

Importance of Educating Individuals with Disabilities about Bullying

Full Reference

Marini, Z., Fairbairn, L., & Zuber, R. (2001). Peer harassment in individuals with developmental disabilities: Toward the development of a multidimensional bullying identification model. *Developmental Disabilities Bulletin, 29*, 170-195.

Keywords

Bullying, developmental disabilities, peers

Main Question

What role do peers play in the victimization process of children with disabilities?

Background

Bullying can be defined as a particular form of abuse that is perpetrated by peers and involves severe and pervasive behaviours that have long-lasting consequences. A peer is a same-aged individual with whom the victimized child has a social, voluntary relationship. Approximately 25% of children are frequently involved in bullying as children who bully, children who are victimized, or both. However, children with disabilities have not received a similar level of attention regarding their rates of involvement in bullying.

Individuals with disabilities are diverse. Their disabilities may result in limitations in major areas of life, often resulting in special needs. The number of behaviour patterns commonly found among children with special needs can make them vulnerable to poor social relationships. Children with disabilities tend to make fewer friends and their disabilities can affect their social competence, leading to failure to follow social rules. The result can often be an increase in gullibility, and thus susceptibility to exploitation. Despite this knowledge, limited research directly addresses issues of bullying in individuals with disabilities.

The Multidimensional Bullying Identification Model can help in the detection and identification of bullying because it integrates multiple methods and dimensions into one model to assist in the detection of this complex behaviour. The model involves three components:



Component A: Five defining characteristics of bullying: power differential, repeated over time, intention to control or harm, creates anxiety, intimidation and fear, and secretive in nature.

Component B: Four distinct types of bullying: physical (e.g., hitting, pushing), cognitive (e.g., teasing), social (involves a group/gang of individuals), and emotional (e.g., spreading rumours).

Component C: Three major groups of participants: bullies, victims, bystanders.

Who Was Involved

Seventeen adults (10 male, 7 female, ages 21-63) participated in this study. They answered self report questions about their experience with bullying, drew pictures to show their understanding of bullying, told the researcher a story about the picture they had drawn, and answered open-ended questions pertaining to their understanding of bullying, its causes, and possible ways to stop the bullying.

What We Found

Rates of involvement differed across the three roles: 68% were bystanders, 28% were victims, and 13% were bullies. The four different types of bullying also occurred at different rates, with cognitive bullying (teasing) being the most common (82% for bystanders, 42% for victims, 25% for bullies).

The majority of the pictures drawn by the participants depicted physical bullying, with the victimized person smiling and the person bullying looking angry. Similarly, the stories told involved physical descriptions of the bullying. Most of the stories indicated an understanding of bullying as general conflict and did not encompass the defining characteristics involved in the definition of bullying held by researchers.

Answers to the open-ended questions reflected the same understanding evident in the drawings and stories. Most participants viewed bullying as a physical assault, fighting, or picking on someone. Most participants mentioned the importance of perceived differences, race, disability, and size as possible causes of victimization. When asked why someone with a disability would get bullied, the majority of participants' responses involved an understanding that they walked or talked differently, were not as strong, or were different than the person bullying.





Implications

The findings from this study point to the need to educate individuals with disabilities about the various types of bullying. Only by being able to identify wrongful behaviour can an individual be empowered to stand up against it. Most of the participants in this study did not conceptualize bullying as anything but a physical conflict, and were unaware of the cognitive, social, and emotional forms of bullying. It is important to find ways of empowering individuals with disabilities so they can shape their own educational process. Using a more comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to bullying identification may help guide individuals with disabilities when considering non-physical types of bullying.

