International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research Updates

Journal homepage: https://orionjournals.com/ijmru/

ISSN: 2783-0179 (Online)

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)

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The effects of childhood trauma on bullying - mental health

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International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research Updates, 2025, 09(01), 001-012

Publication history: received on 09 December 2024; revised on 14 january 2025; accepted on 17 january 2025

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.53430/ijmru.2025.9.1.0018

Abstract

Bullying is the systematic abuse of power and is defined as aggressive behavior or intentional harm-doing by peers that is carried out repeatedly and involves an imbalance of power. Being bullied is still often wrongly considered a 'normal rite of passage'. This review considers the importance of bullying as a major risk factor for poor physical and mental health and reduced adaptation to adult roles, including forming lasting relationships, integrating into work, and being economically independent. Bullying by peers has been mostly ignored by health professionals but should be considered as a significant risk factor and safeguarding issue. In addition, the present relationship between childhood trauma and the risk of bullying, in any of the capacity to either become a target, a bully or both, is explained. The review also considered the differences between direct, relational, and cyberbullying, as well as the effects on both the target, self, and the perpetrator. Particular emphasis is placed on the cumulative response and the possible consequences of bullying in the future, including the emotional state in the form of anxiety, depression, cutting oneself, and thoughts about suicide, but only among those children who face bullying every day. Through emphasizing the intricate processes and the broad impacts of bullying, this paper supports a much-engaged approach towards such issues as: early identification of bullying; the use of school-based prevention methods, and helping the students who have been bullied.

Keywords: Child Abuse; Psychology; School Health; General Pediatrics; Outcomes Research; Bullying

1. Introduction

1.1 Definition and epidemiology

Bullying is the systematic abuse of power and is defined as aggressive behavior or intentional harm-doing by peers that is carried out repeatedly and involves an imbalance of power, either actual or perceived, between the victim and the bully (Olweus, 1993). Bullying can take the form of direct bullying, which includes physical and verbal acts of aggression such as hitting, stealing, or name-calling, or indirect bullying, which is characterized by social exclusion (e.g., "you cannot play with us," "you are not invited," etc.) and rumor spreading (Rigby, 2002; Smith et al., 2008). Children can be involved in bullying as victims and bullies, and also as bully/victims, a subgroup of victims who also display bullying behavior (Haynie et al., 2001; Nansel et al., 2003). Recently, there has been much interest in cyberbullying, which can be broadly defined as any bullying performed via electronic means, such as mobile phones or the internet (Kowalski et al., 2014). One in three children report having been bullied at some point in their lives, and 10–14% experience chronic bullying lasting for more than six months (Craig et al., 2009; Wolke et al., 2013). Between 2% and 5% are bullies, and a similar number are bully/victims in childhood/adolescence (Smith et al., 2008). Rates of cyberbullying are substantially lower, at around 4.5% for victims and 2.8% for perpetrators (bullies and bully/victims), with up to 90% of the cyberbullying victims also being traditionally (face-to-face) bullied (Kowalski et al., 2014). Being bullied by peers is the most frequent form of abuse encountered by children, much higher than abuse by parents or other adult perpetrators (Radford et al., 2011).

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1.1.1 Bullying screener

- *Direct bullying* refers to harming others by directly getting at them. It is done by one or a group of pupils repeatedly against some children at school. These children:
  - Are threatened or blackmailed or have their things stolen
  - Are insulted or get called nasty names
  - Have nasty tricks played on them/are subject to ridicule
  - Are hit, shoved around or beaten up
- *Relational bullying refers to damage relationships between friends and destroy status in groups to hurt or upset someone. Over and over again some children at school:*
  - Get deliberately left out of get-togethers, parties, trips or groups
  - Have others ignore them, not wanting to be their friend anymore, or not wanting them around in their group
  - Have nasty lies, rumours or stories told about them
- *Cyberbullying is when someone tries to upset and harm a person using electronic means (eg, mobile phones, text messages, instant messaging, blogs, websites (eg, Facebook, YouTube) or emails)*
  - Have their private email, instant mail or text messages forwarded to someone else or have them posted where others can see them
  - Have rumours spread about them online
  - Get threatening or aggressive emails, instant messages or text messages
  - Have embarrassing pictures posted online without their permission
  - (Answered for A, B, and C separately on this 4-point scale)
- *How often have these things happened to you in the last 6 months?*
  - Never
  - Not much (1–3 times)
  - Quite a lot (more than 4 times)
  - A lot (at least once a week)
- *How often have you done these things to others in the last 6 months?*
  - Never
  - Not much (1–3 times)
  - Quite a lot (more than 4 times)
  - A lot (at least once a week)
- Victims: Happened to them: quite a lot/a lot; did to others: never/not much
- Bully/victims: Happened to them: quite a lot/a lot; did to others: quite a lot/a lot
- Bullies: Happened to them: never/not much; did to others: quite a lot/a lot

