

Submission
No 37

INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Inquiry into Bullying**

**Invited submission presented on behalf of the Child and Youth Network,
University of Sydney**

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This submission focuses on bullying as it occurs in schools among school age children. The aim of this submission is to highlight the complex nature of bullying and the key factors that need to be considered when developing and implementing anti-bullying strategies in schools.

1. The nature, level and impact of bullying among school age children

- 1.1 Bullying is differentiated from other forms of aggressive behaviour in that it involves a more powerful group/individual dominating through violence, aggression or intimidation a less powerful group/individual over an extended period of time (Olweus 1997).
- 1.2 Based on research examining gender and developmental differences in children's aggression (Bjoerkqvist, Lagerspetz, Kaukiainen 1992), bullying behaviours have been classified into two distinct categories, direct and indirect bullying (Rivers & Smith 1994).
- 1.3 Direct bullying is characterised by behaviours that involve hitting, kicking, pinching, taking money or belongings, name calling, taunting and threatening (Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, Karstadt 2000), extortion, slander, damage to property, and verbal and physical intimidation (Smith & Sharp, 1994).
- 1.4 Indirect bullying/aggression is the hurtful manipulation of peer relationships/ friendships to inflict harm on others through behaviours such as social exclusion and rumour spreading (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995).
- 1.5 Peer victimization or aggression (ie bullying) should not be confused with 'teasing', which, if good-natured, is often used as a means of bonding between close friends. When teasing takes the form of intentional and persistent public humiliation, however, it is viewed as

'ridicule,' a variant of bullying behaviour that cannot be assumed to be part of normal developmental experiences in children (Brendtro, 2001).

1.6 Gender differences have been observed in school bullying. Boys are more likely than girls to be both bullies and victims of bullying (Boulton, Smith 1994; Boulton & Underwood 1992). Although maleness itself is probably not a causal factor as some have suggested (e.g. Egger, 1995), the social and situational forces that combine with masculinity may well be. School bullying seems to be more frequent among boys than girls and among younger than older students. Rigby and Slee (1993) identified 10% of 201 boys aged 7-13 compared with 6% of 211 girls as victims of school bullying. Girls, however, may engage in more covert forms of indirect bullying behaviours such as rumour spreading, social rejection and exclusion so that the actual rates of bullying among girls may be underestimated (Crick, Bigbee, Howes 1996). However, young boys may be equally involved in relational bullying (Wolke et al 2000).

1.7 One Australian study reported that one in 6 students is bullied on a weekly basis and 1 in 10 are perpetrators of bullying (Rigby, 1996).

Another Australian study Forero et al (1999) investigated the prevalence of bullying and its association with mental health in New South Wales government and non government schools. The researchers used a cross sectional survey methodology with a sample size of 3,918. The students sampled were in year 6, year 8 and year 10 in 115 schools. Results showed that 23.7% bullied other students, 12.7% were bullied, 21.5% both bullied and were bullied and 42.4% were neither bullied or bullied others, on one or more occasions in the most recent term of school. More boys than girls reported either being a bully or a victim.

Bullying can occur among children as young as 5 years old and its prevalence usually decreases with age (Fererio et al., 1999). However, around 4-14% of young people are chronically victimized for extended periods during their school years (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). The persistent victimization of specific children becomes quite stable by the end of primary school (Browning et al., 2003).

1.8 Kenny and Nelson (2008) reported on the bullying experiences of young offenders. Bullying occurred most commonly between classes and before and after school hours (47%). The perpetrators of bullying were mostly older males (59%). Twenty-two percent (22%) young offenders reported being both a victim and perpetrator of bullying. Young offenders from regional (68%) areas were more likely to report bullying than offenders living in Sydney (52%), and younger offenders (<16 years) were more likely to report bullying (62%) than older offenders (53%). Eleven percent (11%) indicated that they had experienced some form of bullying in the six months preceding the survey.

1.9 There is a robust association between involvement in the schoolyard bullying and an array of seriously adverse concurrent, delayed and/or long-lasting consequences for growing children (Eron 1998). School shooting tragedies in the US revealed that more than two thirds of shooters were victims of chronic school bullying (Scott, Hague-Armstrong & Downes 2003).

