

Name: _____ Class: _____

Bullying in Early Adolescence

The Role of the Peer Group

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This informational text explores various research studies about adolescents bullying their peers, with a focus on how peer groups play a role. As you read, take notes on the evidence each of the scientific studies provides about how bullying occurs.

[1] A recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association demonstrated the seriousness of bullying in American schools. In a nationally representative sample of over 15,686 students in the United States (grades 6 through 10), 29.9% self-reported frequent involvement in bullying at school, with 13% participating as a bully, 10.9% as a victim, and 6% as both (Nansel et al., 2001). Aggression and violence during childhood and adolescence have been the focus of much research over the past several decades (e.g., Loeber & Hay, 1997; Olweus, 1979). These researchers have found that serious forms of aggression remain relatively stable from childhood through adulthood; however, Loeber and Hay (1997) argue that mild forms of aggression may not begin for some children until early or late adolescence. Despite Loeber and Hay's findings, very little research has been conducted on mild forms of aggression, such as bullying, during the middle years. One notable gap in the evolving literature on bullying and victimization¹ during early adolescence is the role that peers play in promoting bullying and victimization by either reinforcing the aggressor, failing to intervene to stop the victimization, or affiliating² with students who bully. This *Digest* looks at the limited research available on the role of the peer group in bullying to learn more about how bullying and victimization might emerge or continue during early adolescence.



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Definitions of Bullying

While definitions of bullying often differ semantically, many of them have one concept in common: Bullying is a subtype of aggression (Dodge, 1991; Olweus, 1993; Smith & Thompson, 1991). The following definitions are common in the literature: "A person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (Olweus, 1993, p. 9). "A student is being bullied or picked on when another student says nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a student is hit, kicked, threatened, locked inside a room, sent nasty notes, and when no one ever talks to him" (Smith & Sharp, 1994, p. 1).

1. **Victimization (noun):** the process of making someone the victim of cruel treatment
 2. **Affiliate (verb):** to closely connect

Peer Acceptance and Status

During early adolescence, the function and importance of the peer group can change dramatically (Crockett, Losoff, & Petersen, 1984; Dornbusch, 1989). Adolescents, seeking autonomy³ from their parents, turn to their peers to discuss problems, feelings, fears, and doubts, thereby increasing the salience⁴ of time spent with friends (Sebold, 1992; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). However, this reliance on peers for social support is coupled with increasing pressures to attain social status (Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Eder, 1985). It is during adolescence that peer groups become stratified⁵ and issues of acceptance and popularity become increasingly important. Research indicates, for example, that toughness and aggressiveness are important status considerations for boys, while appearance is a central determinant⁶ of social status among girls (Eder, 1995). Some researchers believe that the pressure to gain peer acceptance and status may be related to an increase in teasing and bullying. This behavior may be intended to demonstrate superiority over other students for boys and girls, either through name-calling or ridiculing.

Setting the Stage for Bullying in Middle School

Research with elementary school children in other countries supports the view that peer group members reinforce and maintain bullying (e.g., Craig & Pepler, 1997; Salmivalli et al., 1996). These authors contend that bullying can best be understood from a social-interactional perspective (i.e., bullying behaviors are considered a result of a complex interaction between individual characteristics, such as impulsivity,⁷ and the social context, including the peer group and school social system). Participation of peers in the bullying process was clearly evident when Pepler and her colleagues videotaped aggressive and socially competent⁸ Canadian children in grades 1 through 6 on the playground; peers were involved in bullying in an astounding 85% of bully episodes (Craig & Pepler, 1997). Similarly, in a survey study of sixth-graders in Finland, the majority of students participated in the bullying process in some capacity, and their various participant roles were significantly related to social status within their respective classrooms (Salmivalli et al., 1996). Clearly, peers play an instrumental role in bullying and victimization on elementary school playgrounds and within classrooms.

Transition to Middle School and “Fitting In”

- [5] Less well understood are the peer dynamics⁹ associated with bullying during the transition from elementary school to middle school. Some researchers speculate that this transition can cause stress that might promote bullying behavior, as students attempt to define their place in the new social structure. For example, changing from one school to another often leads to an increase in emotional and academic difficulties (Rudolph et al., 2001); bullying may be another way that young people deal with the stress of a new environment.

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3. **Autonomy** (*noun*): freedom from external influence or control
 4. **Salience** (*noun*): importance
 5. **Stratify** (*verb*): to divide into classes
 6. **Determinant** (*noun*): a factor
 7. **Impulsivity** (*noun*): tendency to act without thinking
 8. **Competent** (*adjective*): having the necessary ability or skills
 9. **Dynamics** (*noun*): interactions between people in a particular group

A short-term investigation of over 500 middle school students (grades 6-8) found an increase in bullying behavior among sixth-graders over a 4-month period (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2001). The authors speculated that the sixth-graders were assimilating¹⁰ into the middle school, where bullying behavior was part of the school culture. This speculation is supported by the theory that bullying is a learned behavior, and that as they enter middle school, sixth-graders have not yet learned how to interact positively in the social milieu¹¹ of the school. Many sixth-graders who wish to “fit in” may adopt the behaviors — including teasing — of those students who have been in the school longer and who have more power to dictate the social norm.

