

**School Bullying and Mental Health:
Documented Links, Critical Issues and Pre/Intervention Strategies**

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Although school bullying has been around as long as anyone can remember, it is only in the past 50 years that it has been a topic of serious study. In many respects, it is our children who have demanded our attention to the topic, given the number of tragic deaths that have been linked, directly or indirectly, to bullying (Cullen, 2009; Godfrey, 2005; Marr & Fields, 2001; Olweus 1978, 1993). With an international exchange of research on bullying (e.g., Bullying Research Network, <https://cehs.unl.edu/BRNET/>; International Bullying Prevention Association, <https://ibpaworld.org/>; World Anti-Bullying Forum in 2017, 2019 and soon again in 2021, <https://worldantibullyingforum.com/>), what we *have* learned over the past five decades is that school bullying is *not* just a normal part of growing up, or a rite of passage that can help to make kids tougher, as traditional stereotypes might suggest. Rather, it is a form of interpersonal aggression that has significant impact on children who have been victimized, as well as on perpetrators and schoolmates who witness such behaviour. We have learned that students who bully do not necessarily fit stereotypes of bullies as individuals who are socially incompetent, relying on aggression and intimidation to get what they want. Rather, they are often highly popular, socially intelligent students who engage in such behaviours as a means of attaining or maintaining their status within the peer group. And increasingly we have come to recognize how contextual factors play a significant role in encouraging or discouraging school bullying, including the overall climate or atmosphere of the school as well as classroom/school social hierarchies and social norms. These understandings are described in more detail in my recent review of the research to date (Hymel, 2021, attached). What I have been asked to focus on for Dublin's Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is what we have learned about the impact of such behaviour on mental health, including key issues and effective strategies to address that process. To that end, I offer the following summary of relevant information from my review chapter, as well as more recent, but related work.

Impact of Bullying and Victimization

A major focus of research to date has been on the correlates and consequences of bullying, for both victims and perpetrators (for reviews see McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015; Swearer & Hymel, 2015; Chapter 4 of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). As summarized in the attached chapter (Hymel, 2021), research has documented quite clearly that victims of school bullying are at significant risk for a variety of mental health problems, especially internalizing difficulties such as depression, anxiety, poor self-worth, and increased suicidal ideation. Victimized children and youth are also at greater risk for externalizing difficulties such as aggression, conduct problems, delinquency, and self-harm (e.g., Haltigan & Vaillancourt, 2014; Reijntjes et al., 2011). Importantly, neuroscience research has shown how the effects of peer victimization can "get under the skin," impacting neuro-biological functioning across the lifetime

(see Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2013 for a review). But that is not all. In addition to mental health difficulties, students who are victimized by peers are also at risk for physical health problems (e.g., stress-related illnesses), greater peer rejection and exclusion, and poor academic functioning (negative attitudes toward school, greater absenteeism). For many victimized youth, these impacts carry over into adulthood.

Students who bully their peers are also at risk, with bullying perpetration being linked to both internalizing problems (anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, self-harm), externalizing difficulties (aggression, antisocial behaviour), academic difficulties (lower achievement, absenteeism) and substance use (see Rodkin, Espelage, & Hanish, 2015; Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Research also suggests that bullying behaviour may become a generalized pattern of negative interpersonal behaviour, with demonstrated links to later dating violence (Connolly, Pepler, Craig & Taradash, 2000), delinquency (Bender & Lösel, 2011) and later criminality (e.g., Farrington, Ttofi, & Lösel, 2011).

Bully-victims, students who are both perpetrators and targets of peer bullying, represent only a small fraction of the student population but have been found to be at even greater risk for maladaptive outcomes, including academic problems and health difficulties, both physical and mental (e.g., Kowalski & Limber, 2013). In one extensive review (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2016), it was concluded that the psychological and health problems experienced by bully-victims are similar to the outcomes of victims, while the academic and substance use problems they experience are similar to that of bullies - the worst of both worlds. Sometimes described as “provocative victims” who can trigger peer retaliation, this subsample of students may well be at greatest risk, but often receive little sympathy or support, fueling stereotypes that such peer behaviour is deserved.

In their review, McDougall and Vaillancourt (2015) point to the challenges of distinguishing correlates from consequences of bullying. Longitudinal research aimed at exploring this distinction has confirmed the complexity and diversity of bully and victim trajectories. Understanding the long-term impact of bullying is especially difficult given evidence of both *multifinality* and *equifinality* (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996). For example, as noted above, both bullies and victims have been found to be at risk for anxiety and depression (equifinality). Rudolph, Troop-Gordon, Hessel and Schmidt (2011) followed students from grade 2 to grade 5 and found that early and increasing victimization over those years was associated with both depression and aggressive behavior (multifinality). As well, research by Haltigan and Vaillancourt (2014) has shown that some victimized students became perpetrators of bullying over time, while others did not.

