



Bullying

Recent developments

Two previous *Highlights* on *Bullying in schools* were published in 2000 and 2005^{1,2}. Since then the issue of bullying has continued to be important for children and young people. Over the last five years cyberbullying has become a major topic and, since much of this happens outside school, the title of this *Highlight* has been shortened to *Bullying*. Research has progressed in understanding the group dynamics of bullying, the relative roles of individuals, school classes, whole schools and societies in the incidence of bullying, and the relative success of intervention strategies.

In England, the previous government developed a suite of *Safe to Learn* internet-based packages, including specific guidance on homophobic bullying; bullying involving children with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities; sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying; and cyberbullying (2007–09); as well as earlier guidance on bullying related to race, religion, and culture (2006). A further suite of guidance materials *Safe From Bullying Out of School Settings* (covering children's homes; extended services in and around schools; play and leisure provision; on journeys; in youth activities; in further education colleges; and in the community) were produced in 2009 (all available at teachernet – see Useful websites). The new coalition government formed in May 2010 has flagged up school bullying as a continuing priority, although new directions of focus may emerge.

A House of Commons Select Committee on Bullying in 2008 produced a report and recommendations,³ and reports have come from the (then) Children's Commissioner,⁴ and the Children's Rights Director.⁵ The Anti-Bullying Alliance and many other organisations continue to promote anti-bullying activities and resources on homophobic bullying; sexual bullying; cyberbullying; and bullying due to racism, religion and culture, SEN and disability. (see Useful websites). Internationally, work has continued in many countries, and important collections and reviews have appeared.^{6,7,8}

Recent surveys

In 2009 a *Staying Safe Survey*,⁹ reported interview data from 833 children/young people aged 12 to 17, and 1,433 parents/carers. Bullying was the second highest

concern expressed about children's safety by parents (61 per cent), and also by children (though only by 35 per cent). Some 14 per cent of children said they had experienced 'bullying' behaviours; most frequent were teasing/name calling, followed by physical bullying and then cyber-bullying. Most parents, and children, said that they would do something about bullying, most often talking to someone about it, for example at school. Over 80 per cent of such actions were reported as successful.

Two surveys used Olweus-type self-report questionnaires with pupils, and highlighted figures for being bullied 'once or twice' or more; but this is a lenient criterion that arguably does not satisfy the definition of bullying as a repeated action.¹⁰ Reported here are figures for 'two or three times a month' or more in the past couple of months. A study in 2007 of 2,132 pupils aged 9–14 years from 16 schools in Birmingham local authority,¹¹ found that 15 per cent of primary school children and 12 per cent of secondary school children had been bullied. Consistent with many previous findings, boys experienced more physical victimisation, girls more indirect forms; the majority occurred in the playground, but much in the classroom as well; many pupils told someone, more so with girls; and friendship was a protective factor. A study in 2009 of 7,448 pupils from 167 schools in Wales¹² found victimisation rates of 19 per cent in year 6, 18 per cent in year 7, and 6 per cent in year 10. Much victimisation only lasted a week or so, but for a core of around 6 per cent of pupils in years 6 and 7, it was long-lasting. Most cyber victimisation was experienced on social websites, followed by mobile phone texts, and email. A third survey¹³ of 2790 12- to 14-year-olds in 28 East London schools, found overall that 9.1 per cent were bullied sometimes or more often.

The government-sponsored Tellus surveys produced nationwide figures. Tellus3¹⁴ in 2008 found 14 per cent of 8- to 16-year-olds had been bullied in school at least once in the previous four weeks, and 8 per cent somewhere else. Tellus 4¹⁵ in 2009 used a different metric, but roughly comparable figures appear to be 8 per cent were bullied at school, and 11 per cent outside, in the previous four weeks. In 2008, 35 per cent of pupils thought their school dealt well with bullying. This increased to 59 per cent in 2009. Tellus surveys have now been discontinued.

A DfE report on a survey of c.12,500 pupils in England¹⁶ used a 'bullying' measure based on receiving one of many kinds of aggressive act over the last 12 months. This led to much higher rates of victimisation (around 40 per cent) but by most standards this is a lenient measure, including much ordinary aggression. Many correlates of this measure of victimisation were reported.

Different forms of bullying

There is consensus that traditional bullying is aggressive behaviour which intentionally hurts or harms another person, together with repetition and an imbalance of power.^{2,10} Girls' bullying (compared to boys') is more bound up with friendships, feuds and exclusion.¹⁷ A forthcoming review of identity-based bullying¹⁸ (based on characteristics such as race, religion or belief, disability, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity) discusses resources and recognition of these issues across local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales. Disability is known to be an important factor, and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders have been found to be at higher victimisation risk, especially when they misinterpret social situations.¹⁹

Internationally, there has been considerable research on homophobic bullying,²⁰ with an important finding that positive school climates can lessen negative outcomes for lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) students.²¹ A survey in Wales¹² found around 5 per cent of all pupils reported frequent homophobic bullying. This rate is much higher in LGB pupils, and in the UK a Stonewall report²² found that 65 per cent reported such victimisation. This was most frequent from boys in the same year group (c.80 per cent of cases) but not infrequently from girls (c.50 per cent). Again, having explicit school rules regarding the issue was associated with lower incidence.