Two recent studies further examined the hypothesis that middle school students opt to bully their peers to “fit in” (Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Rodkin et al., 2000). Pellegrini and colleagues found that bullying enhanced within-group status and popularity among 138 fifth-graders making the transition through the first year of middle school. Similarly, Rodkin and colleagues, in a study of 452 fourth- through sixth-grade boys, found 13.1% were rated as both aggressive and popular by their teachers. Furthermore, these aggressive popular boys and popular prosocial boys received an equivalent number of “cool” ratings from peers.

These two studies do not examine how the influence of the peer group on bullying behaviors differs across sex, grade, or level of peer group status. A study by Espelage and Holt (2001) of 422 middle school students (grades 6-8), using a survey that included demographic questions, self-report, and peer-report measures of bullying and victimization, and measures of other psychosocial¹² variables, examined the association between popularity and bullying behavior. Despite the finding that bullies as a group enjoyed a strong friendship network, the relationship between bullying and popularity differed for males and females, and also differed across grades. The most striking finding was the strong correlation¹³ between bullying and popularity among sixth-grade males, which dropped considerably for seventh-grade males and was not associated for eighth-grade males. Closer examination of peer cliques in this sample found that students not only “hung out” with peers who bully at similar rates but that students also reported an increase in bullying over a school year if their primary peer group bullied others (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, in press).

Conclusion

We cannot assume that bullying among young adolescents is a simple interaction between a bully and a victim. Instead, recent studies and media reports suggest that there are groups of students who support their peers and sometimes participate in teasing and harassing other students. It seems important for families, schools, and other community institutions to help children and young adolescents learn how to manage, and potentially change, the pressure to hurt their classmates in order to “fit in.”

For More Information:

[10] Corsaro, W. A., & Eder, D. (1990). Children's peer cultures. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 16, 197-220.

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10. **Assimilate** (*verb*): to conform to the customs, attitudes, and habits of a group or nation
 11. **Milieu** (*noun*): the environment
 12. **Psychosocial** (*adjective*): relating social conditions to mental health or state
 13. **Correlation** (*noun*): relationship

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Olweus, D. (1979). Stability of aggressive reaction patterns in males: A review. *Psychological Bulletin, 86*(4), 852-875. EJ 216 558.

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Pellegrini, A. D. (2002). Bullying, victimization, and sexual harassment during the transition to middle school. *Educational Psychologist, 37*(3), 151-164.

- [25] Pellegrini, A. D., Bartini, M., & Brooks, F. (1999). School bullies, victims, and aggressive victims. Factors relating to group affiliation and victimization in early adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*(2), 216-224.

Rodkin, P. C., Farmer, T. W., Pearl, R., & Van Acker, R. (2000). Heterogeneity of popular boys: Antisocial and prosocial configurations. *Developmental Psychology*, 36(1), 14-24. EJ 602 204.

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Salmivalli, C., Lagerspetz, K., Bjorkqvist, K., Osterman, K., & Kaukiainen, A. (1996). Bullying as a group process: Participant roles in their relations to social status within the group. *Aggressive Behavior*, 22(1), 1-15.

Sebald, H. (1992). *Adolescence*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies a central idea of this text?
 - A. Bullying occurs as a simple interaction between a bully and the bully's victim.
 - B. Bullying harms the victim in various ways but the bully is harmed as well.
 - C. Groups of students who support bullying contribute to its development.
 - D. Bullies are insecure because they are failing to adapt to a new environment.

2. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "One notable gap in the evolving literature on bullying and victimization during early adolescence is the role that peers play in promoting bullying and victimization by either reinforcing the aggressor, failing to intervene to stop the victimization, or affiliating with students who bully." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "Research indicates, for example, that toughness and aggressiveness are important status considerations for boys, while appearance is a central determinant of social status among girls (Eder, 1995)." (Paragraph 3)
 - C. "For example, changing from one school to another often leads to an increase in emotional and academic difficulties (Rudolph et al., 2001); bullying may be another way that young people deal with the stress of a new environment." (Paragraph 5)
 - D. "Instead, recent studies and media reports suggest that there are groups of students who support their peers and sometimes participate in teasing and harassing other students." (Paragraph 9)

3. Which statement best identifies how the text describes the relationship between bullying and middle school?
 - A. Bullying only begins to emerge in sixth grade and becomes strongest in eighth grade for boys and girls.
 - B. Participation in bullying may be part of the process of adapting to the culture of middle school and changes by age and gender through eighth grade.
 - C. The most serious form of bullying is common throughout middle school and remains a means to seek popularity through eighth grade.
 - D. Bullying is common throughout middle school but does not become a means to seek popularity until eighth grade.

4. What does the Peer Acceptance and Status section contribute to the author's description of adolescents in the text?
 - A. It positions teenagers as cruel, unfair, and very likely to become bullies.
 - B. It highlights that teenagers begin to rely more on their peers for support.
 - C. It reveals how teenagers lose superiority over others when they bully.
 - D. It explains how bullying leads to increased social status for teenagers.

5. How is paragraph 8 effective in supporting the development of ideas in this text?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Why do you believe that adolescents bully one another? Does the text reinforce or alter your beliefs?
2. Were you ever bullied or did you ever bully someone as an adolescent? Did you find that the behavior lessened or worsened as you got older? Why might that be?
3. If you were a school administrator, what would this research article prompt you to do in order to decrease instances of bullying in middle schools?
4. In the context of this text, why do people follow the crowd? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.