



Focus on: **BULLYING 2017**

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ABA defines bullying as:

'the repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. It can happen face to face or online'.

Focus on: Bullying 2017

This, our first edition of 'Focus on: Bullying' our annual summary of journal articles on bullying in the UK (or involving UK participants). This edition looks at articles published during 2017. It is restricted to research on children and young people, including students in higher or further education, and to studies which had bullying as a primary or substantial focus.

We have endeavoured to cover major contributions using search engines and data bases, but inevitably a few may have been missed.

Context: Government

In July 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) issued revised guidance on Preventing and tackling bullying: Advice for headteachers, staff and governing bodies¹. The advice summarises legal requirements, gives descriptions of bullying and cyberbullying, discusses prevention and intervention issues, and gives a range of websites for further support. The definition still states that 'Bullying is behaviour by an individual or group, repeated over time, that intentionally hurts another individual or group physically or emotionally' and that 'Many experts say that bullying involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim' - thus indicating a more uncertain status for the imbalance of power criterion.

MANY EXPERTS SAY THAT BULLYING INVOLVES AN IMBALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN THE PERPETRATOR AND THE VICTIM

In this 2017 edition, the DfE have updated their guidance on safeguarding children and young people, put more emphasis on awareness of social media in relation to cyberbullying, and revised their guidance on schools giving support for pupils who are bullied: 'In all cases schools have a responsibility to support children who are bullied and make appropriate provision for a child's needs. The nature and level of support will depend on the individual circumstances and the level of need. These can include a quiet word from a teacher that knows the pupil well, asking the pastoral team to provide support, providing formal counselling, engaging with parents, referring to local authority children's services, completing a Common Assessment Framework or referring to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).' The revision has considerable expansion of material on vulnerable pupils, and lists more websites on, for example, race, religion and nationality, and on sexual harassment and sexual bullying.

Prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying

Many studies report prevalence rates of bullying perpetration and victimisation, both for what is now often called traditional (offline) bullying, and for cyber (online) bullying. However the actual rates obtained can vary enormously, depending on definitions used (for example is imbalance of power mentioned?), time period assessed over (for example the last month, or year, or ever), frequency cut-off (for example once or twice, about once a week, several times a week), and other factors. This was demonstrated in a meta-analysis review² of 39 studies reporting prevalence in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland from 1997 to 2016. This study also found that traditional victimization rates were about twice as high as cyber victimisation rates in primary schools; rates at post-primary schools were lower, with no significant difference between traditional and cyber rates.

A study using the EU Kids Online data from 2010³ examined cyber and face-to-face victimisation from 18 countries (including the U.K.). This study found that online victimisation was more likely among girls. The main focus was on regional and country level predictors. Regional life expectancy had a negative relationship and crime rates a marginal positive relationship to both online and face-to-face victimisation. Population density had a negative, and GDP a positive, relationship with cyber but not face-to-face victim rates. Adjusting for the effects of socio-demographic variables, 3.8% of the variation in an individual's propensity to be a victim of cyberbullying was due to differences between regions, while 6.6% was due to between-country differences.

A study in Scotland⁴ examined time trends, using data from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, which assesses 11, 13 and 15 year olds every 4 years. In fact in many countries, HBSC data has suggested some decrease in victimisation rates over the last two decades; but the Scottish study found some trend for an increase between 1994 and 2014, from 10.4% to 13.8% who had been bullied at least twice in the past couple of months. The researchers also found that victims generally had lower confidence and happiness, and more psychological complaints; this association worsened over the time period for girls, but not for boys.

A study in English secondary schools⁵, examined traditional and cyberbullying involvement, self-esteem and behavioural problems in 11-16 year olds. Of these, 29% reported being victims, but only 1% were pure online victims (that is, not also bullied traditionally). Both traditional and online victimisation had negative correlates with behaviour problems and self-esteem, but with poly-victims (who experienced both) significantly more affected. The authors argued that 'cyberbullying creates few new victims, but is mainly a new tool to harm victims already bullied by traditional means'.

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Research specifically on cyberbullying

A study of 16- to 19-year-olds in England⁶ asked about giving and receiving five kinds of cyberbullying behaviours, via eight forms of media. Both giving and receiving was higher in males than females. Cluster analysis produced four distinct roles: not involved (33%), rarely victim and bully (40%), typical victim who rarely cyberbullied (26%) and retaliator who gave and received (1%).

