

A Systematic Analysis of Causes and Consequences of School Bullying among Children

Manisha Dhami*, Neha Joshi*, Seema Sharma**

*Research Scholar, *Research Scholar, ** Principal Extension Scientist

Human Development & Family Studies, Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana-141001

Abstract

Bullying victimization is one of the most common psychological problems of children in school. It has an association with adjustment difficulties and psychological well being of bullied children. In recent years, the impact of childhood bullying on mental health is also receiving the attention of practitioners and educators. This paper intends to assess the extent of school bullying, identify causes of bullying behavior, and describes the consequences of bullying victimization in respect to child development. Findings: Around the world, more than 1 in 3 students aged between 13-15 experiences bullying (UNICEF 2019). Existing literature indicates a) certain factors that are responsible for bullying behavior are psychological, family-based, socio-economic and influence of media; b) short term or long term consequences of bullying, attributes like self-esteem, socio-emotional wellbeing, psychological distress, and academic achievement of children are reported to be impacted. **Conclusion:** Bullying amongst children highlights existing inefficiencies in the social system and the potential for incurring future social costs in the communities and schools in which children live their lives. Every child has the right to a safe nurturing school environment that must respect their dignity.

Keywords: Children, bullying victimization, well being, attributes, initiatives, prevention

Introduction

Bullying is an aggressive behaviour that takes place intentionally and frequently causes another child to feel hurt. It is a serious threat to children, as it is one of the most common expressions of violence in the peer context. Bullying prevails when there is an imbalance in the strength of power between the parties involved (Olweus 1993). Children who bully generally come from perceived higher social status or position of power, children who are bigger, stronger, or perceived to be popular. Bullying involvement is a collective prevalence of bullies, victims, and bully-victims (Malhi *et al* 2014) It engrosses activities like physical attack (hitting, kicking, destructing victim's belongings), assault, intimidation, verbal attack, social aggression, and in current time bullying also take place through internet known as cyber bullying (Smith 2014). The psychology behind the bullying behavior is that it is way of establishing social dominance. Bullying and victimization have higher linked with emotional problems, conduct problems, and hyperactivity which have an association with low prosocial

behavior (Malhi *et al* 2014 & Ranjith *et al* 2019). Its prevalence can have distressing effects, not only to the person who experiences it but also to the wider community where it occurs. It is the responsibility of adults and students to stop an unacceptable behaviour of bullying. School must have lucid and comprehensive program and policies that can deal to all forms of bullying and emphasize prevention: timely, consistent intervention: social-emotional supports for victims and bullies; and clear, effective disciplinary policies.

Extent of school bullying:

Around the world, more than 1 in 3 students aged between 13-15 experiences bullying (UNICEF 2019). In the past few decades, incidents of school bullying have risen in India and have gained attention due to media focus on homicide and suicide in which bullying acts as a precipitating factor. Studies indicated that 20% to 54% of children are continually involved in school bullying as bullies or as victims (Kumpulainen & Rasanen 2000). Approximately 30 percent of 6-10 grade students were involved in bullying, as a perpetrator, victim, or both

(Fight Crime: Invest in Kids 2003). According to George (2018), it has been reported that 10 % of the students do not feel safe in their school because of bullying. Data obtained from the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey in 2005 portrayed that 53.6% of children were involved in verbal bullying, 51.4% in social bullying, and 20.8% in physical bullying (Wang *et al* 2009). Indian schools have reported prevalence of bullying involvement was around 53 % with prevalence of bullies and victims were 34% and 30–60% respectively (Kshirsagar *et al* 2007 & Mahi *et al* 2014).

Analysis of gender difference in the prevalence of school bullying showed that boys were more involved in bullying than girls (Oluyinka 2008 & Jaradat 2017), whereas, no significant gender differences in bullying have been reported by Kshirsagar *et al* (2007). Smith and Gross (2006) identify that boys exhibit higher levels of overt bullying behavior while girls exhibit covert psychological bullying. Boys were found to be engaged more in physical bullying (fight/ use of abusive language) and likely to receive physical victimization whereas, for girls, it took the form of teasing, name-calling or avoiding someone (Ranjith *et al* 2019).

Causes of school bullying:

Bullying behavior is a result of multiple factors that place children at risk of bullying includes:

- **Psychological:** Psychological traits refer to relatively stable disposition form of personality and it refers to individual's tendencies to think, feel and react in a certain way. Various socio-psychological factors like impulsivity, misconduct, aggression were found to be significantly associated with bullying behavior (Oluyinka 2008). Attachment and neuroticism act as risk factors for students in becoming victims of bullying (Hansen *et al* 2012). Students with a low sense of belonging tend to engage in bullying. Poor health behavior (substance abuse and lifestyle), poor social support of parents and peers and low self-esteem presented a strong relationship with bullying victimization (Gaspar *et al* 2014).
- **Family environment:** Family environment has direct effect on child behaviour as family is the first unit of social interaction and relationship providing context for development of social pattern. Family factors were inimitably associated with the behavior of children of all groups. Exposure to inter-parental conflict, the experience of child maltreatment, low maternal warmth, parental depression, harsh or uninvolved parenting styles, lack of parental bonding is known to be associated with a high risk of children's involvement in bullying behaviour (Papanikolaou *et al* 2011 & Bowes *et al* 2009).
- **Socio-economic status:** It is an aggregated concept comprised of resources-based and prestige based indicators. Studies suggested bully-victims have been reported to be associated with poor parental education (Jansen *et al* 2012), low parental occupation (Lemstra *et al* 2012) and poverty (Glew *et al* 2005). Children from low SES families tend to experience lower levels of emotional well-being and have more behavior problems. Wang *et al* (2009) found that victims of physical and relational bullying belong to low affluence families in comparison to cyberbullying.
- **Influence of media:** Today's children grow up in a world saturated with media use. Children spent a considerable portion of their time in media usage. Media use is like a double-edged sword with merits and demerits. Through media, children and adolescents are exposed to violence through games, music, video, movies as well as daily news on television (Brown & Tierney 2011). Social media and other forms of communication are loaded with aggressive content and children are at risk of imitating them (Mehta & Paliania 2014). The increased utilization of the internet and social media platforms are leading to cyberbullying, especially among youth (Abaido 2020).
- **Peer pressure:** Bullying behaviors which can be seen as a group phenomenon (Oleus 1993), can be a response to peer pressure within the school. Children being members of social group occupy different roles to foster their feelings of belongingness and to establish themselves in social hierarchy. Peer pressure act as a powerful influencer, forcing children to engage in bullying behaviour. Ehindero (2016) found a significant influence of peer pressure on bullying behaviour indicating that students imitating the aggressive behaviour of his

