

Bullying from Early to Late Adolescence

Full Reference

Pepler, D., Craig, W., Connolly, J., & Yule, A., McMaster, A., & Jiang, D. (in press). A Developmental Perspective on Bullying. *Aggressive Behavior*.

Key Words

Developmental, childhood, adolescence, sexual harassment, date violence

Main Question

In this paper, we were interested in how bullying changes through adolescence in terms of: the numbers of students who reported bullying (prevalence rate), the types of behaviours they used to cause distress to others (forms), and the types of relationships in which forms of bullying occur (context). We were also interested in differences between boys and girls.

Background

Through our 15 years of research on bullying, we have come to understand bullying as a relationship problem - because it is a form of aggression that unfolds in the context of a relationship in which one child repeatedly asserts power and control over another through aggression. As children grow older, we are concerned that the lessons learned in bullying within peer relationships generalize to other developmentally significant relationships. We contend that the combined use of power and aggression found in playground bullying is a key component of sexual harassment, dating aggression, workplace harassment, marital aggression, and elder abuse (Pepler et al., 1997). In this study, we expected that as adolescents deal with emerging sexuality and sexual identity, there is an increase in sexual harassment. At this age, there is power in identifying vulnerabilities related to sexuality and using these as a means to bully through sexual harassment. We were also concerned that adolescents who bully may recognize and target the vulnerabilities in a romantic partner to establish interpersonal power in the relationship to a greater extent than adolescents who do not bully, so we expected an increase in dating aggression. We expected that boys would report higher levels of bullying and sexual harassment than girls, but we did not expect sex differences in dating aggression.

Who Was Involved

This study involved 1896 students in different grades (cross sectional). There were 961 students from late elementary school (grades 6 to 8) and 935 students from high school (grades 9 to 12) with about equal numbers of boys and girls. The students were from both public and independent schools.



What We Found

Students completed surveys to report on the various forms of bullying. We found that early adolescents Grades 6 to 8 reported less bullying than high school students (Grades 9 to 12), with a peak in Grade 9, right after entering high school. As expected, students in late elementary school reported less same-sex and opposite-sex sexual harassment than students in high school. Boys reported higher levels of bullying and sexual harassment than girls.

We asked students to report on indirect aggression (e.g., spread rumours, ignore) and physical aggression (e.g., slapped, kicked) with dating partners. Overall, students in the elementary grades (6 to 8) reported less indirect dating aggression than students in the high school grades (9 to 12). A small number of students (2 to 24%) reported being physically aggressive with their dating partners and there were no differences across grades and no differences between boys and girls on reports of dating aggression. We found that students' reports of bullying were correlated with their reports of sexual harassment and dating aggression. Student who reported bullying were significantly more likely to report sexual harassment and dating aggression than students who did not bully.

Implications

Our findings highlight the concern for bullying as a relationship problem in which children learn to use aggression to establish power over. Adolescents who reported bullying peers were more likely to engage in both sexual harassment and dating violence. In elementary and high school, bullying is not an exceptional problem: many adolescents engage in bullying their peers occasionally; a small group of students bully at a frequent rate. Adolescents who frequently bully others may be at high risk for transferring these interactional patterns to other forms of power and aggression, such as workplace harassment, domestic violence, and child abuse. Future research is needed to learn more about the pathway from bullying to other forms of relationship aggression in adulthood. This study highlights bullying as a relationship problem and points to the need for prevention programs to reduce the use of power and aggression in adolescent relationships.

