

# Factors that Influence Perceptions of Bullying\*

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**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 (6; 10). It typically occurs within the context of a peer group and covers a wide range of behaviours from social exclusion to physical assaults (2; 9). Bullying is a pervasive phenomenon that can have far-reaching and long-lasting effects for children who bully and who are bullied, both of whom are at risk of emotional, social and psychiatric problems that may persist into adulthood (1; 5, 7, 11). A qualitative research study was conducted with children in grades four and five who self-identified as having been bullied, their parents, and educators.

The study findings suggest that several factors contribute to the complexity of bullying and influence how children and adults view and respond to bullying incidents.

## Description of the Study

The study provides one of the first qualitative assessments of the perceptions of children who have been victimized and their parents, teachers, and school administrators. The study was conducted in four public schools in Toronto. The selected schools differed in variables that might influence bullying behaviour such as income, education, family composition and percentage of recent immigrants. Of 349 students invited to participate, 159 received parental consent. These students were given the "Safe School Questionnaire" (8), which has two questions that directly address involvement in bullying.

On the basis of questionnaire results, 9 boys and 9 girls in grades four and five who identified as being frequently bullied were selected. 55 semi-structured interviews were conducted with these 18 children, 20 parents (in two cases, both parents were interviewed), 13 teachers, 2 vice-principals and 4 principals.

## RESULTS of the Study

*The prevailing pattern in the interviews was the difficulty respondents had in characterizing bullying.*

## Factors that Affect How Individuals Respond to Bullying

**Definition of Bullying** – The majority of children and adults referred to a power imbalance that exists in bullying situations. Most respondents also included direct and indirect behaviours such as exclusion, threats, gossip and rumours in their definition of bullying; although it emerged they often considered indirect bullying as less serious. Notably, most respondents did not mention repetition, which is a key feature of the standard definition of bullying.

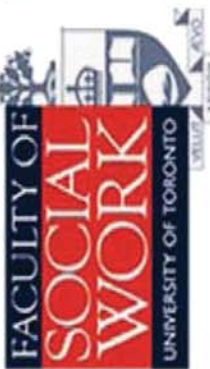
**Disclosure of Bullying** – Approximately 1/2 of the parents and teachers were unaware that their child or student was bullied and many of those who were unaware were surprised. A prevalent finding was that many children reported that they told or would only tell an adult if they thought the bullying became "serious." Among reasons offered by children for not disclosing to adults, first and foremost was fear of repercussions from the child who had bullied or fear that their peers would "hate" or dislike them.

\*This fact sheet is a summary of the following articles:

Mishna, F., Pepler, D., & Wiener, J. (2006). Factors associated with perceptions and responses to bullying situations by children, parents, teachers and principals. *Victims and Offenders*, 1(3), 255-288.

Mishna, F., Scarcello, I., Pepler, D., & Wiener, J. (2005). Teachers' understanding of bullying. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 28(4), 718-738.

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Adults "think if I go to the principal's office and tell him they won't do it anymore, but they'll do it more because you told on them" - A child

**Direct and Indirect Bullying** – Although the majority of respondents included indirect bullying in their definitions, they repeatedly "normalized" or minimized such incidents or behaviours, thus overlooking non-physical aggression.

"People say 'get over it, they are just words' but feelings hurt just as much and in some cases more. Because the pain from words stays with you and makes you feel bad. Kicking and punching hurts for a while and though it may give you a bruise, it doesn't hurt as long as words" – A child who experienced bullying

**Use of Language** – A striking finding concerned the words some respondents used when describing particular children. Some adults referred to children who were bullied in such terms as "playing the victim" or "thriving on being a victim."

How Individuals Distinguish Bullying from Non-Bullying

**Whether the incident matches an individual's definition** – In attempting to distinguish bullying from non-bullying, there appears to be a process of establishing whether the behaviour matches one's own definition of bullying. Many respondents emphasized that they look for intent to cause harm, which is integral to bullying. Respondents seemed to struggle particularly with whether the incident entailed a power imbalance and an intent to hurt. Others thought that a distinguishing factor should be how the recipient feels.

