10	11
Boys				
In favor	51.7	47.2	43.3	34.2
Unsure	32.2	31.9	36.2	40.9
Against	16.1	20.9	20.5	24.9
Girls				
In favor	50.3	51.4	51.8	49.5
Unsure	39.6	39.0	37.4	37.8
Against	10.2	9.6	10.8	12.7

readiness to talk about bullying among the younger students in primary school and the older ones at secondary school. For instance, among 8 year olds some 51.7% of boys and 50.3% of girls wanted to talk; among 15 year olds the corresponding figures were 21.6% and 33.3%. Results for the age range 8–11 years are given in Table 28.6.

The trend towards fewer students being in favor of, and more being against, talking about bullying in class is evident for boys (chi square was 30.3, $p < .001$). Among girls the proportions for the three responses to the question are not significantly different (chi square = 2.7, $p > .05$). It would seem that although at no stage are more than 25% of boys or girls against talking about it in class, there is an increasing reluctance among boys in particular to engage in such talking. This result parallels the finding that there is a lessening of support for victims over this period, again notably among boys, and may in fact reflect a growing lack of sympathy with the plight of victims, and possible apprehension about what talk about bullying may reveal about themselves.

Transition from Primary to Secondary School

Changes in the prevalence of peer victimization may be affected not only by increasing age, but also by changes in the nature of the schooling. For example, children in some countries and in some localities transfer around the age of 11 or 12 years from a primary school where they are among the oldest children in the school to a secondary school where they are among the youngest. Because younger children are more vulnerable to attack one would expect the incidence of reported victimization to rise after entering the school catering for predominantly older students. This is what was found in Australian schools (Rigby, 1997b). In an analysis of students attending coeducational schools only, the reported incidence of weekly victimization was traced for Australian students attending Year 4 to Year 12 (approximately 8 to 16 years). Analyses were conducted separately for students who transfer

Table 28.7 Percentages of Students Reporting being Bullied Weekly According to Year of Schooling (Ns range from 40 to 1025)

	<i>Year of schooling</i>								
	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>12</i>
Students starting Year 7									
Boys	31.3	30.6	17.4	28.0	25.1	22.3	14.9	12.1	4.6
Girls	36.4	21.2	18.2	23.1	19.6	14.6	11.2	8.4	6.9
Students starting Year 8									
Boys	30.0	22.4	23.3	17.0	24.9	23.5	15.1	9.7	3.1
Girls	28.0	21.1	17.9	9.8	19.6	11.4	10.2	5.4	3.4

Note. Students starting secondary school in Year 7 were drawn from 4 primary and 18 secondary schools; those starting in Year 8 were drawn from 14 primary and 17 secondary schools.

to secondary school in Year 7 (in the States of Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales, and Australian Capital Territory) and for those who transfer in Year 8 (in the States of South Australia, Queensland, Western Australia, and Northern Territory). Rates of reported victimization are given in Table 28.7.

These results indicate that reported victimization in coeducational primary schools declines gradually between Years 4 to 6 in States in which the students are normally transferred to a secondary school for their Year 7 schooling, and then increases before reducing again in later years. For students in other States where transfer to secondary school occurs in Year 8, the decline in the incidence of reported peer victimization continues for another year, before rising when these students enter secondary school, again decreasing later.

What is clear from these data is that in the Australian context the level of reported victimization around the ages of 11 and 12 years is dependent in part on whether the student has entered secondary school. If the incidence of victimization were determined only by chronological age one would expect a simple linear trend, not increases in peer victimization when a child changed schools. Clearly in accounting for peer victimization at a given age one must take into account social situation and organizational structure.

Gender Differences

Studies of gender differences in overall peer victimization have produced mixed results. Data for children under the age of 12 years from England (Whitney & Smith, 1993), the United States (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988) and Australia (see Table 28.1), suggest that there is little or no sex difference between the extent of peer victimization. On the other hand, in some countries, for example, Norway (Olweus, 1993), Portugal (Almeida, 1999),

and Germany (Losel & Bliesener, 1999), significantly higher levels of peer victimization have been reported for boys.

The similarities in overall victimization may mask differences in the kinds of bullying to which boys and girls are subjected. Table 28.2 shows that among Australian children for each of the age groups boys are more likely to be the targets of physical bullying, while girls are more likely to report “being left out of things,” which is one of the relational forms of bullying that researchers such as Crick et al. (1997) have reported as occurring more often to girls, even at preschool age.

Whilst boys and girls under 12 appear to be victimized by peers equally often, there have been numerous reports that boys are more likely than girls to engage in bullying behavior (see Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1998; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Table 28.3 shows that whilst boys and girls seem equally likely to bully in groups as to bully individually, the percentages of boys reporting bullying others as group members and as individuals is approximately twice as great as for girls. In part this may be explained by noting that boys bully members of the opposite sex far more than girls do (Rigby, 1998). It may also be the case that boys tend to see the practice of bullying others in a more positive light than girls do, and are more likely to want to report doing so. Although data bearing on this matter derive from responses to anonymous questionnaires, they may still be affected by considerations of social desirability, which influence boys and girls differently.

Less well researched are the reactions of boys and girls to being bullied at school. In general, girls report being “bothered” more by it. From Table 28.4, among 11 year olds who had been bullied some 52.3% reported that they were “not bothered” by it, compared with 33.7% of girls. When children are bothered, girls are more likely than boys to say they felt “sad”; boys are more likely to say they felt “angry.” It is noteworthy that the tendency among boys to report not being bothered increases with age, arguably because they are being more and more socialized into a culture that expects boys to be tough, “macho,” and to deny hurt. Among girls the data suggest that there is no such tendency.

