

## **Elementary School Bullying: The Frequency and Role of Adults in Helping Kids Feel Safe**

### **Full Reference**

Beran, Tanya N. & Tutty, L. (2002). Children's reports of bullying and safety at school. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology, 17*(2), 1-14.

### **Keywords**

Elementary school students, attitudes, gender differences, bullying, schools, safety measures.

### **Main Questions**

How often does bullying occur among elementary school children and is the frequency of bullying different for students of each gender and at different ages? Is the support of teachers and other adults also associated with children's sense of safety at school?

### **Background**

Bullying is repetitive negative actions towards another person with the intention of causing fear, distress or harm to the victim. Being a victim of bullying is associated with a variety of emotional and behavioural problems and feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and fear. Previous research that has looked at how often bullying occurs among grades 4 to 6 students has not always produced consistent results. The number of students who have reported being victimized by bullying ranges from 5% to 27% and the number of students who reported bullying others ranges from 6% to 17%. While the exact percentage of children involved may differ, it appears that bullying is a relatively common experience among students in grades 4 to 6. It is unknown whether students in grades 1 to 3 experience similar levels of bullying. Also unknown is to what extent the same children are experiencing both verbal and physical bullying.

Previous research has sometimes shown that boys are more likely to bully and to be victimized by bullying than girls. Whether or not a gender difference exists remains unresolved.

Students may feel unsafe at school. This could be a result of exposure to violence and bullying when at school. However the role of adults must also be considered. School staff and parents may be able to protect children from the harm of bullying. Therefore, the authors are interested in whether the support of adults at school is associated with children's sense of safety.



### Who was Involved

Students from seven elementary schools in Calgary, Alberta answered the questionnaires that were used in this study. Both Catholic and public schools were included. The schools participated in the study because they were planning to implement the bullying intervention program called "Dare to Care: Bully Proofing Your School". Each school also had some prior experience with violence prevention strategies. Because they had agreed to participate in an anti-bullying program and had already experienced some programming, the schools in this study may be different from other schools. It is possible that they had especially high levels of bullying to begin with, or they were especially sensitive to the issue of bullying. 224 students from grades 1 to 3 and 248 students from grades 4 to 6 participated in the study. There were approximately an equal number of male and female students.

### What We Found

We found a higher frequency of bullying involvement than has been reported in other published research. 54% of students in grades 4 to 6 reported being bullied at least sometimes and 33% reported bullying others. The results were very similar in grades 1 to 3 where 52% reported being bullied and 32% admitted bullying others. While the reports of hitting others were similar between the older and younger children, the older students reported verbally bullying others more often. This was despite the fact that the reports of experiencing verbal bullying were similar between the age groups. This could be because older children are more aware of bullying or because the older students were verbally bullying the younger ones. The second explanation is supported by the finding that the majority of younger students reported being bullied by older children, whereas only a very few older students reported being bullied by younger children.

More boys than girls were doing the bullying. In grades 1 to 3, boys reported more physical aggression and in grades 4 to 6, more boys than girls reported high levels of both physical and verbal bullying. However, there was no gender difference in the number of children who reported being victimized. Girls were just as likely as boys to be bullied.

Most of the children in this study reported feeling safe at school, despite the high levels of bullying reported, *if* they felt supported by their teachers. Also, children were less likely to feel safe when they experienced frequent verbal bullying than when they experienced physical bullying.

The type of support that children seek out when they are victimized by bullying appears to change with age. The younger students were likely to tell a number of individuals, but older students were likely to tell only their parents. One third of older children did, however, receive support from peers.



### **Implications**

This study provides an understanding of students' perceptions of bullying. It adds to the literature by including students in grades 1 to 3, who are often not considered. The results indicate that bullying occurs frequently among both age groups studied. The level of verbal bullying in school is more closely related to children's feelings of safety than does the level of physical bullying. This indicates that name-calling and harsh words may have a greater effect on the perception of safety than physical attacks. Also, teacher support seems to play a critical role in children's experiences of safety, regardless of how much bullying occurs. These results suggest that students do see the teacher's role as important in reducing bullying and increasing safety.