1.10 All forms of peer victimization carry substantial risk of psychological, psychosomatic and behavioural consequences for all the people involved either as bullies, victims or bullvics (ie; people who are both bullies and victims) (Eron, 1998). Being bullied has been consistently associated with insecurity, suicidal ideation, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties, and poor academic achievement (Scott et al. 2003; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela, & Rantanen 1999). Characteristics associated with bullies include conduct disorder, gang affiliation, substance abuse, school drop out and violence/delinquency in adulthood (Scott et al 2003). Bullvics are at greatest risk of peer rejection, serious behavioural and mental health problems and school failure (Forero, McLellan, Rissel & Bauman 1999). Bullying has been identified as a precursor for criminal behaviour, poor mental health and diminished school performance (Smith & Brain 2000).

- 1.11 Bullying is the third leading cause of youth suicide in the USA (Poland & Lieberman 2003). Similar effects of bullying are evident internationally. For example, a study of Korean children (Kim, Koh & Laventhal 2005) found that students who were involved in school bullying, especially victim-perpetrators and female students, had significantly higher risks for suicide ideation and suicidal behavior compared with individuals who were not involved in school bullying. Rigby and Slee in South Australia conducted three studies between 1993 and 1996 on self-reports of adolescents' suicidal ideation and self harm attempts (Rigby 1997). Self-reports on suicidal ideation and self-harm were found to be significantly associated with reports of being bullied by peers and also bullying others.
- 1.12 School children are concerned about bullying as indicated by the types of calls young people make to the Kids' Help Line. Although relationship difficulties remain the primary concern for young people, in 2002 the next most common problem area was school, involving problems like bullying. Calls to the Kids' Help Line about these problems increased from 11% in 1994 to 17% in 2002 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2003).

2. Factors contributing to bullying

- 2.1 At least four factors contribute to bullying and victimisation in schools (a) personal factors such as ethnic background, religion and gender; (b) socio-economic issues such as area of residence, perceptions of being rich or poor and the way people dress; (c) school-attitudes held by students, scholastic aptitude, sports ability and (d) being perceived as different. It is unclear whether these characteristics apply equally to boys or girls and whether they apply differentially to those victimising or those being victimised (Glover, Cartwright, Gleeson 1998).
- 2.2 Crick and Dodge (1994) proposed a social cognitive filtering model to explain individuals' responses to social situations. The 'cognitive filter' in aggressive individuals is biased, interpreting neutral or ambiguous cues as hostile, making it more likely that such individuals will engage in aggressive behaviours. Bosworth, Espelage and Simon (1999) found that misconduct, anger and beliefs supportive of violence were significantly related to bullying behaviours in a sample of adolescent high school students.

Bullies are part of highly structured social groups that require a sophisticated theory of mind to engage in bullying successfully. Theory of mind refers to the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others in order to explain or predict one's own and others' behaviour. Take, for example, the skills required to engage in indirect bullying such as exclusion. A bully employing exclusion needs an understanding of: who is a safe target; who will join him/her in excluding the target; what reasons peers will consider justifiable to engage in excluding other students, and mobilising those cognitions in order to incite other students to exclude the target. Such sophisticated cognitions do not support the proposal that bullies are cognitively inept or intellectually challenged in their interactions with peers (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham 1999).

- 2.3 Consistent across different cultures, children characterised either by themselves and/or their peers as submissive, withdrawn, more introverted, less assertive, or aggressive (in case of bullies) are likely to become victims of maltreatment by peers (Schwartz, Farver, Chang & Lee-Shin, 2002; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999).
- 2.4 Bullies tend to hold unrealistically favourable personal views of their self-efficacy and self-esteem that are contradicted by other people (Natvig, Albreksten, & Qvanstorm, 2001).
- 2.5 In a young offender sample (n=800) (aged 12-18 years), 64% of the bullies reported that they felt either no feelings at all or positive (feeling justified or superior) personal emotional consequences of their bullying behaviour (Kenny & Nelson, 2008). This lack of victim

empathy is a major concern that predicts poor outcomes of intervention and recidivism and warrants further investigation.

