



## Observations of bullying in the playground and in the classroom

### Full Reference

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### Key Words

Observations, bullying, peers

### Main Questions

In this paper, we observed bullying and victimization in two different settings, the playground and the classroom. Does bullying occur more frequently in the playground or in the classroom? Does the type of bullying differ in the playground compared to the classroom? Does the frequency of bullying differ depending on the characteristics of the bullies and their victims such as their gender, race and personality (aggressive or non-aggressive) in the two settings? How does the presence of peers and teachers affect bullying?

### Background

Research from various parts of the world suggests that bullying is a frequent behaviour in schools (Olweus, 1987; Pepler et al., 1994). Although bullying is an interaction between the bully and the victim, it must be understood within the broader social context. To date, research on bullying has been limited to focussing on just the characteristics of individual bullies and victims and has relied on questionnaires. In this study, we observed bullying in the playground and classroom to examine the role of context, peers, and teachers. Using a social learning perspective (Huesmann & Eron, 1984), we wanted to see if the following three contexts increased the likelihood of bullying: observing aggression, receiving aggression, and reinforcement for aggression. A better understanding of what influences bullying should provide direction to anti-bullying programs in schools.

### Who Was Involved

This study involved 34 children (24 boys and 10 girls) in Grades 1 to 6 from one elementary school who were observed in a bullying episode. All children who wore microphones knew that they were being filmed. Children were randomly chosen for filming during lunch, recess or in the classroom. Children were observed for an average of 28 minutes in the playground and 31 minutes in the classroom.





## What We Found

Bullying occurred more frequently in the playground than in the classroom; there were 4.5 episodes of bullying per hour in the playground compared to 2.4 episodes in the classroom. Setting influenced the type of bullying: direct bullying occurred more often in the playground whereas indirect bullying occurred more often in the classroom. In the playground, the unstructured nature of playground activities, the high activity level and limited adult supervision may be conducive to direct bullying. In the classroom, children may resort to covert types of bullying to avoid detection. About 60% of the bullying episodes involved male bullies in both settings. Male bullies targeted boys as their victims almost all the time in both settings. Female bullies targeted girls as their victims half the time in both settings. Both aggressive and non-aggressive children were equally likely to be the victim of bullying. Non-aggressive children were more likely to bully in the playground, whereas aggressive children were more likely to bully in the classroom. We examined the reinforcing role that peers and teachers may play in bullying. Peers were present as observers for most bullying episodes in both settings, yet seldom intervened. Teachers only intervened in approximately one in six playground bullying episodes and one in five classroom episodes. By lack of intervention, peers and teachers may reinforce bullies for their aggressive behaviours.

## Implications

By analyzing bullying episodes from a social learning perspective, we have identified some processes that may maintain or exacerbate problem behaviours. Children's experiences on school playgrounds and in classrooms may be teaching them that bullying is acceptable and appropriate in certain circumstances. Bullies may learn that there is little discouragement and minimal risk in harassing their peers. Therefore, our observations confirm the need for a systemic intervention which focuses not only on bullies and victims, but also includes peers, teachers, and parents. The results of this study indicated that peers are often aware of bullying, provide an audience for it, but fail to intervene. A component of a school-based intervention program must be aimed at peers to reduce their reinforcement of the bully and to encourage their support of the victim. For example, lessons could be developed for children which define bullying and provide strategies and a language for intervening. Providing children with a language to stop bullying empowers children to use their voices and take action against bullying. Teachers may also be inadvertently contributing to the problem of bullying by their low rate of intervention. The lack of teacher intervention may be a function of inadequate numbers of adults to supervise the playground and/or lack of awareness of bullying. By increasing supervision, there will likely be more intervention in bullying episodes. Teachers need to be aware of how pervasive bullying is in the playground and in the classroom, be receptive to children's concerns about bullying, and follow through when bullying is identified by the victims or peers.