Causes and Contributing Factors

As bullying research began, a major focus was on the individual characteristics and behaviours that distinguished students who bully from their peers. Early studies (see Hymel, 2021, for details & references) provided evidence that, relative to their peers, students who bully were more likely to exhibit more aggressive and antisocial behaviour, to experience externalizing difficulties, to display more hyperactivity and impulsivity, to hold more positive attitudes towards violence, to show less anxiety and empathy and greater narcissism, and to be more indifferent to the pain of others, willing to manipulate others to achieve their own goals. Many of these correlates also characterize psychopathic adults, leading to questions about links between bullying and early psychopathic tendencies, as has been suggested regarding Erik Harris,

one of the perpetrators of the Columbine massacre in the U.S. (Cullen, 1999). Research by Fanti and Kimonis (2012) directly explored this link in a study of Greek students in grades 7 to 9. They did find that students who reported greater narcissism, impulsivity and callous/unemotional traits (three primary characteristics of adult psychopaths) were more likely to bully others and note that these students would benefit from early identification and preventive intervention. However, such characteristics were evident in only a small part of the sample (2.8%), and do not characterize the larger number of students who report that they bully others.

Other research has shown that many of the students who bully their peers are quite socially intelligent (Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 2000; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999a,b) and are often high in social status among peers (Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). In one of our own studies, we found that slightly over half of the students that peers identified as bullies were recognized by their peers as high status, popular students. Hymel and Swearer (2015) argue that addressing the bullying they engage in becomes particularly challenging for adults who may not recognize their behavior as bullying when perpetrated by high functioning, social competent youth. As well, such behaviour, performed in an effort to gain or maintain social status, may be highly reinforcing and especially difficult to eliminate. Given such evidence, scholars increasingly recognize that there is no one type of "bully" (e.g., Farmer et al., 2010, 2011); some are well-integrated socially while others are socially marginalized.

A more common characteristic of students who bully is the tendency to *morally disengage* (see Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014; Hymel et al., 2010). Bandura (1999, 2002) has identified multiple ways in which *adults* are able to disengage from their own moral standards to engage in highly negative behaviors (e.g., soldiers, terrorists), thereby freeing themselves from guilt, shame and self-censure. Research across multiple countries have found that the same strategies are used by children and youth who bully to justify and rationalize their behaviour. Although it may not be appropriate to describe such behavior as moral *disengagement*, considering children and youth whose moral development is still underway, it is clear that one focus of efforts to stop bullying is countering such patterns of thinking (see Hymel & Bonanno, 2014, for a further discussion), helping perpetrators to recognize the true impact of their behaviour on others.

Beyond individual characteristics, scholars have recognized that bullying is a group phenomenon, encouraged or discouraged by a number of contextual factors. Observational research by Craig and Pepler (Craig, Pepler & Atlas, 2000; O'Connell, Pepler & Craig, 1999; Pepler & Craig, 1995) showed that peer bystanders are present in about 85-88% of bullying episodes, and Salmivalli and colleagues (e.g., Salmivalli, 1999, 2001; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996) showed that, beyond bully and victim, students adopt a number of *participant roles* during bullying episodes, including students who assist or reinforce the bullies, those who observe and/or do nothing, and a smaller percentage who try to defend or support those who are victimized. Findings such as these have lead to social-ecological models of bullying (e.g., Espelage & Swearer, 2004, 2010, Swearer et al., 2012) that explores the interplay of individual and contextual, even cultural factors that contribute to school bullying.

Research by Rodkin and colleagues has emphasized the fact that bullying emerges within very complex social ecologies, with social status being a key motivating factor. Vaillancourt and colleagues underscore the fact that bullying is