Adapted from references (Craig et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2008; Radford et al., 2011; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011).

1.2 Bullying is not conducting disorder

Bullying is found in all societies, including modern hunter-gatherer societies and ancient civilizations. It is considered an evolutionary adaptation, the purpose of which is to gain high status and dominance (Volk et al., 2012), get access to resources, secure survival, reduce stress, and allow for more mating opportunities (Hawley et al., 2008). Bullies are often bi-strategic, employing both bullying and also acts of aggressive 'prosocial' behavior to enhance their own position by acting in public and making the recipient dependent as they cannot reciprocate (Garandeau et al., 2014). Thus, pure bullies (but not bully/victims or victims) have been found to be strong, highly popular, and to have good social and emotional understanding (Woods et al., 2009). Hence, bullies most likely do not have a conduct disorder. Moreover, unlike conduct disorder, bullies are found in all socioeconomic groups (Tippett & Wolke, 2013) and ethnic groups (Wolke et al., 2001). In contrast, victims have been described as withdrawn, unassertive, easily emotionally upset, and as having poor emotional or social understanding (Wolke et al., 2012; Camodeca et al., 2003), while bully/victims tend to be aggressive, easily angered, low on popularity, frequently bullied by their siblings (Wolke & Skew, 2012) and come from families with lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Elgar et al., 2009), similar to children with conduct disorder.

1.3 How bullies operate

Bullying occurs in settings where individuals do not have a say concerning the group they want to be in. This is the situation for children in school classrooms or at home with siblings, and has been compared to being 'caged' with others. In an effort to establish a social network or hierarchy, bullies will try to exert their power with all children. Those who have an emotional reaction (e.g., cry, run away, are upset) and have nobody or few to stand up for them, are the repeated targets of bullies. Bullies may get others to join in (laugh, tease, hit, spread rumours) as bystanders or even as henchmen

(bully/victims). It has been shown that conditions that foster higher density and greater hierarchies in classrooms (inegalitarian conditions) (Garandeau et al., 2014), at home (Wolke & Skew, 2012), or even in nations (Elgar et al., 2009), increase bullying (Ahn et al., 2010) and the stability of bullying victimisation over time (Schafer et al., 2005).

1.4 Adverse consequences of being bullied

Until fairly recently, most studies on the effects of bullying were cross-sectional or just included brief follow-up periods, making it impossible to identify whether bullying is the cause or consequence of health problems(Schafer et al., 2005). Thus, this review focuses mostly on prospective studies that were able to control for pre-existing health conditions, family situation and other exposures to violence (eg, family violence) in investigating the effects of being involved in bullying on subsequent health, self-harm and suicide, schooling, employment and social relationships.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Childhood and adolescence (6–17 years)

