

Straight from the Experts: What Kids, Parents, and Educators have to say about Bullying

Full Reference

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

Keywords

Bullying, peer victimization, children, children's friendships, children's perspectives, bullying definition, qualitative research

Main Questions

What do kids tell us about their experiences of victimization? How do the perceptions of children compare to those of parents and educators? How does the interaction between children and adults relate to peer victimization?

Background

A large body of research exists on bullying and victimization, but most of it is quantitative. In other words, most of the research is collected using surveys where the respondent answers questions by circling a standard answer from a small set of answers. This type of research can be very informative and has generated considerable knowledge about many areas of bullying, including how bullying affects the academic, social, emotional, and physical health of children involved.

Less research exists that uses qualitative methods. Qualitative data often involves interviewing a particular population in depth to find out more about an issue. Some researchers have noted the benefit of using qualitative research to learn more about the experiences of victimized children.

Who Was Involved

A total of 61 children in grades 4 and 5 filled out a survey and based on their responses, a subset of children were chosen to participate in a structured interview. As well, one of these children's parents, their teachers, and their principal and vice-principal were interviewed. Five children were selected. Each interviewee was asked to give a definition of bullying and then the interviewer provided a standard definition. Children were asked what they were bullied about (e.g., appearance), what kind of bullying it was (e.g., direct or indirect), where it happened, who did it, how they coped, and who they told about their experiences. Adults were asked about their awareness of the child's experiences, their interactions with the child, and how they would evaluate their own and others' responses.

What We Found

A clear issue that arose from this study is how hard it is to define bullying. Children, parents, and teachers alike have a hard time determining what qualifies as bullying and what does not. Overall, two themes emerged as contributing to the complexity of the issue of bullying: (1) differences between the individual's verbal definition and their identification of a particular incident as bullying; and (2) when bullying occurs between friends. Adults find it difficult to determine "fault," if any, when the bullying occurs among friends.

The reactions in actual situations reported by participants did not necessarily match their own definitions of bullying. Several factors seem to impact a person's decision to label an incident as bullying. One factor is whether the victimized child is considered responsible. Another factor is whether there is a perceived power imbalance, and another is whether the incident is considered serious.

All the children reported telling their friends that they were bullied, but only some of them had told their parents or their teacher. Some of the children strongly felt that telling an adult makes the situation worse. Children feared retaliation, feared being blamed, believed they should be able to handle it on their own, or simply believed adults cannot help. When the adults did know about the bullying, they tended to suggest that the victimized child stay away from the bullying child. The children find this difficult because they are often friends with the other child. Parents reported having mixed feelings about allowing their victimized children to play with children who bully; they want to foster autonomy, while protecting their children. Children particularly appreciate their friends' support even when it does not stop the bullying.

Implications

While a clear definition of bullying is required for education, intervention, and research, such a definition does not necessarily lead to consistent decisions about whether a particular incident constitutes bullying. It is important for interventions to address ambiguous situations that confuse children and adults.

If a child turns to an adult who does not consider the situation bullying, the adult must respond in a way that does not invalidate the child's perspective of the situation. If children are not heard and validated, they may doubt their own feelings and views and may stop telling adults about their victimization.



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Interventions need to be tailored to bullying among friends, targeting the children, their parents, and educators. Conflict is inevitable in close relationships and it is important to teach children positive ways of dealing with that conflict.

