Bullying: Definitions

Bullying is a Relationship Problem

Bullying has traditionally been defined by three elements: aggression (the intent to harm), a power differential, and repetition.[1] The predominant term used in research within the United States has been "peer victimization", which focuses somewhat more on the experience of children who are victimized and less on the intent of those who perpetrate the bullying.[2]

Bullying has recently been reconceptualised as a *relationship problem that requires relationship solutions* — because it is a form of aggression that unfolds in the context of a relationship in which one individual asserts interpersonal power through aggression.[3] The power that children who bully hold over others can arise from their individual characteristics, such as superior size, strength, or age[4]; and from knowledge of others' vulnerabilities.[5] The power in bullying can also arise from a position in a social group, either in terms of generally high social status[6], by membership in a group of peers who support bullying[7], or through systemic power (e.g., class, race, mainstream culture).

The perspective of bullying as a relationship problem highlights that problems arise from complex interpersonal dynamics rather than simply from an individual child's problem with aggression or with being unable to defend him or herself. Within the relationship context of bullying, those children who bully are learning how to use power and aggression to control and distress another; those children who are repeatedly victimized become trapped in abusive relationships that are increasingly difficult to escape.

Bullying takes different forms at different ages and the label applied to bullying also changes with developmental stage and relationship context. Teenagers are more likely to use the label "harassment" for repeated aggression from a position of power. When children enter adolescence, new forms of aggression combined with power emerge. As children develop cognitive and social skills, they become more aware of others' vulnerabilities and differences and of their own power relative to others. Bullying becomes diversified into more sophisticated forms of verbal, social, electronic, sexually- and racially-based aggression. In sexual harassment, the power derives from targeting another's sexuality, sexual orientation, or some other physical or psychological vulnerability related to sexuality. Racism and sexism are also forms of aggression exerted from a position of power entrenched in socio-political foundations.

The lessons of power and aggression learned in playground bullying can transfer to sexual harassment and dating aggression[8] and may extend to workplace harassment, as well as marital, child, and elder abuse.

Challenges in Defining Bullying

There are many challenges in providing a precise definition of bullying. The understanding of bullying can vary along many dimensions.

- Aggression in bullying needs to be differentiated from rough-and-tumble play and friendly, mutually fun teasing in which there is no intent to harm.
- The distress of the victimized child may be the only indicator of a bullying situation. An outsider cannot always determine whether an act is aggressive; however, if a victimized child experiences it as distressing, then it needs to be addressed.
- The children engaging in bullying may not realize the negative impact of their aggressive behavior and may not recognize it as bullying. They need education to support their empathy, moral compass, and positive, rather than negative, use of power.
- Some children are both aggressive and victimized by their peers. These children have been called "provocative victims" or "bully-victims". They experience a wide range of problems and require intensive support to move beyond their involvement in bullying and victimization.
- Bullying can be considered on a continuum from mild forms of aggression to behaviors that deeply violate an individual's sense of well-being and belonging.
- Repetition is an element of the definition that has been disputed. Children consider an isolated act of bullying as such[9]. With repeated bullying, however, the power differential between the child who bullies and the victimized child increases, leaving victimized children increasingly powerless to defend themselves.

Means and Forms of Bullying

Bullying can be carried out in several ways, some of which are face-to-face and others which are indirect:

Physical bullying includes behaviors such as: hitting, kicking, shoving, spitting, beating up, stealing, or damaging property.

Verbal bullying includes behaviors such as: name-calling, mocking, hurtful teasing, humiliating or threatening someone, racist comments, or sexual harassment.

Social bullying includes behaviors such as: rolling your eyes or turning away from someone, excluding others from the group, gossiping or spreading rumours, setting others up to look foolish, and damaging friendships.

Electronic or Cyberbullying includes the use of email, cell phones, text messages, and internet sites to threaten, harass, embarrass, socially exclude, or damage reputations and friendships.