"It can be very hard to decide whether it really is a bullying situation, whether it's one up, one down, or 50-50" – A teacher

**Whether the child who bullies is considered a friend** – Bullying by children who were considered friends was particularly perplexing for children and adults alike in their efforts to distinguish bullying from "normal" conflict among friends.

"One minute they are best friends and the next minute they're excluding each other and talking behind each other's back" – A teacher

**Whether the Child "Fits" Expectations about how a Victimized Child Presents** – A number of respondents held assumptions about how victimized children would present themselves

One assumption mentioned by several adults was that children who are bullied would lack confidence, or be passive and unable to assert themselves.

Accordingly, adults were not surprised to discover that students who fit their expectations of a victimized child had indeed been bullied, but were very surprised that children who did not fit with these assumptions also experienced bullying.

"It is tricky because something you see as minor may be major to the kid" – A teacher. That same teacher had said that she had not really taken it seriously when the boy had told her he was being called names, "because he has friends and is liked."

Another teacher was surprised a student was bullied because, "a victim does not respond the way he does. He would probably run away and become more terrorized, but he is outspoken."

Determining what is "Normal" and Developmental Features of Bullying

The meaning respondents attributed to bullying varied. Many of them described bullying as "part of growing up," but emphasized that it was not okay and had to be stopped. At times a child considered a situation bullying whereas an adult concluded it wasn't bullying. In these situations, adults appeared to minimize or invalidate the child's experience. Then again several adults expressed concern that due to its pervasiveness children might perceive bullying as the norm and not even recognize when they are being bullied.

"Kids with this archetypal view of what a bully is, suddenly learn that a bully doesn't have to be physical. She can be a gossip or the one not inviting you to a party. It is awesome for them to learn that they are a bully or victim and that they have rights to stop it" – A principal

**Adults' Personal Experiences with Bullying** –

Almost all of the adults reported being bullied as children and only a few reported that they had bullied others. They recalled feeling sad, afraid and ashamed and felt they had nowhere to turn. Several remarked that the effects had persisted. Several adults believed that their bullying experiences made them more sensitive to the covert nature of bullying.

**Role of the Broader Context** -- Comparisons among the schools revealed similar frequencies of bullying reported by children despite the variance in school variables. The study findings suggest that the school's environment appears to influence the form bullying took.



## CHALLENGES FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS IN RESPONDING TO BULLYING

Parents and teachers identified the following challenges in relation to bullying:

- The relentlessness of bullying behaviour – teachers described it occurring all day
- Discerning what had occurred during a bullying incident that they had not witnessed
- Dealing with bullying that occurs among friends
- Lack of time and resources to adequately address bullying
- Knowing how to intervene in bullying situations, especially those involving indirect and non-physical bullying
- Lack of policies and administrative support to deal with indirect bullying
- Having empathy for victimized children, especially those that adults considered to be provocative and instigators, or as “exaggerating” or overly sensitive

## PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

- Although a standard definition of bullying is necessary, it is insufficient for individuals confronted with bullying.
- Interventions must address ambiguous situations, that confuse children and adults in naming bullying and in which there are differences among individuals when determining bullying. It is important to help children and adults see discrepancies between their views and their reactions
- It may be hard for individuals to follow guidelines, definitions and advice.
- Teachers, parents and other adults need to be aware that the child’s viewpoint may differ from theirs or that the child’s distress may be greater than an adult anticipates.
- It is essential for adults to validate the child’s perspective of a situation. If not listened to and validated, children may doubt their own feelings and views of situations, and may stop telling adults.
- Relational problems require relationship solutions.
- In terms of interventions, there is a lack of focus on bullying in relationships considered friendships. It is necessary to address bullying that occurs in friendships, targeting children and adults. As conflict is inevitable in friendships, conflict resolution is important.
- There need to be guidelines and policies that address various forms of bullying, particularly non-physical and indirect bullying.

- Bullying is universal. The impact of adults’ personal experiences must be considered. Teachers, parents, and mental health professionals may have experienced bullying (“victimized or bullying others,” directly or indirectly). They must deal with feelings that may surface for them when working with children involved in bullying, either through bullying others or being victimized.

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