A fully referenced summary of the consequences of bullying during childhood and adolescence on prospectively studied outcomes up to the age of 17 years is shown in table 1. Children who were victims of bullying have been consistently found to be at higher risk for common somatic problems such as colds, or psychosomatic problems such as headaches, stomach aches or sleeping problems, and are more likely to take up smoking (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Wolke & Lereya, 2014). Victims have also been reported to more often develop internalising problems and anxiety disorder or depression disorder (Zwierzynska et al., 2013). Genetically sensitive designs allowed comparison of monozygotic twins who are genetically identical and live in the same households but were discordant for experiences of bullying. Internalising problems were found to have increased over time only in those who were bullied (Arseneault et al., 2008), providing strong evidence that bullying rather than other factors explains increases in internalising problems. Furthermore, victims of bullying are at significantly increased risk of self-harm or thinking about suicide in adolescence (Lereya et al., 2013; Fisher et al., 2012). Furthermore, being bullied in primary school has been found to both predict borderline personality symptoms (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2010) and psychotic experiences, such as hallucinations or delusions, by adolescence (Schreier et al., 2009). Where investigated, those who were either exposed to several forms of bullying or were bullied over long periods of time (chronic bullying) tended to show more adverse effects (Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000; van Dam et al., 2012).

In contrast to the consistently moderate to strong relationships with somatic and mental health outcomes, the association between being bullied and poor academic functioning has not been as strong as expected. A meta-analysis only indicated a small negative effect of victimisation on mostly concurrent academic performance, and the effects differed whether bullying was self-reported or reported by peers or teachers (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010). Those studies that distinguished between victims and bully/victims usually reported that bully/victims had a slightly higher risk for somatic and mental health problems than pure victims (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Vaillancourt et al., 2013). Furthermore, most studies considered bullies and bully/victims together; however, as outlined above, the two roles are quite different, with bullies often highly competent manipulators and ringleaders, while bully/victims are described as impulsive and poor at regulating their emotions (Juvonen et al., 2003). We know little about the mental health outcomes of bullies in childhood, but there are some suggestions that they may also be at slightly increased risk of depression or self-harm (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2010; Winsper et al., 2012), though less so than victims. Similarly, the relationship between being a bully and somatic health is weaker than in bully/victims (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009), or bullies have even been found to be healthier and stronger than children not involved in bullying (Wolke et al., 2001). Bullying perpetration has been found to increase the risk of offending in adolescence (Ttofi et al., 2011); however, the analysis did not distinguish between bullies and bully/victims and did not include information about poly-victimisation (e.g., being maltreated by parents). Bullies were also more likely to display delinquent behaviour and perpetrate dating violence by eighth grade (Foshee et al., 2014).

3. Methodology

Table 1 Consequences of involvement in bullying behaviour in childhood and adolescence on outcomes assessed up to 17 years of age

	Findings			
Outcomes	**Victims**	**Bullies**	**Bully/victims**	**Example References**
	Health and Mental Health Issues			
Anti-social personality disorder	No significant association was found between victims and delinquent behaviour.	Bullying perpetration was strongly linked to delinquent behaviour.	Bullying victimisation was associated with delinquent behaviour.	(Barker et al., 2008)
Anxiety	Pre-school peer victimisation increases the risk of anxiety disorders in first grade. Peer victimisation (especially relational victimisation) was strongly related to adolescents' social anxiety. Moreover, peer victimisation was both a predictor and a consequence of social anxiety over time. However, Storch and colleagues' results showed that overt victimisation was not a significant predictor of social anxiety or phobia and relational victimisation only predicted symptoms of social phobia.	–	–	(Wichstrøm, Belsky, & Berg-Nielsen, 2013; Siegel, La Greca, & Harrison, 2009; Storch, Masia-Warner, Crisp, et al., 2005)
Borderline personality symptoms (BPD)	Victims showed an increased risk of developing BPD symptoms. Moreover, a dose–response effect was found: stronger associations were identified with increased frequency and severity of being bullied.	–	–	(Wolke et al., 2012)
Depression and internalising problems	Monozygotic twins who had been bullied had more internalising symptoms compared with their co-twin who had not been bullied. Peer victimisation was associated with higher overall scores, as well as increased odds of scoring in the severe range for emotional and depression symptoms. Victims were also more likely to show persistent depression symptoms over a 2-year period. Moreover, a dose–response relationship was found showing that the stability of victimisation and experiencing both direct and indirect victimisation conferred a higher risk for depression problems and depressive symptom persistence. A meta-analytic study showed significant associations between peer	Being a bully was not a predictor of subsequent depression among girls but was among boys.	Bully/victims exhibited significantly greater internalising problems.	(Zwierzynska, Wolke, & Lereya, 2013; Arseneault, Milne, Taylor, et al., 2008; Kaltiala-Heino, Fröjd, & Marttunen, 2010; Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000; Sweeting, Young, West, et al., 2006; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, et al., 2010)