A review on cyberbullying at universities⁷ summarised eight international studies of incidence, and other studies on aspects such as participant roles. The legal context, especially in the U.K., is discussed. The authors point out that cyberbullying can be a significant problem in colleges and universities, but that 'in most universities, specific policies on cyberbullying are often lacking'.



Social skills of perpetrators and victims

There have been differing views and evidence about the social skills of perpetrators or bullies, and of victims. In particular, are bullies lacking in such skills, or are they instead skilful manipulators? A review⁸ reported on 9 studies (4 in the U.K.) that had examined bullying roles in relation to theory of mind – the ability to understand the emotional states of others even if different from ones own. Five of the 9 studies found positive associations of theory of mind with bullying others, and two out of four studies found positive associations with defender roles (helping the victim); supporting the view that such skills can be used for both prosocial and antisocial ends. Four out of seven studies however found victims to have poorer theory of mind skills.

A study⁹ of 11-16 year olds in U.K. schools examined bully and victim roles in relation to emotion recognition, hostile attribution bias, and characterological self-blame. There were no associations between bullying perpetration and these three measures; however, being a victim was associated with more hostile attribution bias and characterological self-blame. Another review study¹⁰ examined relations of childhood bullying (here, meaning being a victim of bullying) to paranoid thinking. The authors identified 10 separate studies, of which 9 found a significant association, with childhood victims showing more paranoid thinking in adolescence or as adults. Both these studies pointed out implications for interventions to help victims.

Impact of bullying

See also ⁴ and ⁵ above.

Data from 16 countries (including the UK), provided by the Children's World survey, was analysed in a study¹¹ that related children's experiences of school-based bullying (being bullied) with subjective wellbeing. In 14 of the 16 countries, a significant negative association was found. Although the study refers to bullying, it acknowledges that the actual measure used did not assess intentionality or imbalance of power, and may have picked up more general aggression or even play fighting.

BULLYING IN ADOLESCENTS RELATES TO POOR MENTAL HEALTH AND IT WAS FOUND THAT SOCIAL SUPPORT ALLEVIATED THIS OUTCOME

A cohort study of 28 secondary schools in East London¹², the RELACHS study, surveyed pupils in years 7 and 9. Many pupils were of Bangladeshi origin. Bullying (here meaning being bullied) was associated with more psychological distress, as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. This was true for both White British and Bangladeshi pupils; and for both groups, social support from family was associated with less psychological distress. For White British pupils only, social support from friends also reduced psychological distress found that bullying in adolescents relates to poor mental health and was found that social support alleviated this outcome.

A study¹³ of 11-16 year olds in 5 UK secondary schools, examined bullying role in relation to preoccupation about weight loss. Bullies, victims and bully-victims were at increased risk of weight loss preoccupation compared to adolescents uninvolved in bullying. However the pathways were different. For bullies (especially boy bullies), it appeared that they were directly concerned with body image, perhaps as a way to increase attractiveness and social status. For victims, body weight preoccupation was related to lower self-esteem and greater psychological distress.

An issue around many studies of impact is that of cause and effect. Does being a victim cause psychological distress, or does psychological distress (for other reasons) lead to being a victim?

Also, do genetic factors account for much of the association? Findings from a longitudinal study of twins¹⁴ (TEDS: Twins Early Development Study) goes a long way to resolve these issues. The data comes from a large sample of twins born in England and Wales from 1994-1996 and assessed at 11 and later 16 years. Analyses of different experiences of monozygotic (genetically identical) twins controlled for genetic confounds. Being a victim at 11 years predicted anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and impulsivity, inattention, and conduct problems at the time; these persisted for 2 years but were not found at 5 years. Cognitive disorganisation and paranoid thoughts were also associated with being a victim at 11 years, and these decreased but were still significant, 5 years later. The authors highlight the potential for resilience in children who are bullied, and implications for intervention.

Vulnerable Groups

LGBTQ pupils are known to be more at risk of being bullied, and this was supported by findings from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) of adolescents between 15.5 and 17.5 years¹⁵. Sexual minority adolescents (those not identifying as 100% heterosexual) were more at risk of bullying (meaning here, being bullied), between 12 and 16 years. In addition, being bullied contributed to increased risk of anxiety disorders at 17.5 years.

