

Factors Affecting Disclosure of Bullying*

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What is Peer Victimization?

Peer victimization, also known as bullying is a form of aggression that unfolds within the context of a relationship, in which there is an imbalance of power between the child who bullies and the child who is victimized (14; 20). Bullying usually occurs in peer groups and covers a wide range of behaviours including emotional intimidation, social exclusion and physical assault. Bullying may be direct (e.g., name calling) or indirect (e.g., gossip or exclusion). With the passing of time and continued harassment, the options for the child who is bullied become progressively limited (18).

How Common is Peer Victimization?

The pervasiveness of bullying among children and adolescents is well documented. According to research, 5-15% of children experience ongoing and thus concerning bullying (3; 9; 14; 19). The most typical forms of bullying include belittlement of an individual's religion, race, looks or speech; physical aggression such as being hit, slapped or pushed; gossip for instance spreading rumours or lies; and sexual comments or gestures (13; 24).

What are the Effects of Bullying?

Increasingly bullying is being recognized as a profound problem for children and adolescents, with possible far-reaching and lasting negative effects for victimized children (6; 13; 12; 17; 22). A sizable body of research suggests that peer victimization may impact upon many areas of a victimized child's life including academic, social, emotional, psychological and physical, putting them at greater risk of developing severe adjustment problems that may persist into adulthood (4; 13; 14; 22). Many children who are bullied describe themselves as unpopular, unhappy, and unsafe at school (1; 9; 23).

These children tend to be rejected by peers and lack friends or consistent social support from peers (7; 15).

Disclosure of Peer Victimization - Benefits and Risks

It is important that adults do what they can in order for children to tell when they are bullied and that adults insure that disclosing bullying leads to a positive outcome. There is an assumption that disclosure is beneficial and essential if children are to receive necessary support, protection, and intervention (9). Although there clearly are many benefits associated with telling, disclosure is a complex matter, which may not always result in desired outcomes. Telling about traumatic events may decrease stress or guilt associated with keeping a secret, but revealing may also entail significant risks. Children who are bullied may perceive more risks than benefits in telling. For example, victimized children are often not willing to tell adults for fear that their involvement will make the situation worse (18).

There is a consistent tendency for children who are bullied to withhold disclosure.

What are the Factors that Inhibit Disclosure of Peer Victimization?

A qualitative research study in which children in grades four and five were interviewed about their experiences of being bullied revealed seven major factors that inhibit disclosure.

Secrecy – The majority of bullying incidents occur out of sight of adults, on the school playground or in the hallways for example. Thus the cloak of secrecy extends to encircle a group of peers and excludes adults (12). Fear that telling adults will worsen the situation is often operative in not choosing to disclose.

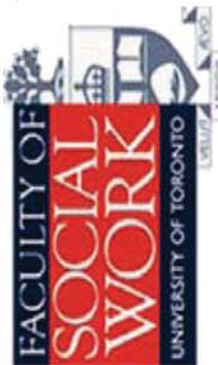
Powerlessness – A perceived power imbalance is integral to bullying dynamics. Children who are bullied may not disclose due to fear of retaliation and their belief that telling adults won't help.

Victimized Child Blaming Self – Children who are victimized by bullying often feel ashamed and blame themselves for their experiences of bullying. They may feel they will not be believed and that they should handle the problem alone (3; 10; 22; 23).

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Retaliation – Fear of retaliation emerged as a key reason for victimized children not reporting. Children feared the child who bullied them would be punished and then retaliate for being reported.

Child Vulnerabilities – Children who are bullied are typically described as being less accepted by peers than nonvictimized children and as having few friends (7; 20). Many might be more insecure, anxious, withdrawn and cry easily, and perhaps are physically weaker and more submissive (3; 6; 14).

Fear of Losing the Relationship if the Child who Bullies is a Friend – Having or desiring a friendship with the child who bullies may complicate the situation and inhibit the victimized child's ability to disclose (9).

Expectations Regarding the Effectiveness of Adult Interventions – Adults play a key role, whether in identifying the signs of victimization, helping a child disclose, righting the power imbalance that promotes bullying, or supporting the victimized child (14). Young school-age children look to adults for help and to stop the bullying, but as children grow older, they become increasingly skeptical of adult interventions, which may relate to the lack of effectiveness of adults' strategies (2; 13).

What Can Teachers, Parents, and Practitioners do to Help Promote Disclosure and Beneficial Outcomes?

- Foster an environment that addresses the range and seriousness of peer victimization so children learn these behaviours are unacceptable.
- Recognize possible signs of peer victimization such as a child's greater reluctance to attend school, worsening self-esteem, or damage to possessions.
- Provide a relationship that helps children disclose by fostering an environment in which children and adolescents feel understood, listened to, and comfortable expressing themselves and discussing their experiences of victimization at their own pace.
- Anticipate and minimize the increase in stress to the victimized child due to disclosure by making assurances of help but not promising positive outcomes.
- Listen, understand and validate the child's experience since a child's distress may be greater than perceived by adults. If not listened to and not validated, children may doubt their own feelings and may stop telling adults.
- Address the complex and multiple factors related to disclosure.
- Work with children to help them respond to peers who disclose to them that they are victimized.

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