3. Issues related to prevention and early intervention approaches to address bullying

- 3.1 Almost half of the victims of bullying do not report being bullied to their teachers (Fekkes, Pijpers & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005).
- 3.2 Unless consistent and immediate negative consequences are delivered to the bully, the bullying behaviour is reinforced and there is an increased likelihood of recurrences (Yoon & Kerber, 2003).
- 3.3 Teachers and other school staff may model bullying behaviours (Yoon & Kerber 2003). Hence, teachers need to learn effective ways to become aware of their own behaviour and attitudes towards bullying and to deal effectively with bullying incidents (Fekkes et al 2005).
- 3.4 Attitudes are important since research has shown that children hold attitudes that are congruent with their behaviour (Boulton, Bucci, & Hawker 1999). However, there is scant evidence indicating that targeting attitudes towards bullying is an effective anti-bullying strategy.
- 3.5 Most children will articulate opposition to bullying but are reluctant to intervene to assist a peer who is being bullied (Rigby & Slee 1991). Children express admiration for peers who intervene to assist a victim, but this does not enhance their victim support behaviour, acceptance of the victim or denunciation of the bully's behaviour. Children, both male and female, also report less victim empathy with increasing age, evincing erosion in anti-bullying attitudes over time (Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij & Van Oost 2000). Children express anxiety about intervening related to fear that they may become the bully's next victim, fear of loss of social status, and concern at their lack of ability to handle the situation effectively. These are powerful personal and interpersonal factors that must be addressed in any prevention and early intervention approaches.
- 3.6 Bullying is a relational phenomenon that occurs in a social context. Children's individual characteristics interact with the school and classroom environment to produce behaviour. A full understanding of bullying cannot be found in the examination of the individual characteristics of bullies and victims alone. The behaviour of peers who either participate in or observe bullying behaviour often reinforces bullying through provision of attention to the bully, or deferential behaviour towards him/her after the bullying incident. Bullying interventions need to take an ecological approach to the problem that includes individuals, dyads, groups and the whole school community.
- 3.7 Bullying may be construed as a type of social interaction used to form group membership. Once formed, victimising other students may enhance the solidarity of the group and bullies within the group may increase their status as a result of their bullying behaviour. Victims may observe the success of bullies in terms of their status within a peer group and begin to model the bullying behaviour in an attempt to increase their own social status and self-esteem. These complex forces that encourage and maintain bullying must be identified and assessed both ecologically and for individual students within the social network before effective interventions can be developed (Merton, 1996).

4. Evidence-base for effective anti-bullying approaches

- 4.1 There are few comprehensive assessment protocols for accurately measuring bullying and differentiating the various forms of bullying that occur. Robust assessment instruments are a pre-requisite of sound research.
- 4.2 Much research has focused on the characteristics and interactions between individual bullies and victims. However, bullying very frequently occurs within social relationships and usually with peers present (Andreoua, Didaskaloub & Vlachoub (2008) or in a gang setting. Research into bullying therefore needs to be extended to cover both group and individual bullying and to assess and address maintaining factors within the social environment in which bullying occurs.
- 4.3 Results of existing bullying interventions, both psychological and ecological in approach, have been, on the whole, disappointing or contradictory (Andreoua, Didaskaloub & Vlachoub 2008).

5. Approaches to address bullying in Australia

- 5.1 An ecological approach implies a whole school approach to the problem of bullying. Structural, intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and whole school community strategies need to be implemented simultaneously. These include:

Structural approaches:

- a. Governmental and Departmental support from the Minister and Director General of Education - (conducting a campaign such as the "To violence against women, Australia says no").
- b. School policy that is developed consultatively between teachers, parents and students, that is on public display and taught and reinforced in classrooms;
- c. Teacher training to support anti-bullying program
- d. Parent education to help them identify parenting strategies that may inadvertently support bullying behaviour (eg Authoritarian, power-assertive, punitive parenting)
- e. Adequate supervision in playgrounds, toilets and other venues where bullying is likely to occur, including moving between classrooms in high schools (Kenny & Nelson, 2008).
- f. Immediate, consistent negative consequences enforced for bullying behaviour;
- g. Provision of a safe means whereby victims can report being bullied;
- h. Provision of overt support for students who intervene against bullying and for those who support/befriend victims

Psycho educational approaches:

- a. Pre-service and in-service training for teachers in understanding causal factors and motivation for behaviour; thorough training in behavioural management techniques, ability to conduct a functional analysis of behaviour; modelling of appropriate pro-social and problem-solving behaviours; consistent implementation of natural and logical consequences.
- b. Provision of parent training programs; support for families with problems; encouragement of parent participation in school activities.
- c. Personal skills training for students by classroom teachers, PDPHE teachers, school counsellors etc in social skills, problem solving etc
- d. Additional structural (protection) or psychological support (counselling, psychotherapy, family therapy etc) for vulnerable students

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