

Peers and Bullying

Peers provide the relational context for bullying. Bullying often occurs within groups of peers and peers can play multiple roles in promoting and preventing bullying act and the associated effects of bullying. Research about the critical roles that peers have in bullying is summarized below:

Key Research Findings

Impact of Peers

- Bullying most often occurs within groups of peers.^{1,2}
- Isolation and peer dislike are strong predictors of bullying and victimization.^{3,4}
- Negative peer-related variables, such as having delinquent peers or gang affiliation, are consistent risk factors for bullying behavior.^{5,6,7}

Interactive Effects of Peer Factors

- Peer dominance hierarchies increase as children get older. When the peer dominance hierarchy is strong in primary school, it is more difficult for children who are victimized to move out of the victim role.⁸
- Children who bully in elementary school are more likely to be socially rejected, but this trend shifts so that children who are victimized are more socially rejected in high school.⁹
- Feelings of isolation during high school increase the negative effects of being victimized as measured by stress during college.¹⁰

Significance of Peer Relationships

- Belonging within a peer group is a strong goal for children and adolescents.
- Wanting or having a friendship with the child who bullies can be a reason why children who are victimized choose not to disclose that they are experiencing bullying.¹¹

The Bystander Role

- Bystanders are present in at least 85% of bullying episodes they observed among elementary school students, with two or more peers present in more than half of the incidents.^{12,13}
- Peers contribute to bullying by providing attention and reinforcement to the child who is bullying, as well as by joining in bullying.¹⁴
- The mere presence of bystanders in a verbal dispute between parties of the same gender increases the likelihood that the dispute will turn violent.¹⁵
- Because most bullying incidents occur in the presence of peers and out of sight of adults, the secrecy expands to include entire circles of peers.¹⁶
- Bystanders who witness repeated victimization of peers experience negative effects similar to children who were victimized. Children in both groups showed distress similar to or in excess of that reported for natural disasters or other life threatening experiences.¹⁷
- If the person being victimized is a stranger, but the bystanders comprise a socially cohesive group, there is a higher likelihood that they will intervene.¹⁸

Peers' Roles in Intervention

- One study of children 9 to 13 years old found that younger children who witnessed bullying were more likely to try to stop the incident or to tell someone than to simply watch or join in.¹⁹
- Peers intervene more frequently than teachers²⁰ and their interventions are effective in stopping bullying more than half the time.^{21, 22}
- Interventions that acknowledge the role of bystanders and the group as a whole, show positive results in terms of promoting prosocial attitudes.²³
- Interventions that focused on social skills training for children with peer relationship difficulties found that improving peer relationships lowers antisocial affiliations, and has a positive effect on aggressive children, decreasing levels of aggression and peer victimization.²⁴
- There is a code of silence that creates barriers for victims to disclose that they are experiencing bullying. Children who are bullied are as likely to tell a friend as they are to tell a family member about being victimized.²⁵

Key Themes

- Peers contribute to the dynamics within bullying.
- The relationship between peers and bullying is complex and exists at multiple levels.
- As bystanders and those engaged in bullying and/or victimization, peers have the potential to either promote or prevent the incidence and negative effects of bullying. They can be part of the problem or part of the solution.
- Effective interventions must address the peer group as a whole.

Implications

Education

- School staff and students children require understanding about bullying and peers' potential roles in promoting or preventing bullying.
- Promoting social skills and attitudes that are supportive of victimized youth is critical to creating a climate in which peers will intervene.

Assessment

- Peers are more aware of bullying episodes than adults; therefore, general surveys of students' perceptions will provide essential information on the rate, location, and nature of bullying.

Prevention and Intervention

- Prevention and intervention programs should be multi-modal and include a peer component.
- Communities and schools should promote healthy peer relationships in order to prevent bullying and decrease the negative effects of bullying for children who are victimized.

- Interventions to help children who bully should focus not only on skills training, but also on shifting their negative power in bullying to positive power within the peer group.
- Having one friend is a protective factor in bullying, therefore, children who are victimized benefit from supportive peer relationships.
- When addressing bullying incidents, bystanders should be included in the resulting education and support along with the children who bullied or were victimized.

Policy

- Policies must include references to the role of peers in bullying and their contributions to the power dynamics.
- Bullying is a systemic problem and it is everyone's responsibility to respond to stop bullying, including peers.
- Although peers can make an important contribution to preventing and intervening in bullying, they cannot be successful without supportive and trusting adults who will follow through with educative consequences.

¹ Li, Q. (2007b). New bottle but old wine: A research of cyberbullying in schools. *Computers in Human Behavior, 23*, 1777-1791.

