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# Responding to Bullying

## *What Works?*

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**ABSTRACT** Children who are bullied are often told to 'solve the problems themselves'; however, when bullying is repeated over time, it becomes increasingly difficult for victimized children to stop the torment because of their relative lack of power. We examine the ways in which children respond to bullying and their evaluations of the effectiveness of various strategies in reducing their bullying problems. One thousand eight hundred and fifty-two Canadian children and youth, ranging in age from 4- to 19-years-old (mean 12.6, SD 2.4) responded to a web-based questionnaire. Few respondents indicated that they were motivated by public education campaigns or information about bullying. Participants indicated they were motivated to do something to stop bullying by their own need to exert control and be assertive and by their emotional reactions to bullying. A significant group of youth responded that they did nothing to stop bullying. Finally, the longer the bullying had been ongoing, the less effective students perceived their own strategies. The results highlight the importance of adults supporting students. Similarly, it is important to provide children and youth with strategies that are effective, as they are most likely to implement strategies that are only going to increase the victimization over time.

**KEY WORDS:** aggression; bullying; coping; strategies; victimization

Bullying is a form of abuse at the hands of peers that can take different forms at different ages. Bullying is defined as repeated aggression in which there is a power differential (Juvonen and Graham, 2001; Olweus, 1991; Pepler and Craig, 2000). Two elements of bullying are key to understanding its complexity. First, bullying is a form of aggressive behaviour imposed from a position of power: children who bully have more power than the children they victimize. This power can derive from a physical advantage such as size and strength, but also through

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a social advantage such as a dominant social role (e.g. teacher compared to a student), higher social status in a peer group (e.g. popular versus rejected student), strength in numbers (e.g. group of children bullying a solitary child) or through systemic power (e.g. racial or cultural groups, sexual minorities, economic disadvantage, disability). Power can also be achieved by knowing another's vulnerability (e.g. obesity, stuttering, learning problem, sexual orientation, family background) and using that knowledge to cause distress. The second key element is that bullying is repeated over time. With each repeated bullying incident, the power relations become consolidated: as children bully and repeatedly cause distress for others, they increase in power over time, whereas the children who are being victimized lose power in that relationship.

Bullying can take many forms. It can be physical (e.g. hits, pushes, tripping, spitting), verbal (e.g. threats, insults, put-downs), social (e.g. social exclusion, malicious gossip) or cyber-bullying (e.g. threats, insults, demeaning messages spread through the internet or cell phone). Bullying may be direct (i.e. face-to-face) or indirect (i.e. causing distress without confrontation, such as malicious rumours). All of these forms of bullying can be harmful to another's sense of self and relationships within the peer group. Through our research, we have come to understand bullying as a *destructive relationship problem*: children who bully are learning to use power and aggression to control and distress others; children who are victimized become increasingly powerless and unable to defend themselves from this form of abuse at the hands of peers. Children who are bullied are often told to 'solve the problems themselves'; however, when bullying is repeated over time, it becomes increasingly difficult for victimized children to stop the torment because of their relative lack of power compared to the child or group of children doing the bullying (O'Connell et al., 1999). In this article, we examine the ways in which children respond to bullying and their evaluations of the effectiveness of various strategies in reducing their bullying problems.

In Canada, the rates of bullying and victimization are considerably higher than in many other countries. In the recent World Health Organization (WHO) Health Behaviours in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey, Canada ranked a disappointing 26th and 27th out of 35 countries on measures of bullying and victimization, respectively (Craig and Harel, 2004). Across all categories of bullying or victimization, Canada consistently ranked at or below the middle of the international group. Among 13-year-olds, 17.8 percent of the boys and 15.1 percent of the girls reported being frequently victimized. Although a substantial number of children and youth are occasionally victimized, our longitudinal research shows that a small group of children and youth

experience frequent and prolonged victimization at the hands of their peers (Goldbaum et al., 2003). These are the children who experience a wide range of problems and are in need of focused support to enable them to move on from these abusive interactions with peers and to find healthy relationships in adolescence and beyond (Pepler and Craig, 2000).

There is reason to be concerned for the well-being of students who are chronically victimized because of the prevalence of associated physical and mental health problems.

Victimized children are at high risk for physical symptoms: they are 1.3 to 3.4 times more likely to report headaches and 1.3 to 3.3 times more likely to report stomach aches than non-victimized children (Due et al., 2005; Williams et al., 1996). Victimized children also suffer psychosomatic symptoms: they are 1.3 to 5.2 times more likely to report difficulty sleeping (Due et al., 2005) and 1.2 to 2.4 times more likely to wet their bed (Williams et al., 1996) than non-victimized children. Victimized children are 1.6 to 6.8 times more likely to report depressive symptoms than children uninvolved in bullying (Due et al., 2005; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999; Williams et al., 1996). The psychosocial difficulties that victimized children experience spill over into their school experiences: they are at high risk for disliking and avoiding school; one-fifth to one-quarter of frequently victimized children report bullying as the reason for staying home (Rigby, 2003).