Bullying can take forms, all of which reflect the power differential inherent in bullying:

Racial bullying includes behaviors such as: treating people badly because of their racial or ethic background, saying disrespectful things about a cultural background, calling someone racist names, or telling racist jokes.

Religious bullying includes treating people disrespectfully because of their religious background or beliefs, calling names or telling jokes based on religious beliefs and

practices.

Sexual bullying includes behaviors such as: leaving someone out or treating them disrespectfully because they are a boy or a girl; making someone feel uncomfortable because of their gender or sexual orientation; making sexist comments or jokes; touching, pinching or grabbing someone in a sexual way; making crude comments about someone's sexual behavior; spreading a sexual rumour about someone; or calling someone gay, a fag, a lesbian, or similar homophobic names.

Disability bullying includes behaviors such as: leaving someone out or treating them disrespectfully because of a disability, making someone feel uncomfortable because of a disability, or making comments or jokes to hurt someone with a disability.

Implications

Education
- Key messages about bullying that should be broadly disseminated are:
  - Bullying is a relationship problem
  - Relationship problems require relationship solutions
- In tailoring our messages that define bullying and specific forms of bullying, we must consider children's developmental stage and gender.

Assessment
- Assessment instruments used to assess the prevalence of bullying and victimization should consider the respondent's developmental stage and gender and include definitions of the relevant forms of bullying.

Prevention and Intervention
- Children develop the capacity to form healthy relationships from moment-to-moment learning experiences starting at birth. Children need warm and supportive relationships, as well as consistent messages and responses to support their healthy social development across all of the contexts in which they live, learn, work, and play.
- The goal of interventions with children who bully, who are victimized, or who are bystanders to bullying, is to enhance relationship capacity by promoting their healthy relationships in the present and laying a foundation for healthy relationships throughout the lifespan.
- It is important to focus not only on the relationship skills of the children involved in all roles within bullying, but also on the social dynamics in children's peer groups and the roles that adults play in shaping children's experiences.
- The complexity of social interactions highlights the need to provide extensive, dynamic, and ongoing support to youth to enable them to learn how to: relate to others positively, be effective in achieving social goals, and use power positively.
- Interventions with children who are victimized should protect and connect them, to assure safety and supportive relationships with adults and peers.

- Interventions with children who bully should provide learning experiences that transform their negative use of power to experiences of positive leadership.

Policy

- Wherever children live, learn and play, developmentally appropriate policies should explicitly define bullying in its many forms and clearly outline expectations for children and youth, as well as the adults' responsibilities with respect to curbing bullying and providing an environment that promotes healthy relationships and healthy development.

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[1] Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do.* Oxford: Blackwell.
[2] Lee, C. (2006). Exploring teachers' definitions of bullying. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 11,* 61-75.
[3] Pepler, D. J., Craig, W. M., Connolly, J. A., Yuile, A., McMaster, L., & Jiang, D. (2006). A developmental perspective on bullying. *Aggressive Behaviour, 32,* 376-384.
[4] See note 1 above.
[5] Sutton, J., Smith, P. K., & Swettenham, J. (1999). Social cognition and bullying: Social inadequacy or skilled manipulation? *British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 17,* 435-450.
[6] See note 1 above.
[7] Salmivalli, C., Lagerspetz, K., Björkqvist, K., Österman, K., & Kaukiainen, A. (1996). Bullying as a group process: Participant roles and their relations to social status within the group. *Aggressive Behavior, 24*, 205-218.
[8] Pepler, D., Craig, W., Connolly, J., & Henderson, K. (2002). Bullying, sexual harassment, dating violence, and substance use among adolescents. In C. Wekerle & A. M. Wall (Eds.), *The violence and addiction equation: Theoretical and clinical issues in substance abuse and relationship violence*. (153-168) Brunner/Mazel: Philadelphia.
[9] Madsen, K. (1996) Differing perceptions of bullying and their practical implications, *Educational and Child Psychology, 13,* 14-22.