² Craig, W., Pepler, D., & Blais, J. (2007). Responding to bullying: What works? *School Psychology International, 28*, 465-477.

³ Veenstra, R., Lindenberg, S., Oldehinkel, A. J., De Winter, A. F., Verhulst, F. C., & Ormel, J. (2005). Bullying and victimization in elementary schools: A comparison of bullies, victims, Bully/Victims, and uninvolved preadolescents. *Developmental psychology, 41*(4), 672-682.

⁴ Williams, K. R., & Guerra, N. G. (2007). Prevalence and predictors of internet bullying. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 41*, S14-S21.

⁵ Fitzpatrick, K.M. Dulin, A.J. Piko, B.F. (2007). Not just pushing and shoving: school bullying among African American adolescents. *Journal of School Health, 77*(1), 16-22

⁶ Ybarra, M. L., Espelage, D. L., & Mitchell, K. J. (2007). The co-occurrence of internet harassment and unwanted sexual solicitation victimization and perpetration: Associations with psychosocial indicators. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 41*, S31-S41.

⁷ Mouttapa, M., Valente, T., Gallaher, P., Rohrbach, L. A., Unger, J. B. (2004). Social network predictors of bullying and victimization. *Adolescence, 39*(154), 315-35

⁸ Schäfer, M., Korn, S., Brodbeck, F. C., Wolke, D., & Schulz, H. (2005). Bullying roles in changing contexts: The stability of victim and bully roles from primary to secondary school. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 29*(4), 323-335.

⁹ See note 8 above.

¹⁰ Newman, M. L., Holden, G. W., Delville, Y. (2005). Isolation and the stress of being bullied. *Journal of Adolescence, 28*(3), 343-57

¹¹ Mishna, F. (2004). A qualitative study of bullying from multiple perspectives. *Children & Schools, 26*, 234-247.

¹² O'Connell, P., Pepler, D., & Craig, W. (1999). Peer involvement in bullying: Issues and challenges for intervention. *Journal of Adolescence, 22*, 437-452.

¹³ Craig, W., & Pepler, D. (1997). Observation of bullying and victimization in the schoolyard. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology, 13*, 41-59.

¹⁴ See note 12 above.

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- ¹⁵ Felson, R. B. (1982). Impression management and the escalation of aggression and violence. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *45*, 245-254 as cited in Stueve, A. Dash, K., O'Donnell, L., Tehranifar, P., Wilson-Simmons, R., Slaby, R. G., Link, B. G. (2006). Rethinking the bystander role in school violence prevention. *Health Promotion Practice*, *7*(1), 117-24.
- ¹⁶ Hawkins, D. L., Pepler, D. & Craig, W. M. (2001). Naturalistic observations of peer interventions in bullying. *Social Development*, *10*, 512-527 as cited in Mishna, F. & Alaggia, R. (2005). Weighing the risks: a child's decision to disclose peer victimization. *Children & Schools*, *27*(4), 217-27.
- ¹⁷ Janson, G. R. & Hazler, R. J. (2004). Trauma reactions of bystanders and victims to repetitive abuse experiences. *Violence & Victims*, *19*(2), 239-55
- ¹⁸ Rutkowski, G. K., Gruder, C. L. & Romer, D. (1983). Group cohesiveness, social norms, and bystander intervention. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *44*, 545-52 as cited in Stueve, A. Dash, K., O'Donnell, L., Tehranifar, P., Wilson-Simmons, R., Slaby, R. G., Link, B. G. (2006). Rethinking the bystander role in school violence prevention. *Health Promotion Practice*, *7*(1), 117-24.
- ¹⁹ Brown, S. L., Birch, D. A., Kancherla, V. (2005). Bullying perspectives: experiences, attitudes, and recommendations of 9- to 13-year-olds attending health education centers in the United States. *Journal of School Health*, *75*(10), 384-92.
- ²⁰ See note 13 above.
- ²¹ See note 16 above.
- ²² Fekkes, M., Pijpers, F. I. M., Verloove-Vanhorick, S. P. (2005). Bullying: who does what, when and where? Involvement of children, teachers and parents in bullying behavior. *Health Education Research*, *20*(1), 81-91.
- ²³ Salmivalli, C., Kaukiainen, A., & Voeten, M. (2005). Anti-bullying intervention: Implementation and outcome. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *75*(3), 465-87.
- ²⁴ DeRosier, M. E. & Marcus, S. R. (2005). Building friendships and combating bullying: Effectiveness of S.S.GRIN at one-year follow-up. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, *34*(1), 140-50.
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