In this article, we examine children's reports of strategies for responding to bullying and their ratings of the effectiveness of these strategies as a foundation for recommendations to understand the challenges that victimized children experience and to develop appropriate supports for them. Hunter and Boyle (2004) drew upon the work of Lazarus to examine stress and coping within bullying. They proposed a model that comprises both person characteristics (e.g. age, gender), as well as situation characteristics (e.g. duration and frequency of victimization). In the present analyses we consider children's strategies in response to bullying based on this person-situation model.

Our observational research indicates that children who respond emotionally, either submissively or aggressively, to bullying will likely experience prolonged bullying (Mahady-Wilton et al., 2000). Conversely, responding with problem-solving strategies (e.g. active assertiveness, avoidance) to bullying was associated with de-escalation within the bullying episodes. Kochenderfer-Ladd (2004) found similar patterns: children's angry and embarrassed responses predicted revenge seeking which, in turn, was associated with increases in victimization. Conversely, children's responses that focused on conflict resolution were associated with reductions in victimization. She found that when children were fearful, they were motivated to seek advice for

victimization, which, in turn, predicted a resolution of the bullying problem and fewer internalizing problems.

In a study of strategies to cope with bullying, Camodeca and Goossens (2005) found that children most frequently chose assertiveness. There were gender differences in the favoured responses: girls chose assertive strategies more often than boys. There are some indications that seeking social support may not be equally effective for girls and boys. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2004) found that seeking support for victimization served as a protective factor for girls' social problems, but for victimized boys this strategy was related to lower peer preference. The strategies chosen by children to respond to bullying may also differ by age. Camodeca and Goossens (2005) found that younger children preferred nonchalance more than older children, who were more likely to choose retaliation. Situation factors have also been found to relate to responses to victimization. In a study of children accessing a Kids Help Line, Martin and Gillies (2004) found that the longer bullying had gone on, the more difficult it was for a student to use disengagement strategies such as denial and avoidance.

In the present study, we have addressed four questions related to children's responses to bullying, with a consideration of both person and situation variables, as follows:

- (1) What factors influence youths' decision to do something about a bullying problem?
- (2) What strategies do youth use to stop bullying?
- (3) What strategies do youth perceive to be effective in stopping bullying?
- (4) Is the effectiveness of strategies related to the length of time bullying has been ongoing?

## **Methods**

Data for this article were collected through a survey that was available online at the [bullying.org](http://bullying.org) website. The survey featured six demographic questions related to age, gender, grade, province/state, country and size of city. There were six questions about the nature of bullying and the child's response to the bullying:

- (1) How were you bullied?
- (2) When did this bullying take place?
- (3) How long did this bullying go on?
- (4) Who did this to you?
- (5) What made you decide that you had to deal with your bullying situation?
- (6) What did you do and how well did this work?

The web-based questionnaire is available from the primary author.

For this article, we analysed the data for 1,852 Canadian respondents under the age of 20, with a range from 4- to 19-years-old (mean 12.6, SD 2.4). There were 66 respondents in the childhood stage (aged 4–8); 1,209 respondents in the late childhood/early adolescence stage (aged 9–13); 452 respondents in the middle adolescence stage (aged 14–16) and 125 respondents in the late adolescence stage (aged 17–19). There were 653 boys (35 percent) and 1,169 girls (63 percent) in the sample.

## **Results**

### *Types of victimization*

Participants were asked to identify how they had been victimized. Chi-square analyses were conducted to examine for gender differences in the type of victimization. Boys were significantly more likely to report being victimized by physical bullying (44 percent of boys versus 32 percent of girls,  $p < 0.01$ ) and by harm to their property (27 percent of boys versus 21 percent of girls,  $p < 0.01$ ) than were girls. There was a high incidence of verbal bullying, with girls reporting significantly more victimization by this form of bullying than boys (69 percent of boys versus 80 percent of girls,  $p < 0.001$ ). Girls were also significantly more likely to report social victimization (42 percent of boys versus 63 percent of girls,  $p < 0.001$ ) and cyber-bullying (16 percent of boys versus 22 percent of girls,  $p < 0.001$ ) than were boys.

