Bullying: A Developmental Perspective

Bullying is a problem that touches most children and youth at some point in their school years. Bullying and victimization can start in early childhood and persist through the school years, peaking during the school transitions. The use of power and aggression in relationships generally drops off as children and youth learn that this is an ineffective means of maintaining relationships. Some youth, however, persist in their use of power and aggression through adolescence and into high school.[1] A small proportion of youth are persistently bullied from elementary through late high school.[2]

Key Research Findings

The rates and forms of bullying change with development through the elementary, middle, and high school years.

- Bullying and victimization begin in early childhood and are associated, even at this early age, with behavior and school adjustment problems.[3]
- Students in the early grades of elementary school report slightly more than twice as frequent victimization as those in the middle grades.[4]
- Rates of bullying increase through the elementary school years, peaking at the time of the school transition.[5,6,7]
- Rates of physical bullying peak in Grade 8 and then decline. [8]
- From early adolescence, new forms of aggression, carried out from a position of power, emerge. With developing cognitive and social skills, children become aware of others' vulnerabilities and of their power relative to others. Bullying then diversifies into more sophisticated forms of verbal, social, and electronic bullying, as well as dating aggression.[9]
- Both girls and boys who bully in elementary school are at high risk for being physically aggressive with their boy/girlfriends in high school.[10]
- In the middle school years, early pubertal development is associated with opposite-sex sexual harassment for both boys and girls. These relationship patterns bode poorly for both boys' and girls' healthy opposite-sex relationships through adolescence and into adulthood.[11]

Recent research has begun to uncover the diversity among children who bully and children who are victimized:

- Longitudinal research from age 10 to 17 reveals four different pathways in bullying:[12]
    - One group (16% of boys; 4.5% of girls) reported consistently high levels of bullying from late elementary through high school.
    - A second group (13.6% of boys; 13.3% of girls) reported bullying at about the same level as the high group in late elementary school, but their levels dropped to almost no bullying by the end of high school.
    - A third group (41.5% of boys; 29.6% of girls) reported consistently moderate levels of bullying throughout the school years.
    - The remaining students (28.9% of boys; 52.6% of girls) almost never reported bullying.

- The same longitudinal study reveals four pathways in victimization:[13]
    - A small group of students (3.2% of boys; 4.9% of girls) reported consistently high levels of being bullied over time.
    - A second group (17.3% of boys and 27.1% of girls) reported moderate levels of victimization in the early adolescent years, but decreased thereafter through to the end of high school.
    - The third group (49.5% of boys and 44.3% of girls) reported consistently moderate levels of being bullied over time.
    - A fourth group (30.2% of boys and 23.7% of girls) almost never reported being bullied.
- Bullying or harassment continues into adulthood: 82%, 74%, and 76% of men admitted to some form of psychological aggression against coworkers, subordinates, and supervisors, respectively.[14]

Key Themes

- Bullying and victimization experiences begin early and, for some children, persist throughout the school years and perhaps into adulthood.
- The middle school phase, through the transition to high school is a period in which rates of bullying are at their peak.
- The forms of bullying change with development and transform into sexual harassment, dating aggression, and other uses of power and aggression to control and distress others.
- The lessons of power and aggression learned in playground bullying can transfer to sexual harassment, dating aggression and may extend to workplace harassment, as well as marital, child, and elder abuse.

Implications

Education

- All children and youth, as well as those involved with them (parents, educators, health care professionals, coaches, recreation leaders, etc.) require knowledge of the changing forms of bullying with age and the detrimental consequences. Understanding the complexity and diverse developmental pathways of bullying and victimization is critical for recognizing and responding to the use of power and aggression in relationships.

Assessment

- Assessments of bullying and victimization throughout the school years will provide an index of the numbers of children and youth at risk of these relationship problems and in need of support.
- It is critical to monitor regularly to determine which children are at risk for chronic bullying and victimization or both – these are the children who require the most intensive and ongoing support.

Prevention and Intervention

- Prevention and intervention efforts should be timed to precede increases in bullying, harassment, and dating aggression, as well as victimization.
- A small proportion of youth are involved in persistent bullying and/or victimization from elementary through high school. These youth have a range of adjustment problems and require early, intensive, and ongoing support.
- It may be important to pay attention to early developing youth with a tendency to bully, because they may at risk for engaging in aggressive opposite-sex interactions.

Policy

- Because bullying and victimization place children at increased risk for a range of physical and psychosocial health problems from an early age, policies should insure that school-based and health promotion programs focus on this critical relationship problem.

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[1] Pepler, D., Jiang, D., Craig, W., & Connolly, J. (2008). Developmental trajectories of bullying and associated factors. *Child Development, 79,* 325-338.
[2] Craig, W., Jiang, D., Pepler, D., & Connolly, J. (in preparation). Developmental trajectories of victimization and associated factors.
[3] Arseneault, L., Walsh, E., Trzesniewski, K., Newcombe, R.,Caspi, A., Moffitt, T. (2006). Bullying victimization uniquely contributes to adjustment problems in young children: a nationally representative cohort study*. Pediatrics*. 118(1):130-8
[4] Scheithauer, H., Hayer, T., Petermann, F., & Jugert, G. (2006). Physical, verbal, and relational forms of bullying among german students: Age trends, gender differences, and correlates. *Aggressive Behavior, 32*(3), 261-275.
[5] See note 4 above.
[6] Pepler, D., Craig, W., Connolly, J., Yuile, A., & McMaster, L. (2006). A developmental perspective on bullying. *Aggressive Behavior*, 32:376-384.
[7] See note 1 above.
[8] See note 4 above.
[9] See note 6 above.
[10] Pepler, D., Jiang, D., Connolly, J., & Craig, W. (in preparation). The links between bullying and dating aggression: A joint trajectory analysis.
[11] See note 6 above.
[12] See note 1 above.
[13] See note 2 above.
[14] Greenberg, L. & Barling, J. (1999). Predicting employee aggression against coworkers, subordinates and supervisors: The roles of person behaviors and perceived workplace factors. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour, 20,* 897–913.