Cyberbullying

Over the last decade, cyberbullying has become a significant issue.^{23,24,25} It began as text message and email bullying, and increased throughout the mid-2000s.²⁶ Since then, the development of cameras in mobile phones and increased internet use of instant messaging and social networking sites have offered many new tools for those wishing to hurt others.²⁷ Broadly speaking, cyberbullying now accounts for around one third of total bullying in young people, with a somewhat later age peak, at mid-adolescence, than is found for traditional bullying. Gender differences vary considerably between studies, but relatively, girls may be more involved in cyberbullying and victimisation. Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is much more likely to be perpetrated and experienced outside of school,²⁷ but is still often between class- or school-mates.

In cyberbullying, a single perpetrator's act can be repeated by others many times, and the concept of power imbalance is less clear. There is discussion over whether cyberbullying can be distinguished from cyber aggression more generally.²⁸

Risk factors

Behaviour genetic research is revealing important findings. The Quebec Newborn Twin Study assessed twins' victimisation at six years of age and found no contribution of genetic factors.²⁹ However, in England and Wales the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Study of over 1,000 twin pairs found a strong genetic influence on children's victimisation status at 9–10 years (MZ [identical] twins had more similar victimisation experiences than DZ twins),³⁰ and also on bullying behaviour. These genetic factors may operate through various mechanisms including personality disposition, emotion regulation or social cognition, many of which are identified as individual risk factors in bullying.³¹ For example, boys who bully have been found to have low affective empathy (sharing others' emotions), although not low cognitive empathy (understanding others emotions).³² In secondary school pupils, moral disengagement, together with expectations of positive outcomes from harmful behaviour, have been found to facilitate both traditional and cyber aggression to peers.³³

More attention has been paid to group factors and peers, with a hypothesis that some children who bully are driven by a desire for dominant status in the peer group.³⁴ This highlights the importance of bystanders, with evidence that children with both high empathy and high peer group status, can be the most effective defenders.^{35,36} In-group attitudes within the class or peer group may be influential,³⁷ and can lead to ostracism of those perceived as different,³⁸ but there is little evidence for the scapegoating theory (since many classes have no victims, and many have several).³⁹

The E-Risk study found that school factors were associated with victim risk, family factors with bully risk, and neighbourhood factors with risk of bully/victim status;⁴⁰ and that maternal and sibling warmth and positive home atmosphere contribute to resilience in coping with victimisation (this twin study demonstrating this is an environmental, not genetic, effect).⁴¹ School factors may operate through school climate, school policies and anti-bullying strategies; with some international research highlighting the role of pupil relationships with teachers.^{42,43}

Cross-national data has found an appreciable correlation (c. 0.6) between countries with high income inequality and rates of bullying others. However, the UK is one of the outliers in this analysis, being 8/37 in income inequality but only 31/37 in the index of bullying others used.⁴⁴ This may possibly indicate the

impact of sustained anti-bullying work in the UK over the last 15 years.

Consequences of involvement in bullying

Evidence continues to show that any kind of involvement in bullying is a risk factor for aspects of later adjustment. The East London study¹³ found a significant association of victimisation with poorer academic achievement. An international meta-analysis of 11 studies found that between seven and 16 years, bullies, bully-victims, and victims, all had significantly higher risk of psychosomatic problems compared to uninvolved peers.⁴⁵ A narrative review confirms that being the victim of bullying contributes independently to children's mental health problems, and can have long-lasting effects.⁴⁶ A longitudinal analysis of ALSPAC data from Bristol,⁴⁷ found that being a victim of chronic or severe bullying at 8 or 10 years was associated with substantially greater odds of psychotic symptoms at age 12, even controlling for other prior psychopathology, family adversity, and child's IQ. Both in this country and internationally, suicidal outcomes can be the most tragic consequences of inaction.⁴⁸

Anti-bullying interventions

From the 1990s and 2000s, schools in England generally increased the extent of their anti-bullying work.⁴⁹ While a range of direct sanctions remain a widely-used approach to reduce bullying, many schools also use some non-punitive approaches such as the Support Group Method,^{50,51} and there is increasing interest in use of restorative approaches.⁵² Peer support schemes are now used by an estimated 62 per cent of schools in England,⁵³ and were encouraged by the former DCSF through its Peer Mentoring Pilots scheme. Generally, peer support has benefits for peer supporters and school climate, with effects on bullying rates more variable and context-dependent.⁵⁴ A new approach is to use virtual learning environments in curriculum work.⁵⁵

An international meta-analysis of 44 school-based intervention programmes found that, on average, these reduced bullying by around 20–23 per cent and victimisation by around 17–20 per cent.⁵⁶ Various programme components were identified as important contributors to success. A new intervention campaign in Finland, KiVa, being rolled out on a national basis, includes both virtual learning environments in the classroom, and the use of prosocial, high-status peers as defenders.⁵⁷ Reductions in bullying are substantial (c.40 per cent), with indications that both more disciplinary methods, and non-punitive approaches, can be helpful.

Conclusion

Despite some fears,⁵ present indications continue to be that bullying is not getting worse, and interventions usually have positive effects. But the need for continuing anti-bullying work, in schools and other places used by children and young people, is obvious from current prevalence rates and the accumulating evidence of the causal influence of victimisation on mental health issues and adjustment. The continuing synergy between research findings, both national and international, and policy and practice, has promise of building on the modest but significant successes so far, in creating safer environments in which children and young people can live, grow, play and learn.

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Useful websites

www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/behaviour/bullying
www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour/tacklingbullying/
www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications
www.nspcc.org.uk
www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk
www.antibullying.net/ (Anti-Bullying Network (Scotland))
www.restorativejustice.org.uk (restorative justice resources)
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