### *Duration of bullying*

Respondents were asked about the length of time that the identified bullying situation had gone on. Significantly more boys (40 percent) reported that bullying lasted less than a week than did girls (28 percent),  $p < 0.01$ . Approximately the same percentage (23 percent) of boys and girls indicated having been bullied for several years.

### *Relationship with child who bullied*

Both boys and girls were most likely to report being victimized by someone of their own gender and by someone of their own age. When asked about how close they were to the child who had bullied them, very few boys and girls indicated being bullied by someone they did not know (12 percent and 8 percent, respectively). Boys and girls reported being bullied by someone they knew a little or by someone in their peer group with similar percentages (30 percent and 20 percent, respectively). Girls, however, were more likely to indicate being bullied by someone they would call a friend than were boys (30 percent of girls versus 20 percent of boys,  $p < 0.01$ ).

*Motivation for responding to bullying*

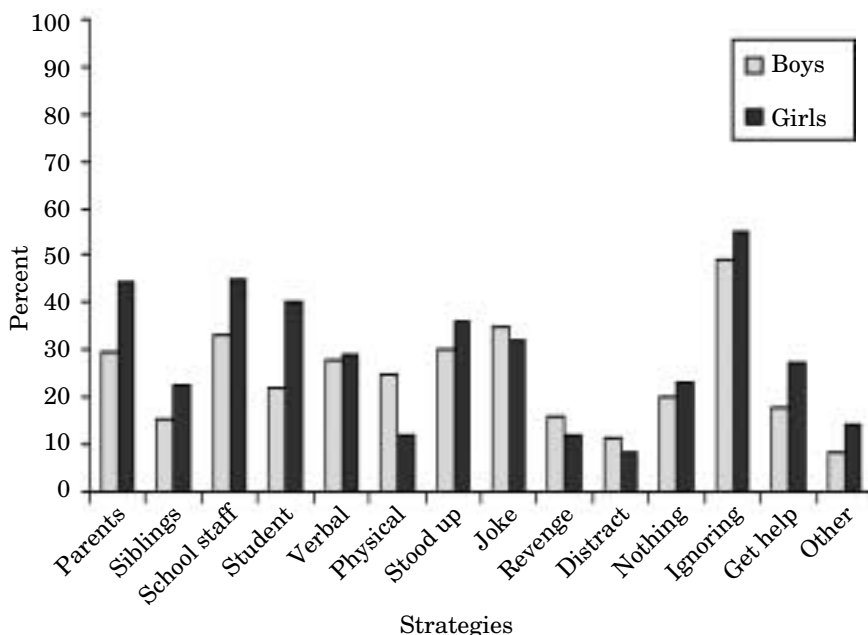
In answering the question about what made them deal with their bullying situation, respondents indicated several reasons, which were coded into major themes such as: advice of someone else; escalation; education about bullying; an emotional reaction to the bullying; academic consequences; constancy and pervasiveness; health consequences; damage to self-worth; assertiveness; altruism for others; social repercussions or nothing. For both boys and girls, escalation of bullying, emotional reactions and assertiveness were cited most frequently as reasons for doing something about bullying. Girls were significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) more likely to cite these motivations to stop bullying compared to boys. For example, 20 percent of girls reported that escalation was the motivating factor compared to 12 percent of boys. Similarly girls were more likely to cite emotional reasons (18 percent of girls versus 9 percent of boys,  $p < 0.01$ ) and assertiveness (17 percent of girls versus 11 percent of boys,  $p < 0.01$ ), compared to boys.

We also examined whether the motivation for addressing bullying problems varied by the length of time that the bullying had been ongoing. Chronically victimized children, compared to those victimized for a shorter period to time, were more likely to be motivated by: academic consequences, altruism, constancy of bullying, emotional reactions, escalating of bullying, damage to health, damage to self-worth and social repercussions (all  $p$  values  $< 0.01$ ).

*Strategies used to respond to bullying*

Respondents were given a list of 12 strategies that they may have used to deal with their bullying situation and asked to indicate which of these strategies they had attempted. A substantial number of respondents indicated not having done anything about the bullying they were experiencing (20 percent), while a comparable number reported attempting one strategy. Approximately 10 percent of students indicated attempting two to four strategies while less than 10 percent attempted five or more strategies. Boys were more likely to endorse none or one strategy to stop bullying than were girls,  $p < 0.01$ . Conversely, girls were more likely to endorse three to six strategies to stop bullying,  $p < 0.01$ .