about interpersonal power (see Hymel, 2021, for details and references). Consistent with social-ecological models of bullying, it becomes important that educators understand the group processes and contextual factors that underlie such behavior in attempting to address it (see Hymel, McClure, Miller, Shumka & Trach, 2015, for a fuller discussion). Relevant here are three major lines of research within the literature on school bullying. First, studies have begun to identify features of the overall atmosphere or climate of the classroom or school that contribute to bullying (see e.g., Konishi, Miyazaki, Hymel & Waterhouse, 2017; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Second, studies have begun to explore the established social norms that operate in a given classroom or school to support or deter bullying (e.g., Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Third, studies by Espelage and colleagues have documented how certain subgroups of students are at heightened risk for peer victimization, including sexual minorities (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Robinson & Espelage, 2012), ethnic minorities and immigrant youth (Hong, Peguero, Espelage, & Allen-Meares, in press) and students with disabilities (Rose & Espelage, 2012). Accordingly, anti-bullying initiatives must recognize the critical role of school personnel in addressing bullying, providing education and support to give them the tools needed to address such behavior effectively. Teachers are especially important in this regard. Farmer and colleagues (e.g., Farmer, McAuliffe Lines, & Hamm, 2011) describe teachers as the “invisible hand” whose efforts can help to encourage or discourage bullying, sometimes unknowingly. Studies have also demonstrated how positive teacher-student relationships are one significant factor in protecting vulnerable youth (e.g., Darwich, Hymel & Waterhouse, 2012; Gregus et al. 2020), but teachers can also impact the climate and social norms that operate in the classroom and school.

To summarize, research to date provides clear evidence that the range of negative outcomes associated with school bullying is extensive and serious and certainly warrants attention. What is also clear is that school bullying can contribute to the problems that some children already endure, exacerbating existing mental health or other disabilities, owing in large part to the exclusion, rejection and humiliation they face from peers, with the most tragic outcomes being murder and suicide (e.g., Rina Virk, Amanda Todd). Although individual characteristics do play a role, there appears to be a much broader and more complex interplay of experiences, moderated by multiple factors in a child’s life. At the school level, educators need support and training to understand the group processes and social norms that underlie bullying behavior and how they can best support students who are particularly vulnerable. Administrators and policy makers must understand that there is no single solution or approach that can effectively address all bully-victim situations. Although universal anti-bullying programs are needed to establish appropriate social norms and a basic understanding of behaviour expectations in schools, each case of bullying must be examined individually with efforts to understand the individual, social and contextual factors that contribute to or maintain such behavior in a particular situation. The one thing that is certain, however, is that children who bully and children who are bullied are both at significant risk both concurrently and in the long-term, underscoring our imperative to address school bullying effectively.

Addressing Bullying in Schools

Consistent with social-ecological models, a number of school-based programs have been created to address school bullying, with the most promising and effective programs being characterized as whole school efforts with multiple

foci and including both universal (all students) and targeted (selected individuals or groups) intervention efforts (see Bradshaw, 2015; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). Two of the most well known programs, with demonstrated effectiveness in reducing bullying, are the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in Norway and the Finnish KiVa program, both of which are now available across several countries and languages, but there are many others (see Hymel, 2021, for examples and references). Although there are commonalities across programs, the diversity of approaches is noteworthy, each informing research and practice, each addressing particular contributing factors or groups, and each offering lessons or activities that are effective.

Ongoing assessment of the impact of such efforts is critical to be sure that selected programs are actually effective. Although use of established, evidence-based programs is preferable, it is no guarantee of success in other contexts. Even well established programs can show mixed results across schools (e.g., see Hanewinkel, 2004, on mixed results for the Olweus program). Moreover some intervention approaches may negatively impact students. For example, several programs focus on peers, encouraging bystanders to step up to defend or support victims and/or report bullying. This makes sense given that most bullying is underground, such that peers, but not adults are more likely witness to bullying. Although effective, it is important to acknowledge that children who witness bullying are also at risk, with evidence of greater feelings of helplessness, substance use, mental health difficulties and suicidal ideation (Rivers, Poteat, Noret & Ashurst, 2009; Rivers & Noret, 2013). Finally, it is important to remember that, despite the documented success of many of these programs, results have been limited. Reviews of this literature indicate that overall reductions in bullying are estimated to be only by 17 to 23% (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), with little or no effectiveness at the secondary (high school) level (Yeager, Fong, Lee, & Espelage, 2015) and limited impact on high status, popular bullies (Garandeau, Lee, & Salmivalli, 2014). Although the success of programs to date is impressive, and such programs should be continued, additional efforts are warranted.

In my review paper (Hymel, 2021), I argue that school-based anti-bullying efforts should be viewed as part of a much larger mandate – that schools make concerted efforts to promote social and emotional competencies as well as academic skills. In North America, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning in the US (www.casel.org) has played a leadership role in this focus and has provided an extensive and growing body of evidence for the significant impact of a broad range of school-based, social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, both concurrent and long-term (e.g., Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Weare, 2010). As one example, in British Columbia, Canada, social and emotional skills have been mandated by the provincial Ministry of Education as one of four core competencies to be addressed in all schools, and the teacher training program at the University of British Columbia now emphasizes both SEL and mental health literacy in their training (see Schonert-Reichl, Hanson-Peterson, & Hymel, 2015, for a fuller discussion of SEL in teacher training).

