



Bullying, Sexual Harassment and Dating Aggression Among Adolescents

Full Reference

Pepler D., Craig, W. M., Connolly, J. A., Yuile, A., McMaster, L., & Jiang, D.
(2006). A developmental perspective on bullying. *Aggressive Behavior*, 32, 376-384.

Keywords

Bullying, developmental, girls and boys, sexual harassment, dating aggression, age differences

Main Questions

Does the rate of bullying, sexual harassment, and dating aggression differ depending on the age of the individuals involved? Are the rates different for boys and girls? Do youth differ in their use of sexual harassment and dating aggression depending on whether or not they are involved in bullying behaviour?

Background

Bullying is a relationship problem. It is a form of aggression that takes place in the context of a relationship (wanted or unwanted) in which one child displays interpersonal power using aggression. By viewing bullying as a relationship problem, we are able to see how bullying changes with development into other aggressive behaviours including sexual harassment and dating aggression. These other aggressive behaviours have the same key characteristics of bullying, namely, power and aggression in the context of a relationship. We believe that bullying behaviour is at the root of problems in our society related to interpersonal violence. The lessons that youth learn in bullying (in their peer relationships) may generalize to other significant relationships as they grow up. In particular, as children grow and go through the changes of puberty, bullying behaviours change in a way that mirrors the vulnerabilities associated with puberty. During early adolescence, there is an increased awareness of sexuality and sexual identity. Adolescents can gain power over others by targeting these sensitivities related to sexuality through bullying behaviours classified as sexual harassment.

Who Was Involved

Students in grades 6-12 participated in this study (504 boys and 457 girls in grades 6-8; 456 boys and 479 girls in grades 9-12). The students answered questions in a survey about their bullying behaviour, their sexual harassment behaviour, dating aggression, and pubertal status (when they developed specific secondary sex characteristics).





What We Found

Bullying behaviour peaks in grade 9 for girls and grade 8 for boys, around the time when students make the transition from elementary school to high school. Bullying is less common before and after these time periods. As well, sexual harassment was lower in the earlier grades and increased significantly in grade 9, particularly for opposite-sex sexual harassment. Similarly, opposite-sex sexual harassment was more likely to occur at the time of puberty than before or much after, suggesting the link between puberty and behaviours that target the sensitive issues related to sexual development.

Youth who reported bullying others were also more likely to report sexually harassing others and being aggressive in their romantic relationships. More specifically, both boys and girls, across all grades, who reported bullying others were more likely to sexually harass same- and opposite-sex peers compared to boys and girls who did not bully others. Generally, the same relationship was true for bullying and dating aggression, with one exception. High school girls participated in the same amount of indirect dating aggression (e.g., 'ignored him when mad'), regardless of whether they bullied others or not.

Implications

Youth who go through puberty earlier than their peers require special attention because they are at an increased risk for engaging in bullying behaviour (in all its forms: bullying, sexual harassment, dating aggression) in their interpersonal relationships. Particularly for girls in their romantic relationships, advanced pubertal development may lead girls to use aggression with boys when interest in the opposite sex is increasing, even though this form of interaction is negative. In other words, attention is attention, and these early-developing girls may use inappropriate behaviours in attempts to attract boys' attention. The context of romantic relationships provides opportunities for youth to use aggression. The high levels of intimacy and occasions for conflict make aggression common for both of the sexes in romantic relationships. Aggression within dating relationships may warn us of future relationship problems.

This study highlights the importance of identifying and intervening with students involved in bullying because it is these students who will be more likely to be involved in sexual harassment and dating aggression. We need to identify these youth early to stop the reinforcing use of power that develops through bullying interactions. We also need to intervene to prevent further learning of aggressive interaction patterns. When we understand bullying as a relationship problem, clear intervention goals can be identified: to build healthy relationships now that will lay the foundation for healthy relationships throughout the lifespan.

