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Focus on: Bullying

A report from the Anti-Bullying Alliance,
hosted by National Children's Bureau

Following precedent,
this report focuses on
research based in
the UK since 2010,
while mentioning
major developments
internationally

Cover:
Students at Passmores Academy, Harlow, Essex feel safe to report bullying
as they know staff will support them and issues will be tackled openly.

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Recent developments

There have been more publications with the keyword bully in the last 5 years, than in the previous 50 years

Two previous *Highlights on Bullying* in schools were published in 2000 and 2005, and one on *Bullying* in 2010^{1,2,3}. It is restricted to research about children and young people, for whom the issue continues to be important. For bullying in other contexts, see⁴; for bullying in university students, see⁵; for bullying in different countries, see⁶. Publications have grown exponentially. Judging by ISI Web of Science, there have been more publications with the keyword bully in the last 5 years, than in the previous 50 years. Fortunately an increasing number of meta-analyses are helping us draw conclusions on risk factors and interventions⁷. Following precedent, this Highlight focuses on research based in the UK since 2010, while mentioning major developments internationally.

Government and organisations

In England, the DfE issued revised guidance⁸ on *Preventing and tackling bullying* in October 2014, covering legal requirements, stating that 'Teachers have the power to discipline pupils for misbehaving outside the school premises "to such an extent as is reasonable"', and that 'Schools should apply disciplinary measures to pupils who bully in order to show clearly that their behaviour is wrong'. The 2014 revision expanded the definition of bullying in an earlier 2012 version, to include acknowledgement that "Many experts say that bullying involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim".

The Ofsted framework for school inspection⁹ asks inspectors to consider 'freedom from bullying and harassment that may include cyber-bullying and prejudice-based bullying related to special educational need, sexual orientation, sex, race, religion and belief, gender reassignment or disability'. See websites (at end) for statements from Welsh Assembly, resources in Scotland and consultation in Northern Ireland.

The Anti-Bullying Alliance, hosted by the National Children's Bureau, and many of its member organisations are involved in anti-bullying work and provide resources (see websites).

Recording bullying

In its guide for school governors, the Anti-Bullying Alliance¹⁰ recommends that schools have a system to record all bullying incidents, including action taken following an incident and the outcome. In a survey of 56 schools in the UK, Ofsted¹¹ found a wide variety of practice in recording methods. When kept, incident records often recorded who was involved and where, and gave some indication of the action taken, but there was often little attention paid to the types of bullying that occurred, or to following up the initial action taken and whether it was effective.

A survey of over 11,000 secondary pupils in England and Wales¹³ reported that 11% said they had been bullied a lot and 33% sometimes

Surveys

Since the discontinuation of TELLUS surveys, there is a lack of national data available on bullying. Available surveys vary in terms of samples and methodology. Examples of pupil, teacher and parent questionnaires are available on the Anti-Bullying Alliance website.

A survey of over 35,000 secondary school pupils in England¹² asked about ways of bullying they had experienced by people from their school over the previous 12 months. Overall, 44% said they had been bullied in at least one way, but this high prevalence reflects the likelihood that even single instances of attacks were being included. Most common ways were verbal (both genders), and being left out (especially for girls), followed by physical (especially for boys) and property; cyber was less frequent; and sexual the least. There was a general decrease in victimisation with age for verbal, physical, being left out, and property, but not for cyber and sexual.

A survey of over 11,000 secondary pupils in England and Wales¹³ reported that 11% said they had been bullied a lot and 33% sometimes. Of those bullied, 88% reported it happening in school, also 31% out of school, 15% in cyberspace, 13% on mobile phone, and 15% on the journey to/from school.

A report on *Bullying in Scotland*¹⁴ used an online questionnaire and obtained 7839 usable responses from 8-19 year olds. Using a broad definition (no mention of imbalance of power), 30% of pupils reported experiencing some sort of bullying over the last school year. Of these, 40% experienced some online bullying, and of these, 91% knew who the perpetrator was. Nearly a half of victims told someone, most often a parent/carer followed by friend, and teacher/staff.

In Northern Ireland the Olweus questionnaire was given to a representative sample of 904 primary and 1,297 post-primary pupils, asking about experiences in the previous two months¹⁵. Taking '2 or 3 times a month' frequency as a cut-off, at primary school 3.9% had bullied others and 17.2% had been bullied, and at post-primary 3.4% had bullied others and 11.1% had been bullied. These relatively low figures may be a consequence of a stricter definition of bullying.