Almost half of the respondents indicated that they had tried to ignore the bullying, which was the most frequently endorsed strategy. Girls were more likely to report getting help to stop the bullying, or to telling someone about the bullying incident, including a parent, sibling, school staff or other student. Boys, on the other hand, were more likely to use physical aggression, humour or revenge to stop the bullying. The percentages of students reporting each strategy are presented in Figure 1. We found that with age, the reports of using aggression increased



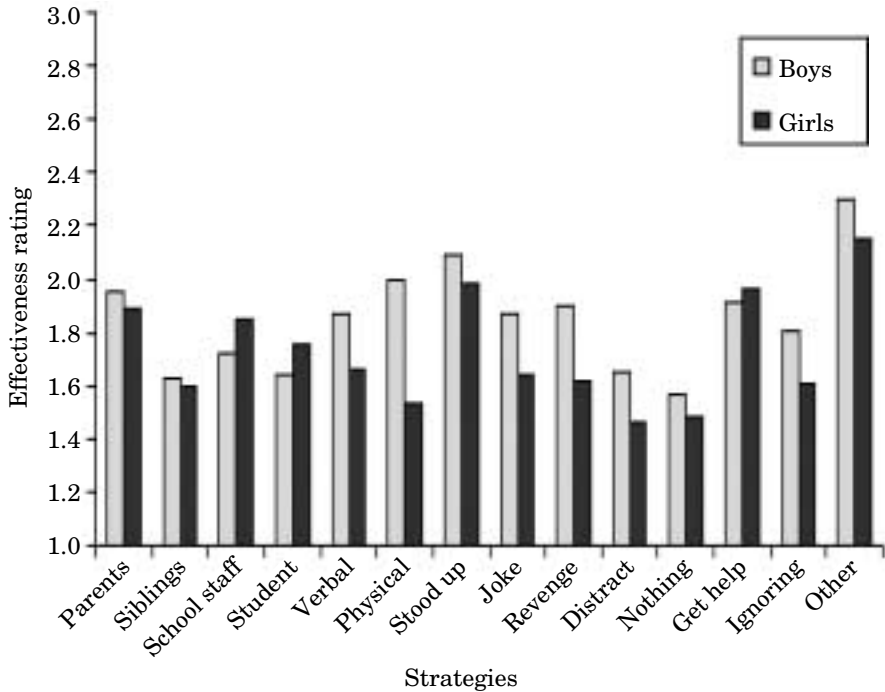
**Figure 1** Strategies used by boys and girls

boys' and girls' ratings of strategy effectiveness ( $p < 0.01$ ). Older children were also more likely to report using passive avoidance strategies, such as ignoring and not doing anything, to stop the bullying compared to younger children,  $p < 0.01$ . It may be that older children have more confidence or more opportunity than younger children to keep their distance from those who are bullying them.

We were able to test whether children used different strategies to respond to bullying, depending on their relationship to the child who was bullying. As closeness of the relationship with the bullying child increases, students were less likely to report doing anything to stop the bullying,  $p < 0.01$ , likely for fear of losing those whom they consider to be friends. Students were also less likely to use aggression to stop bullying when they were being bullied by someone they do not know, which may relate to their concerns for safety,  $p < 0.01$ .

#### *Perceived effectiveness of strategies*

Respondents rated the effectiveness of the strategies they had used on a scale of 1–3, with 1 indicating that it did not work at all and 3 indicating that it worked really well. The effectiveness ratings of the strategies are presented in Figure 2. Anova indicated that girls were



**Figure 2** Boys' and girls' ratings of strategy effectiveness

more likely than boys to indicate that telling school staff was effective,  $p < 0.01$ . Boys, on the other hand, identified verbal and physical aggression, humour, revenge, distracting the bullying and ignoring the bully as being more effective than did girls (all  $p$  values  $< 0.01$ ).

#### *When bullying does not stop*

When bullying continues, the power differential between the child who is bullying and the child being victimized augments, making it increasingly difficult for the victimized child to escape the torment. We examined the survey responses for indications of difficulties experienced by victimized children with prolonged duration. Consistent with the difficulty stopping the bullying, we found that the number of strategies that a child indicated having tried increased with the duration of bullying. The means for the number of strategies tried in addressing bullying were: for the duration of experiencing bullying less than one week of bullying ( $M = 2.5$ ), for less than one month ( $M = 2.5$ ), for all term ( $M = 3.2$ ), for one year ( $M = 3.7$ ) and for more than a year ( $M = 3.8$ ).

We also examined whether the perceived effectiveness of the strategies related to the length of time that bullying had been going on. The respondents' effectiveness ratings decreased with the length of time they reported having been bullied. For example, the mean effectiveness rating of the strategy to address bullying for children who had experienced bullying for less than one week was  $M = 2.2$  compared to  $M = 1.6$  for those who had experienced bullying problems for over one year.