Consistent with social-ecological models of bullying, SEL programs tend to be aimed at a broad number of social and emotional competencies that not only can reduce peer aggression and victimization (e.g. Espelage, Low, Polanin & Brown, 2015), but can also help to develop a more respectful and inclusive school and classroom climate. SEL also provides

a basis for school-based efforts to address mental health issues, especially at the elementary school level, helping to develop fundamental pro-social skills in all students as well as creating a respectful and inclusive school climate that supports students with mental health challenges rather than contributing to their difficulties. Moreover, there are multiple ways in which schools and teachers can promote social-emotional competencies and mental well-being (see www.selresources.com), allowing for flexibility and “repetition with variation” across the school years. Noteworthy is a recent cost-benefit analysis of several such programs that has estimated a benefit:cost ratio of \$11 for every \$1 spent in training and materials, etc. (Belfield et al., 2015).

Efforts to address school bullying must also be guided by continued research. Several suggestions are offered in regard to how we might best address school bullying in an effort to support mental wellbeing. First, although bullying can take many forms (verbal, physical, social/relational and cyber bullying), educators often see cyber and physical bullying as of greater concern given their well-recognized negative impact. However, the most common forms of bullying reported by students are verbal and social bullying (see Hymel, 2021). Currently, we do not know about the specific links between different forms of bullying and mental wellbeing, and need more research to understand how each contributes to or diminishes student wellbeing. The more common forms of verbal and social bullying, for example, can impact victims directly and indirectly, influencing the social environment in which students work and play, fostering exclusion, teasing, and further victimization by peers, potentially exacerbating the negative impact of the initial bullying. Research is needed to understand how the more common and the more serious forms of bullying differ in their impact, both direct and indirect, and in effective strategies to address them.

Second, developmental research is also needed, as prevalence rates of bullying vary with age, increasing across the elementary school years, reaching a peak around late elementary and early secondary school, and declining thereafter. Victimization also becomes more stable with age (see Hymel & Swearer, 2015), underscoring the potential value of early intervention and prevention. For some students, however, peer victimization continues over many years, with one study showing that for 6% of girls and 12% of boys, victimization by school mates was an ongoing problem from age 8 to 16 (Sourander, Helstela, Heleniou, & Piha, 2000). Research is needed to identify optimal periods for intervention and to understand why some children are at the greatest risk for ongoing peer victimization, and its associated negative impacts.

Those children who endure continued bullying over multiple years warrant particular attention. At the 2019 World Anti-Bullying Forum held in Dublin, Dr. Christina Salmivalli presented new data from their 8+ years of work evaluating the Finnish KIVA anti-bullying program, showing that, although the KIVA program has been successful in reducing school bullying significantly, those few students who continued to be bullied were found to be at even greater risk for mental health difficulties. These students are clearly in need of greater mental health support and clinical intervention. Relatedly, a recent review by Gregus, Craig and Cavell (2020) emphasizes the need for class and schoolwide interventions that counter the peer exclusion that these children face on a daily basis, with recommendations provided for several currently available social-emotional learning pre/interventions with demonstrated effectiveness that integrate direct social skills training with peer experiences (e.g., Good Behavior Game, Cooperative Learning, Lunch Buddy mentoring), and

efforts to create socially accepting, inclusive classrooms. In addition, within the field of special education, Katz (2018) has promoted intentional educational strategies for creating inclusive classrooms that combine well-established “universal designs” for academic learning (see Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2013; www.cast.org) with a focus on social-emotional learning and mental health in her “Three-Block Model” for classrooms (see Hymel & Katz, 2019 for a brief overview). In short, school-based SEL can and should play a major role, not only in addressing interpersonal challenges like bullying, but also in preparing a next generation that values diversity and inclusion, and that respects and supports peers who struggle with mental health difficulties.

Research over the past 50 years has provided us with a much better, albeit more complex understanding of school bullying and has demonstrated that there are multiple ways to address the problem in schools with some success. But we can (and must) do better. Given the complexity of individual, contextual, and group factors that contribute to bullying, there seems to be no single approach that fully addresses the problem. Rather, school bullying must be addressed at multiple levels, with universal (school-wide) efforts showing the greatest promise. We have now established a foundational understanding of school bullying and world-wide interest in mobilizing this knowledge to enhance educational practice. I hope that the information provided here is helpful to the Joint Committee in their efforts to address the problem.

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