

## Bullying in School: An Exploration of Peer Group Dynamics



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When one thinks of a school bully, it is common to imagine a socially incompetent boy who uses name-calling, threats, and physical force to get his way. Such a child may be a loner or have a few friends who, like himself, are socially rejected by the majority of classmates. Although there is considerable accuracy in this conception, it is incomplete and provides only one side of a very complex picture of bullying.

In addition to socially marginalized children, research has also shown that some of the most popular and influential students also tend to be involved in bullying (1, 2). **We believe that one of the reasons bullying is so difficult to eradicate in schools and in modern culture is because it is often effectively used by both children and adults.** At its core, bullying is a form of social power (Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, (3)) and it involves efforts to protect one's own status by taking advantage of the social vulnerabilities of others. Therefore, we argue that the prevention and reduction of bullying in school requires an understanding of the social dynamics that support it.

### Why Does Bullying Occur?

Building from research on children's social networks and aggression (4, 5), we have found that it is useful to think about bullying as a byproduct of the natural social dynamics that occur within schools and classrooms. When children are aggregated together, they associate with others who are similar to them or who have qualities or characteristics that in some way support their own behaviors (6). Often, this results in the development of distinct friendships and peer groups that may require the careful negotiation of relationships among multiple peers. Within this context, a social dominance hierarchy can emerge where some children have greater influence than others, either within their peer group or the broader social structure of the classroom. Further, in some classrooms, youth may continually jockey for status within the social hierarchy (7).

Some aggressive children who take on high status or leadership roles may use bullying as a way to enhance their social power and protect their prestige with peers (8, 9). In fact, some forms of bullying require social power and high status (10). Social aggression refers to causing interpersonal harm by using the social community as a means of attack. Socially aggressive strategies involve non-confrontational and largely concealed methods including starting rumors, gossiping, social ostracism, and character defamation. By late childhood, girls are particularly adept at using this form of aggression, which depends on a relatively good

understanding of classroom social dynamics and the ability to manipulate peer relationships.

In contrast, some children with low social status may use bullying as a way to deflect taunting and aggression that is directed towards them or to enhance their social position with higher status peers. Such socially marginalized students may be youth who are “wannabes” (children who are trying to hang around with more popular peers) or they may associate in peer groups with other marginalized peers who are also bullies (11).

Whether they enjoy high status or are socially marginalized, it appears that **youth who participate in bullying are in some way socially vulnerable and use bullying as an expression of power. High status bullies** use bullying strategies to protect their status and to defend against others who may challenge their social power. **Low status bullies** may use bullying as a way to gain power, to direct bullying toward others, or to counter bullying that is directed towards them.

## **Who is Involved in Bullying and what are Their Relationships with Peers?**

There are three distinct types of youth whom are directly involved in bullying: aggressive youth who are not victimized (**bullies**), aggressive youth who are also victimized (**bully-victims**), and non-aggressive youth who are victimized (**victims**). In studies with elementary and middle school students, we have found that bullies, bully-victims, and victims tend to have distinct patterns of peer relationships (4, 12). Although some bullies are not well liked by peers, many are perceived by teachers and peers as being among the most popular or “cool” students in their classrooms. They are also frequently viewed as being leaders by teachers and peers and they tend to associate with popular peers and not with peers who are socially marginalized. Further, these youth tend to not appear to feel sad or to worry about their peer relationships. In comparison, many bully-victims are highly disliked by peers and are not perceived by teachers and peers as being “cool” or popular. These youth tend to affiliate with peers who are bullies and victims and they appear to be marginalized within the classroom social structure. In contrast, non-aggressive victims tend not to be highly disliked, but are often identified as being forgotten by peers. This means these youth are not very salient or influential in the social structure. Also, non-aggressive victims tend not to be in groups that are composed primarily of bullies, but are more likely to be in groups that include other children who are victimized. However, both bully-victims and victims are more likely to cry, feel sad, and worry about peer relationships.

## **What Can Teachers and Parents do to Prevent Bullying?**

Although we argue that bullying is a natural byproduct of classroom social dynamics, we are not suggesting that it is acceptable or that it is inevitable. On the contrary, our work suggests that when teachers and parents are aware of school social dynamics they can create classroom environments that reduce the development of the structures and processes that contribute to bullying (13).

To do this, teachers and parents can do three things.

1. First, adults need to be aware of classroom social structures (7). This involves monitoring a series of questions about the classroom social dynamics.

These include:

- Which children typically affiliate together?
- Which children are leaders and are socially influential?
- Which children are socially marginalized?

Building from this awareness, teachers and parents can help children establish less hierarchically structured relationships and can promote social opportunities for all students.

2. Second, teachers and parents should monitor the interpersonal behavior patterns of children who are leaders and children who are socially marginalized. The focus here should be on teaching and reinforcing strategies of peer influence and social exchange that are not centered on social dominance or causing harm to others. It should be recognized that the needs of bullies and bully-victims might be quite distinct in this regard. For bullies, bullying behavior is likely to be maintained because it works for them. In contrast, the bullying behavior of bully-victims is likely to be maintained as a reactive response to the taunting and provocation of others.
3. Third, teachers should incorporate their knowledge and understanding of classroom social dynamics in their general classroom behavior management strategies (14). This should involve classroom management approaches that focus on teaching and reinforcing socially supportive behaviors and not on punitively reacting to problem behavior.

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