Another vulnerable group are children with autism spectrum conditions (ASC). A study of such young people¹⁶ drawn from 269 schools across England, examined teacher and parents reports of the child being bullied, in relation to a range of risk factors (behaviour difficulties, positive relationships with peers and adults, parental engagement, SEND provision, educational placement, use of public transport). There was support for a cumulative risk model: the more risks present, the more likely a pupil was to be bullied (whether teacher or parent reports were used).

Racism and racist bullying has also been an important topic, with varied findings in recent years. However a study of two rural primary schools¹⁷, each with an overwhelmingly White pupil body, suggested that racist bullying might still occur, but (at least in one school) not be recognised as such. Discourses from the parents as well as teachers were analysed in a Foucauldian perspective.

A Foucauldian perspective was also taken in a qualitative study of pupils aged 10-16 years¹⁸. Observations, interviews and focus groups explored the power relations among pupils and with teachers. The study highlighted the difficult position and marginalisation of some male working-class children, and ways in which the school system can sometimes have a role in maintaining bullying relationships.

BEING A VICTIM AT 11 YEARS PREDICTED ANXIETY, DEPRESSION, HYPERACTIVITY AND IMPULSIVITY, INATTENTION, AND CONDUCT PROBLEMS AT THE TIME; THESE PERSISTED FOR 2 YEARS

Early Years

The origins of bullying can be looked for in preschools, but there is debate about whether bullying (in the sense of repeated attacks on a victim) is an appropriate term at this age range. Victim status (being attacked) seems much more fluid and less stable than at later school ages. An international review¹⁹ of 26 articles summarised research that links bullying roles in preschool to language and social development. Preschool-aged children engage in different bullying roles – aggressor, victim, defender – and early intervention programmes can target these. Language skills may be an important component of this, children with good overall language skills tend to have stronger social skills and positive peer outcomes.

Parental engagement

Although parents have a vital role in reducing the prevalence and impact of bullying, this has been relatively neglected in much research. A study²⁰ in North West England recruited 21 parents, whose views on school bullying were captured through focus groups and interviews. Two main themes were identified. The first, called perceived institutional factors, related to school anti-bullying policies and their implantation, and how parents view communication with teachers and how the school viewed them. Despite some positive experiences, a considerable degree of mistrust in these areas was evident. The second theme was called 'being a good parent'. This referred to parent's desire to protect their child, and appraising themselves as a 'good parent'. The importance of good communication between parents and teachers was highlighted by this research.



Anti-bullying strategies

There are now a large number of school-based anti-bullying programmes available, and meta-analyses have suggested that they tend to have moderate success. One important issue in such programs is sustainability, and how any positive effects of programs change over time. An analysis of this was reported²¹ using earlier data from the DES-SHEFFIELD study in England, and the RESPEKT project in Norway. Indications were of a progressive change over time, with a possible delayed effect after 2 years. These analyses were exploratory but point to the importance of monitoring change over time in future intervention studies.

While pupil factors are important to consider, there is much evidence that schools can make a difference. This was illustrated in a study of 35 primary schools in England²². Data were gathered from pupil surveys (year 6), teachers, and secondary data sources such as Ofsted reports. It was found that pupil factors explained nearly 68% of variance in being bullied, but school factors explained nearly 20% and classroom factors 13%. A key school factor appeared to be the quality and implementation of anti-bullying policies.

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Anti-bullying programs generally incorporate a range of components, and one of these is often peer support. Peer support can take a great variety of forms. One study²³ evaluated the effects of a cooperative cross-age teaching of social issues intervention (CATS) for peer-identified victims of bullying in secondary school. Here, younger pupils are tutored by those a year or so older, including in anti-bullying coping strategies. Positive effects of CATS were found on help-seeking, stronger with a longer dose of intervention, and mediated by changes in self-blame, and self-esteem.

A qualitative study of interviews with five practitioner psychologists and four lawyers in the UK²⁴ suggested the importance of asking about prior or current experience of bullying (and cyberbullying) involvement in psychological risk assessments; increased awareness of legal policies; and the responsibilities of website operators regarding abusive content.

Concluding comments

Research publications on bullying have been increasing rapidly, and the UK remains an important contributor. An important international article²⁵ comments on continuing definitional issues, and offers guidance to researchers. A promising aspect of this substantial research program is the continuing dialogue between researchers and practitioners, and the further development and refinement of intervention strategies.

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