A further difference relates to attitudes toward bullying and also to normative influences on children to engage in bullying others. Significant differences between boys and girls in the age range of 9–10 years have been reported indicating that girls were: (i) more supportive of victims; (ii) less probully; (iii) pressured to bully less by significant others, namely close friends, mother, father, or teachers; and (iv) believed they were less able to bully than boys. Girls also were more likely to report that they would feel “ashamed of themselves” if they bullied someone (Rigby, 1997c). Not surprisingly (see Table 28.6) girls were more interested than boys in talking in groups to discover a way to stop bullying.

Nevertheless the reasons boys and girls give for bullying (if they were to bully) are remarkably similar in relative importance. For both sexes the “revenge motive” appears to be paramount (see Table 28.5), and although it is socially more desirable to give such a reason than to admit to extortion or a desire to upset “a wimp,” it is striking that both boys and girls tend to justify their bullying behavior in similar ways – or, alternatively, provide similar rationalizations for what they are doing. The gender difference in the ranking of “bullying for fun,” with boys seeing bullying more often as a source of enjoyment, may reflect a more insensitive view of bullying on the part of boys.

Race and Ethnicity

Sometimes children are victimized because they are racially or ethnically different from the majority of other students. Those of non-White ethnic origin in one study conducted in England were found to have experienced more racist name-calling than other children of the same age and gender (Boulton, 1995). However, in that study, "bullying in general" was also reported as taking place predominantly between members of the same racial group (British Asian or British non-Asian). A report from Germany indicated that children of non-German extraction were no more likely to be targeted as victims of peer bullying than others (Losel & Bliesener, 1999). Evidence of ethnic group members attracting greater than average overall bullying has been provided by the Kids Help Line in Australia who claim that calls from children of ethnic background on matters of bullying are some 30% greater than others. However, in an Australian study by Rigby (unpublished) utilizing data from the PRQ, quite different results were found. Some 891 children (25% of all respondents in this age group) reported that their family was of ethnic origin other than White Australian. Among these "ethnic" students, 29.2% of boys and 27.2% of girls reported that they had been bullied at school at least once a week. This was only slightly (nonsignificantly) more than other students. (The reported incidence of weekly victimization of White Australian students was 26% for boys and for girls.) However, an examination of reported victimization by specific ethnic group membership did show one significant difference. Among the 34 male Aboriginal respondents in the sample, 18 (53%) reported being bullied weekly. This was significantly greater ($p < .05$) than that reported by other students from "ethnic families", which included children who identified their families as Italian, Greek, Polish, and Vietnamese. Although the sample of Aboriginal children is small and of questionable representativeness, the finding is consistent with many anecdotal accounts of discrimination experienced by Aboriginal children from peers in Australia.

Social Class

The relationship between children's involvement in bully/victim problems and the socio-economic status of their parents has been studied with mixed results. In a study conducted in schools in and around Sheffield, England, a largely industrial area, it was found that involvement in bully/victim problems was significantly more likely to occur in schools in relatively disadvantaged places (Whitney & Smith, 1993). In Scotland, Mellor (1999) found that children of parents with professional and managerial jobs were less likely to be bullied, whilst those whose parents had skilled manual jobs were more likely to be victims and also more likely to be bullies! Research conducted in the Netherlands suggests that bullying is more common among children from socially disadvantaged and inner city areas (Junger-Tas, 1999). As against these findings, Olweus (1993) claimed that among boys attending Swedish schools bullying was unrelated to social class as indicated by indices of parent income level and length of parent education. In neither Spain nor Portugal, was bullying found to be related to social class (Almeida, 1999; Ortega & Mora-Mechan, 1999).

Thus, whether social class is a factor in bullying among children appears to vary between countries. Given what has been reported about the parenting styles of parents of different social classes (Newson & Newson, 1976), with lower-class parents being more inclined to use – and arguably model – physical violence, it seems possible that the mode of bullying, rather than the totality of bullying, may be worth examining as a variable in future studies.

The Effectiveness of Interventions to Reduce Bullying

There is now considerable evidence that bullying in schools can be reduced through the use of whole-school antibullying policies and practices (Eslea & Smith, 1998; Olweus, 1993). However, apart from the report by Olweus on the national campaign to reduce peer victimization in Norway for which a 50% reduction in bullying was claimed, the reductions following interventions have been modest in size and not always significant. Many methods of intervention are currently being canvassed, such as the use of peer counseling and training in conflict resolution skills for all students; but few have been carefully evaluated. An exception is the Method of Shared Concern (Pikas, 1989; Smith & Sharp, 1994): a counseling approach which has been reported as largely successful in preventing the repetition of bullying by perpetrators of group bullying. Further studies to evaluate interventions are clearly needed.

Conclusions

Bullying in schools, as distinct from conflict or aggression in general between children, has over the last 10 years become an important area of study cross-nationally. We now know that bullying is prevalent in early childhood, is perpetrated more by boys, and tends to reduce somewhat as children progress through primary school. It produces considerable distress and psychological harm to the minority of children who are frequently victimized by their peers. Verbal forms of bullying are most prevalent and equally experienced by boys and girls; physical bullying is more commonly perpetrated and experienced by boys; relational bullying by girls. Reactions to bullying tend to differ between the sexes, with boys being more inclined to deny its effect upon them. Motives for bullying may vary widely and include a wish to get even, a means of amusement, acquiescence to peer pressure, extortion, and a desire to appear tough. As well as developmental changes that can affect the incidence of bullying for a given age group, one should recognize as factors the school environment, the social disadvantage of families, and the ethnic mix in some communities. Interventions to reduce bullying are increasingly being developed, proposed, and implemented but as yet with modest success.

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