



## How Peers Influence Bullying

### Full Reference

Craig, W. & Pepler, D. J. (1997). Observations of bullying and victimization in the schoolyard. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 13, 41-60.

### Key Words

Bullying, peers, observations

### Main Question

The purpose of this study was to use naturalistic observations to better understand the roles of peers in bullying episodes and the potential processes within the peer group as they impact on bullying.

### Background

In spite of early recognition of the involvement of the peer group in bullying, much of the research has focused on individual bullies and victims. Bullying research has been limited by a reliance on questionnaire methodologies.

Children report that bullying occurs most frequently at school. Data from self-report questionnaires suggest that most students would shun bullying and actively support the victim. A vast majority (88%) of elementary school students indicate that watching bullying is somewhat or very unpleasant (Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1993), while 70-80% of students report that they would not join in bullying someone they disliked (Pepler et al., 1993). Almost half the students report that they would intervene to assist the victim and stop bullying (Whitney & Smith, 1993). Taken together, these self-report data suggest that peers would seldom behave in a manner to exacerbate bullying, but rather that they would support the victim. Unfortunately, children's attitudes and self-reports do not necessarily represent the children's actual behaviour in bullying situations. Social desirability may operate in these self-reports to obscure the extent to which peers align with the bully and promote bullying interactions.

### Who Was Involved

Children in this study were observed either bullying or being victimized on tapes of playground interaction gathered in the original study of 6- to 12-year-old children. There were 96 children (52 males, 44 females). Within these two samples, 21% of the children were observed as bullies, 33% as victims, and 46% as bully/victims.





## What We Found

Peers were observed to be involved in some capacity in 85% of the bullying episodes. Peers actively took part in 48% of the episodes. The roles of peers in bullying episodes included: being actively involved (i.e., being physically or verbally abusive to the victim), observing the aggressive interaction, being involved in the same activity as the bully prior to the episode, or intervening to terminate the interaction. In 81% of the episodes, the peers reinforced the bullying episode. In addition, peers were coded as being significantly more respectful to bullies (74% of the episodes) than victims (23% of the episodes). These ratings indicate peers tended to side with the bully and therefore may have influenced the balance of power in favour of the bully in the interaction. The results provide preliminary evidence to support the following peer processes in bullying: reinforcement, modelling (copying), emotional contagion, and a weakening of control against aggressive tendencies.

Emotional arousal and contagion can arise because bullies likely derive some sense of satisfaction and pleasure from their attacks on victims. Children on our questionnaires suggested that bullies often bully "just for the fun of it" (Pepler et al., 1993). Although most children indicate that it is unpleasant to watch bullying, the emotional processes within the peer group surrounding bullying may be similar to those which heighten arousal during a professional boxing match or when a fight breaks out in hockey games. As the arousal spreads through the peer group, children may focus less on the distress of the victim and become more inclined to take an active role in bullying.

Peers were observed intervening in 13% of the bullying episodes in which they were present. Peers intervened significantly less often in a socially appropriate manner than in a socially inappropriate manner, (7.4% and 3.5% of the episodes, respectively). In contrast, school staff intervened in 4% of the observed bullying episodes. Intervention by peers in support of victims may defuse and terminate bullying interactions, but observational data indicate that only children with a high social status intervene on the behalf of victims (Ginsberg & Miller, 1981; Salmivalli et al., 1996). Researchers suggest that the link between high status and intervention may relate to the pro-social nature of popular children and/or to their confidence in standing up to the bully.

## Implications

The peer group's disrespect for victims suggests that empathy for the child being victimized needs to be developed in the peer group. Although peers intervened in significantly more episodes than adults, the higher rate of intervention is partly a function of their presence during bullying. Peer intervention is relatively infrequent given the high level of peer participation in bullying episodes. There are several possible explanations for the lack of intervention by peers. Peers may not consider the behaviour



disturbing or warranting intervention, although 90% of children in the study reported that bullying is disturbing to watch (Ziegler et al., 1993). Still further, peers may be afraid of reprisals from other students (i.e., they may be the next victim).

The involvement of the peer group in bullying problems is substantial. Whether peers are observing or actively participating, the peer group is likely to be aware of bullying episodes. Peers likely serve to reinforce and maintain the high frequency of these episodes by attending, deferring, complimenting, and failing to intervene. The attitude of the peer group and the acceptance of this level of violence on the playground contribute to the continuation of bullying. Intervention programs need to involve the peer group and change the attitudes, behaviours and norms around bullying. One way of achieving this goal is to build on children's expressions of discomfort in watching bullying. The peer group needs to recognize the problem of bullying and their potential contributions to the problem and develop a repertoire of strategies for intervening themselves or seeking adult assistance to stop bullying. Developing an attitude in the peer group which condemns violence and those who engage in violence will contribute to decreasing the number of incidents of bullying on the playground.