	victimisation and subsequent changes in internalising problems, as well as significant associations between internalising problems and subsequent changes in peer victimisation.			
Psychotic experiences	Being bullied increased the risk of psychotic experiences. Also a dose–response relationship was found where stronger associations were identified with increased frequency, severity and duration of being bullied.	–	–	(Schreier et al., 2009; van et al., 2012)
Somatic problems	Children and adolescents who are bullied have a higher risk for psychosomatic problems such as headache, stomach ache, backache, sleeping difficulties, tiredness and dizziness. They were also more likely to display sleep problems such as nightmares and night-terrors.	Pure bullies had the least physical or psychosomatic health problems.	Bully/victims displayed the highest levels of physical or psychosomatic health problems.	(Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Wolke & Lereya, 2014; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, et al., 2001; Gini & Pozzoli, 2013)
Self-harm and suicidality	Those who are bullied were at increased risk for self-harming, suicidal ideation and/or behaviours in adolescence. Moreover, a dose–response relationship was found showing that those who were chronically bullied had a higher risk of suicidal ideation and/or behaviours in adolescence. Lastly, cyberbullying victimisation was not associated with suicidal ideation.	Pure bullies had increased risk of suicidal ideation and suicidal/self-harm behaviour according to child reports of bullying involvement.	Bully/victims were at increased risk for suicidal ideation and suicidal/self-harm behaviour.	(Barker et al., 2008; Lereya et al., 2013; Fisher et al., 2012; Winsper et al., 2012; Bannink et al., 2014)
	Academic achievement			
Academic achievement, absenteeism and school adjustment	A significant association was found between peer victimisation, poorer academic functioning and absenteeism only in fifth grade. Frequent victimisation by peers was associated with poor academic functioning (as indicated by grade point averages and achievement test scores) on both a concurrent and a predictive level. Pure victims also showed poor school adjustment and reported a more negative perceived school climate compared to bullies and uninvolved youth.	Pure bullies showed poor school adjustment.	Bully/victims showed poor school adjustment and reported a more negative perceived school climate compared to bullies and uninvolved youth.	(Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2005; Vaillancourt et al., 2013)
	Social relationships			
Dating	–	Direct bullying, in sixth grade, predicted the onset of physical dating	–	(Foshee et al., 2014)

		violence perpetration by eighth grade.		

4. Data Analysis, Presentation and Interpretation

There are a variety of potential routes by which being victimized may affect later life outcomes. Being bullied may alter physiological responses to stress (Ouellet-Morin et al., 2011), interact with a genetic vulnerability such as variation in the serotonin transporter (5-HTT) gene (Sugden et al., 2010), or affect telomere length (ageing) or the epigenome (Shalev et al., 2012). Altered HPA-axis activity and altered cortisol responses may increase the risk for developing mental health problems (Harkness et al., 2011) and also increase susceptibility to illness by interfering with immune responses (Segerstrom & Miller, 2004). In contrast, bullying may also differentially affect normal chronic inflammation and associated health problems that can persist into adulthood (Copeland et al., 2014). Chronically raised C-reactive protein (CRP) levels, a marker of low-grade systemic inflammation in the body, increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases, metabolic disorders, and mental health problems such as depression (Kaptoge et al., 2010). Blood tests revealed that CRP levels in the blood of bullied children increased with the number of times they were bullied. Additional blood tests carried out on the children after they had reached 19 and 21 years of age revealed that those who were bullied as children had CRP levels more than twice as high as bullies, while bullies had CRP levels lower than those who were neither bullies nor victims (figure 1). Thus, bullying others appears to have a protective effect consistent with studies showing lower inflammation for individuals with higher socioeconomic status (Jousilahti et al., 2003) and studies with non-human primates showing health benefits for those higher in the social hierarchy (Sapolsky, 2005). The clear implication of these findings is that both ends of the continuum of social status in peer relationships are important for inflammation levels and health status.