Methods

There has been debate about the origins of bullying in preschool¹⁶. Before about 6 years victim status appears unstable over time, and the term *unjustified aggression* has been proposed rather than *bullying*. However by 8 to 9 years, considerable stability was found in samples of English and German children¹⁷.

At younger ages, teacher nominations provide useful data, with self-reports considered less reliable. At older ages, both self-reports and peer nominations are widely used. Parents reports are seldom used, but a study in England and Wales¹⁸ found mother nominations of their child being a victim showed moderate agreement with child self-report through interview, greater at secondary than primary school. Mother and self-reports correlated similarly with emotional and behavioural problems, and it was argued that mothers' reports were useful, although multiple informants would be best.

Prejudice-based bullying

Sexual: Although boys can be sexually bullied by other boys or girls, boys sexual bullying of girls is most common, often sexually abusive and aggressive language focussed on a girl's sexual status. Girls also engage in sexual bullying of other girls, for example spreading comments about a girl's physical appearance or sexual reputation. Use of social networking sites now provides a frequent forum for bullying of this kind¹⁹.

Homophobic: A meta-analysis of 18 studies found the risk of victimisation significantly higher for LGBT than heterosexual pupils, with an effect size higher for boys than girls²⁰. A longitudinal study in England²¹ followed 4,135 young people 13 to 14 years old, for 6 years. Victimization experiences were higher for LGB young people generally; they declined with age, but the relative risk compared to heterosexual peers got worse for males but better for females. Emotional distress was higher in LGB young people, in part likely due to prior victimisation experiences.

Ethnicity: Although the requirement to report racist harassment in schools was rescinded in 2010/11, FOI requests and other surveys have indicated that bullying based on race, and also faith as in Islamophobia, have been frequent. However a report on ethnicity and bullying in a national UK sample of 10 to 15 year olds²² did not find that ethnic minority children were targeted more than White children, even when controlling for age, gender, parental qualifications and economic situation.

Disability: A study using Millennium Cohort and Longitudinal Study of Young People in England data found that at 7 and at 15 years, disabled children and those with special educational needs (SEN) were around twice as likely to be bullied than their non-disabled peers²³. A similar difference was found in the Northern Ireland survey¹⁵.

Cyberbullying

This topic has seen a rapid growth of studies, with a comprehensive review of risk factors²⁴. EU Kids Online provided data on both online and offline bullying in 2010 based on random stratified sampling of some 1000 children, aged 9-16 years, in 25 European countries²⁵. When asked about hurtful or nasty things happening to them, often repeatedly, over the last 12 months (imbalance of power was not mentioned), 19% were bullied in any way, with 6% bullied online; the corresponding UK figures were 21% and 8%. A follow-up of 7 countries including the UK, in 2013/14, found that in these countries being bullied online had increased from 8% to 12%, the increase being more marked in girls²⁶.

A study of 1045 English secondary school pupils in 2011 found that social networking sites provided the most common venue for cyberbullying. In terms of coping, about a quarter of victims tried to ignore it, and many told a friend or a parent, fewer telling a teacher²⁷. Quality circles have been proposed as one useful way to inform teachers and involve pupils in solution finding²⁸. A report on cyberbullying and the law²⁹ provides a useful overview, however focussing on Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

A study of 1,045 English secondary school pupils in 2011 found that social networking sites provided the most common venue for cyberbullying

Sibling bullying increased the risks of peer bullying, and contributed additionally to the negative effects of being bullied

Risk factors for involvement

Families: A meta-analysis of 70 studies on parenting factors and peer victimization (separately for victims and bully-victims)³⁰ found positive parenting protected against being a victim, and negative parenting associated with greater risk. The links were larger for bully/victims for all measures except overprotection. Parental abuse and neglect had the strongest links, especially for bully/victims.

A review of 12 studies of sibling bullying³¹ found it to have higher prevalence than peer bullying, and related to parenting quality and behaviour. Sibling bullying increased the risks of peer bullying, and contributed additionally to the negative effects of being bullied.

Friends and reputation: High-status friends can protect against victimization, but stability of victim status makes it difficult for a victim to change their reputation and have many such friends. A study using hypothetical vignettes with English 11–13 year olds³² found that pupils said they would be less likely to befriend a new pupil, or think that other pupils would do so, if told that s/he had been the victim of bullying in previous schools; probably because they would see this as risky for their own status, and chances of being victimised.

Individual characteristics: An examination of personality factors including cognitive and affective empathy, and impulsivity, in English 13–17 year olds³³, taking account of many other factors, found that impulsivity was the most important in predicting bullying others. Boys who bullied also had lower affective empathy, but not lower cognitive empathy (findings for girls were non-significant). The importance of self-esteem and empathy was also shown in a study of cyberbullying in 16–18 year olds³⁴.