### **Summary and recommendations**

Children who are victimized by their peers can experience a wide range of problems, particularly if the victimization is prolonged. The World Health Organization survey revealed that among 13-year-old Canadian children (the average age of children in this survey), one in every six boys and one in every seven girls report being frequently victimized (Craig and Harel, 2004). In a recent volume on the leading international bullying interventions, the rates of victimization showed a greater improvement through the bullying programs than the rates of bullying for several of the programs (Pepler et al., 2004). Although these findings are encouraging, there is still considerable room for improvement in our abilities to support and protect victimized children. With this survey, we have attempted to glean insights from the 'real world' experts, the children and youth themselves. We have focused on four questions to highlight the nature and effectiveness of children's attempts to stop bullying

When asked to identify what factors influenced their decision to take action about a bullying problem, the children's and youths' responses indicated that they were not motivated by the types of concerns that adults might have for them in terms of the consequences of victimization, such as increased academic difficulties, health problems, a decrease in self worth or social isolation. Few respondents indicated that they were motivated by public education campaigns or information about bullying. Instead, the children and youth who participated in this survey indicated that they were motivated to do something to stop bullying by their own need to exert control and be assertive ('I just had to do something by myself to stop it') and by their emotional reactions to bullying ('It made me so mad'). The respondents indicated that they were also motivated to do something to stop bullying when it started to escalate or when it became a constant presence in their lives.

As we attempt to support children who are victimized and intervene early to redirect the negative power that children who bully are exerting, early intervention is recommended. Therefore, considerable efforts need to be made to encourage children who are being victimized to come forward before the situation escalates and before the emotional

burden of bullying becomes too great. There are opportunities to support the assertive behaviours of victimized children (Smith and Sharp, 1994); however, the burden of changing the dynamics in bullying should not rest with the victimized child.

When asked about the strategies that they use to stop bullying, a significant group of youth responded that they did nothing. They were more likely to say they did nothing when they were victimized by a friend compared to a non-friend. Interestingly girls were more likely to use relational strategies (i.e. telling a friend, telling an adult) compared to boys who were more likely to use confrontational strategies such as physical aggression or revenge. Finally, with increasing age, youth were more likely to use avoidance strategies. In addition, the longer the bullying had been ongoing, the less effective students perceived their strategies.

The good news is that for girls who endorse utilizing relationship strategies, they believe them to be effective. The bad news is that boys believe their aggressive and confrontational strategies are also effective. The research has found that the strategies primarily supported and endorsed by boys as effective are not – in fact they make the bullying problems more severe and prolong (Mahady-Wilton et al., 2000).

Taken together, these results highlight the importance of adults supporting students. The power differential in bullying makes it very challenging and intimidating for children to stand up to their aggressors. Unless adults support children and youth, students are likely to do nothing and gain a sense of helplessness about their bullying experiences over time. It is important for all adults interacting with children to be aware of the signs of bullying, respond to children and youth when they report bullying experiences and support children who are victimized during and after the incident. If adults do not protect youth, the risk is that the children will come to believe they deserve those experiences and become more passive and accepting of the abuse they experience over time.

Similarly, it is important to provide children and youth with strategies that are effective, boys in particular, as they are most likely to implement strategies that are only going to increase the victimization over time (Mahady-Wilton et al., 2000). Students who are victimized require support in developing the knowledge to recognize healthy relationships and the skills to interact in an effective assertive manner or to engage the support they may require. The results from this survey indicate that even in close friendships when bullying occurs, students do not or are afraid to assert themselves appropriately. Adults need to provide guidance, feedback and ongoing support in developing these skills in children and youth.

In summary, bullying is a problem for a significant number of students and it takes many different forms. Understanding how students respond to bullying problems provides insight for the development of intervention and prevention programs aimed at decreasing bullying. Alarmingly, male students are engaging in ineffective strategies and believe that these solutions are effective. In addition, students report becoming less effective in responding to bullying the longer the bullying has been occurring. These results point to the importance of adults. Children's positive peer relationships depend on positive relationships with adults. Teachers, parents and other adults involved in children's lives not only model relationship skills and attitudes, but they are also active in creating contexts in which children and youth interact. Children will only learn positive relationship skills and attitudes if they observe and interact with adults who exemplify these elements of positive relationships in their interactions with children and with other adults. Adults are responsible for creating positive environments that promote children's capacity and competencies for healthy relationships. They are also responsible for minimizing contexts for negative peer interactions. By observing the interpersonal dynamics in children's lives, adults can construct social experiences in ways that protect and support the development of healthy relationships and minimize the likelihood of bullying and harassment.

### Note

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