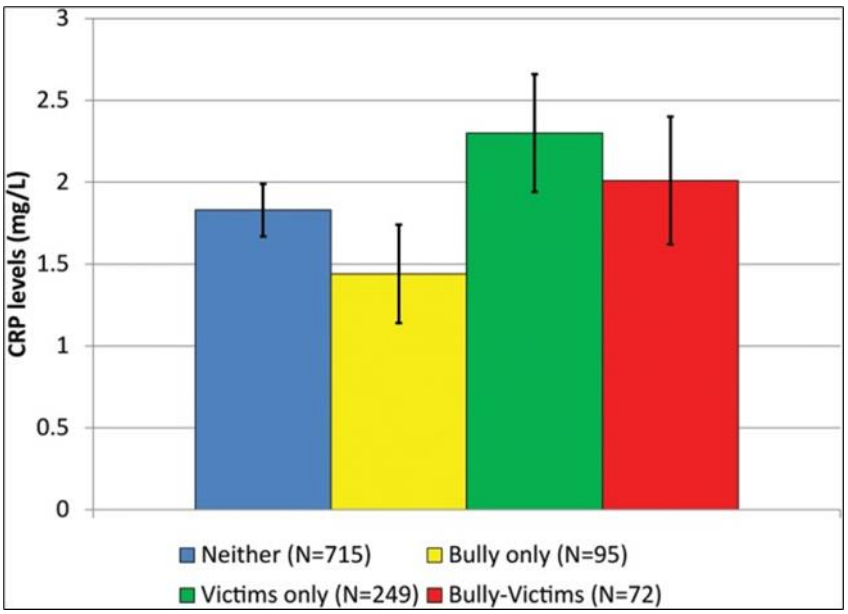

Figure 1 CRP Leval

Adjusted mean young adult C-reactive protein (CRP) levels (mg/L) based on childhood/adolescent bullying status. These values are adjusted for baseline CRP levels as well as other CRP-related covariates. All analyses used robust SEs to account for repeated observations (reproduced from Copeland et al, 2014).

Furthermore, experiences of threat by peers may alter cognitive responses to threatening situations (Sutton et al., 1999). Both altered stress responses and altered social cognition (e.g., being hypervigilant to hostile cues) (Brunstein-Klomek et al., 2009) and neurocircuitry related to bullying exposure may affect social relationships with parents, friends, and co-workers. Finally, victimization, in particular of bully/victims, affects schooling and has been found to be associated with school absenteeism. In the UK alone, over 16,000 young people aged 11–15 are estimated to be absent from state school with bullying as the main reason, and 78,000 are absent where bullying is one of the reasons given for

absence (Bogart et al., 2014). The risk of failure to complete high school or college in chronic victims or bully/victims increases the risk of poorer income and job performance (Sigurdson et al., 2014).

5. Conclusion

Childhood bullying has serious effects on health, resulting in substantial costs for individuals, their families, and society at large. In the USA, it has been estimated that preventing high school bullying results in lifetime cost benefits of over $1.4 million per individual (Masiello et al., 2012). In the UK alone, over 16,000 young people aged 11–15 are estimated to be absent from state school with bullying as the main reason, and 78,000 are absent where bullying is one of the reasons given for absence (Brown et al., 2011). Many bullied children suffer in silence and are reluctant to tell their parents or teachers about their experiences, for fear of reprisals or because of shame. Up to 50% of children say they would rarely, or never, tell their parents, while between 35% and 60% would not tell their teacher (Radford et al., 2013).

Considering this evidence of the ill effects of being bullied and the fact that children will have spent much more time with their peers than their parents by the time they reach 18 years of age, it is more than surprising that childhood bullying is not at the forefront as a major public health concern (Scrabstein & Merrick, 2012). Children are hardly ever asked about their peer relationships by health professionals. This may be because health professionals are poorly educated about bullying and find it difficult to raise the subject or deal with it (Dale et al., 2014). However, it is important considering that many children abstain from school due to bullying and related health problems, and being bullied throws a long shadow over their lives. To prevent violence against the self (e.g., self-harm) and reduce mental and somatic health problems, it is imperative for health practitioners to address bullying.

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