



Peer Intervention During Bullying Episodes

Full Reference

Hawkins, D. L., Pepler, D. J., & Craig, W. M. (2001). Naturalistic observations of peer interventions in bullying. *Social Development, 10*, 512-527.

Keywords

Bullying, peer intervention, gender differences

Main Questions

How often do children intervene in bullying situations on behalf of their peers? What are those interventions like? Are peer interventions effective in stopping bullying?

Background

Despite the fact that bullying is often described as a group phenomenon, most researchers have focused on the characteristics and actions of the two main players: the bullying child and the child being bullied. Little is known about the role of peers in bullying situations, particularly the role of peers in intervention. Peers are present during most (85%) bullying episodes. These peers who are standing by and watching have the potential to intervene, either with the child who is bullying or the child who is being bullied. Interestingly, most children say that they believe bullying is wrong and they are supposed to help another child if he/she is being bullied. Our observations show that peers only intervene to stop bullying in approximately 10% of bullying episodes (both in the classroom and on the playground). In other words, while most children find bullying unpleasant to watch and know they should intervene, few children actually do.

Who Was Involved

We recorded children's play with video cameras and wireless microphones on the playgrounds of two schools involved in a bullying prevention program. Video clips of children who were seen intervening in a bullying episode were selected for further examination. Eighty-four children were observed intervening in 65 of the 306 bullying episodes on the playground. Research assistants coded the interveners' behaviours, including what they said and what they did, the number of peer interveners in an episode, the gender of the bullying and victimized children, the effectiveness of the intervention, the duration of the intervention, and whether or not the victimized child had requested help.





What We Found

Peers intervened in 19% of all bullying episodes seen on the playground. Boys were present as observers in more of the episodes than were girls. Boys and girls intervened at equal rates given their representation in the peer group during bullying episodes. In other words, while the absolute number of boy interveners was higher than girl interveners, there were no differences in the likelihood of intervention for boys and girls based on who was present during the episode. When children did intervene, the intervention lasted, on average, for 17 seconds when a boy intervened and 11 seconds when a girl intervened. The longest intervention lasted for 1 minute and 58 seconds.

What types of interventions were interveners likely to use? The most frequently used intervention strategy was verbal assertion (29%) followed by physical aggression (21%). An interesting difference emerged where girls were most likely to use verbal assertion (48%) followed by physical aggression (19%), whereas boys used physical aggression and verbal assertion with equal likelihood (22% and 19%, respectively). Overall, 47% of all interventions were aggressive in nature and 53% were non-aggressive in nature. When intervening, most children targeted their intervention at the child who was bullying. When interventions were targeted at the aggressive child, the intervention was more likely to be aggressive than non-aggressive (60% and 39%, respectively). On the other hand, when interventions were targeted at the victimized child, the interventions were more likely to be non-aggressive than aggressive (78% and 22%, respectively). In only 10% of the episodes did a victimized child request help from peers.

Are peer interventions effective at stopping bullying? When a peer intervened, 57% of the time the bullying stopped within 10 seconds, 26% of the time the bullying did not stop, and the remaining 17% of the time it was not possible to determine the success of the intervention. Successful interventions did not depend on the nature of the intervention (i.e., whether it was aggressive or non-aggressive). In other words, approximately half the successful interventions were aggressive and approximately half were non-aggressive. Interestingly, the longer an intervention lasted, the less effective it was.

Implications

Children can be effective in stopping bullying, but they need to learn effective strategies. Children more often target their interventions at the children doing the bullying and they often choose aggressive ways of intervening with these children. It may be that peers choose to model the aggressive behaviour they see being displayed, or maybe they have learned from the past that aggression is the only way to 'speak' to these children.



The implication is that children need to be taught how to use more pro-social or non-aggressive strategies (because we know non-aggressive strategies are just as effective), particularly when intervening toward the aggressive child.

Interveners who used non-aggressive strategies were just as effective as those who used aggressive strategies. Although children may have learned that aggressive strategies are often effective in solving social problems, we must help them understand that aggressive behaviour may provide immediate gains (i.e., stopping the bullying), but it will not solve the problem of bullying in the long term. Some concerns associated with aggressive interventions include: increasing the aggressive interactions, placing the intervener at risk, and reinforcing aggressive strategies as an appropriate means of conflict resolution. It is important for educators and researchers to provide children with appropriate strategies to intervene safely and effectively. To be effective, school-based intervention programs must encourage bystanders to intervene to support victimized children, but children cannot do it alone – they need adult leadership and support.