The importance of theory of mind skills (understanding others mental states) used data from the longitudinal E-risk study in England and Wales of over 1000 twin pairs³⁵. Poorer theory of mind scores at age 5 predicted victim, bully and bully/victim roles at age 12; however, when other factors were taken account of, only the associations for victim and bully/victim remained significant.



A sense of community underpins Passmores Academy in Harlow, Essex where all pupils are taught the importance of solidarity and caring for others

Photo: Matt Writtle © 2015

Consequences

Based on national survey data of 10-15 year olds, *The Good Childhood Report*³⁶ found a substantial relationship of being bullied to lower subjective well-being, greater than the effects of all demographic factors combined.

Data from the longitudinal ALSPAC study³⁷ found that being a victim at 8-10 years predicted later internalising symptoms at 11-14 years, notably severe depression; the risks increased for stable victimisation involving multiple forms.

Meta-analyses of many reports from longitudinal studies^{38,39} confirmed that even after adjustments for a range of other factors, victims at school especially, but also children that bully, were at greater risk of later depression; also children that bully were at considerably greater risk for later offending.

Data from the E-risk study⁴⁰ found exposure to frequent bullying in 12 year old children predicted higher rates of self-harm, even after taking account of prior emotional problems. Other strongly contributing factors were a family history of attempted or completed suicide, and maltreatment by an adult. Using the twin data available, victimised twins were more likely to self-harm than their non-victimised co-twin, supporting a direct causal link between peer victimisation and self-harm.

Another review of longitudinal studies highlights the adverse effects of victim experiences at school and discusses processes by which they may affect later life outcomes⁴¹.

Interventions

A national survey of 1,378 schools in England during 2009–2010⁴² provided data about which anti-bullying strategies schools were using, covering proactive, reactive, and peer support. These were often used in combination, with both peer support schemes and restorative methods being used in a majority of schools. Restorative approaches are not a panacea; a review of some concerns⁴³ highlights how a bully may feign contrition in order to escape punishment; a poorly organised restorative conference can lead the victim to feel their concerns are not being respected; and restorative meetings may produce outcomes that are inconsistent with a publicly-stated school policy. However, when properly implemented restorative approaches have much potential.

Anti-bullying programmes in the UK (see websites) include Diana Award Ambassadors Programme, Kidscape ZAP and BIT programmes, and Stonewall education champions to combat homophobia. The ABA SEND programme, so far delivered training to almost 2,000 schools, looks at reducing the bullying of disabled children and those with SEN at school. e-safety training is now an important curriculum intervention for cyberbullying, with more resources available⁴⁴.

A poorly organised restorative conference can lead the victim to feel their concerns are not being respected

The effectiveness of peer support depends very much on the type of scheme used, and new methods are evolving

Meta-analyses: An analysis of 44 intervention programs worldwide found average reductions of 20-23% in bullying rates and 17-20% in victimisation rates⁴⁵, with the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in Norway, and KiVa in Finland producing reductions of around 35-50%. For reducing both bully and victim rates, the elements most associated with success were parent training/meetings, disciplinary methods, and cooperative group work, as well as the greater duration and intensity of the programme. Bully rates were reduced more by improved playground supervision, classroom management, teacher training, classroom rules, a whole school policy and school conferences. Victim rates were reduced more by greater use of videos. Work with peers was associated with increased victim rates. For both bully and victim rates, programmes were more effective for older pupils. A commentary⁴⁶ argued that it was premature to draw policy recommendations from these findings, which were based on correlational across-programme comparisons; a stronger within-programme comparison subsequently showed that interventions are more effective with younger, not older, children⁴⁷. The effectiveness of peer support depends very much on the type of scheme used, and new methods are evolving.

Eight case studies of young people who had been severely bullied in mainstream education shows how from a sheltered therapeutic learning environment at a Red Balloon Learner Centre helped them recover their self-esteem and well-being and get back on track academically to continue their studies⁴⁸.

Conclusion

The media often portray bullying as a problem that is on the increase. However, empirical studies in a wide range of countries suggest that in many countries, rates of involvement in traditional bullying have shown some decline over the last 10 or 20 years⁴⁹. For cyberbullying involvement the picture is different, with some indications of an increase (EU Kids Online follow-up). Given that anti-bullying interventions generally have some success, it is likely that increased awareness and the implementation of anti-bullying interventions have helped produce the decline in traditional bullying, with cyberbullying now requiring similar efforts.

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