peer will exhibit bullying behaviour because children in school-age often seek the attention and opinion of a peer than their parents.

- **Modeling:** Children learn behaviour through observation and role modeling. They reflect the values and behaviour observed in homes, television, games, along with the behaviours of famous personalities and world leaders. Social learning theories attributed bullying to modeling as well as operant conditioning. Bullying behaviour is frequently reported among those children whose parents teach to retaliate and hit back when they feel any kind of attack (Demaracy & Maleckl 2003). Children admit bullying or threat tactics as an acceptable form of problem-solving technique and when they found their role model is using the same, they start reflecting the learned observation (Bauman 2008).

Consequences of school bullying:

Bullying is a serious and widespread problem among school-aged-children and adolescents resulting in short and life-long negative consequences for both the bully and the victim. Common consequences are:

Self-esteem: Self-esteem is an aspect that is considered as a risk factor and a consequence of bullying (Wang *et al* 2018). Tsaousis (2016) found a significantly negative mutual relationship between the bullying behaviors of victims and bullies and their self-esteem. As bullying behavior escalates, the level of self-esteem decreases (Spade 2007). Repetitive bullying could lead them to suffer a serious and lasting decline in self-esteem (James 1998).

Social-emotional well being: Studies showed that that bullying victimization is linked significantly with higher levels of psychological issues and reduced levels of emotional wellbeing (Thomas *et al* 2016). It has been established that social isolation and loneliness have significant relation with bullying victimization (Steyn & Singh 2018).

Psychological distress: Being bullied at school is a source of stress for students and harms their well being (Olweus 1993). Students who are bullied experience poorer social, emotional as well as physical health which results in the signs of depression, suicidal ideation and loneliness (Owusu *et al* 2011).

Academic achievement: Bullying is considered as a severe problem in academics. Bullied students portrayed delinquent behavior with poor academic performance (Macmillan & Hagan 2004). It has been found that school bullying affects the academic performance of victims and bullies both (Raqqad *et al* 2017 and Chandran *et al* 2018).

Cross-national variation in the prevalence of school bullying:

The global variation is found in the prevalence of bullying among school- aged children. The proportion of school-aged children who were bullied was remarkably consistent across various countries: Australia (17 %), England (19 %), Japan (15 %), Norway (14 %), Spain (17 %) and the USA (16 %) (Nansel *et al* 2001) whereas, in UK and France, the prevalence of bullying was 50 % and 65% respectively. In contrast to these countries, around 77% of school children in India reported being a victim bullying (Mohan 2017).

In India, the escalating access of internet among Indians has given rise to cyber bullying, with adolescents being the most vulnerable victims. A report published in Comparitech.com revealed that Indian children were the most cyber-bullied in the world. Indian parents proved to be highest to express confidence that their children were cyber bullied at least some times. Since 2011 to 2018, the number of Parents reporting against cyber bullying has risen. It concluded that Indian school aged children face more offline and online bullying than in some western countries.

Initiatives taken to prevent bullying:

The right to feel safe at home, at school and in the community is the basic right of children as per UNCRC, 1990. Bullying is not a normal part of growing up. For successful holistic development of children, there is a need of a safe, supportive learning environment. Impeding and preventing bullying involves an obligation to create a secure environment where children can thrive, socially and academically, without being afraid. Considering the rising cases of school bullying, CBSE in 2015 issued guidelines stating mandatory setting up of anti-bullying committees in schools for creating awareness, along with developing and implementing bullying prevention programs. The provision of a trained counselor is also suggested by guidelines

for emotional support to bully-victims and helping in coping up.

It is the responsibility of the school to make safe spaces for their students by preventing the many forms of bullying. Malik (2016) emphasized on the need of comprehensive school-based intervention with integrated stakeholder's roles to address bullying behavior at a larger level and awareness about bullying behavior should be created through role-plays, workshops as well as sensitize the children about the consequences of bullying behavior. The involvement of parents in the prevention and management of bullying will help in synergizing the positive outcomes also facilitate the prevention and management of bullying victimization. Srisiva *et al* (2013) also suggested the establishment of anti-bullying policies, training of the teachers in anti-bullying

activities, and incorporating the anti-bullying policies/ procedures in the curriculum.

Conclusion

The rate of bullying among children is major indicator of children's well being. Bullying amongst children has inevitably contributed to become a globally recognized challenge. Bullying at school can threaten students' safety and has negatively impacted the psychology of bullies and victims. The suicide statistics of bullying victims is staggering and alarming. Every child has the right to a safe nurturing school environment that must respect their dignity. Thus, there is a need to priorities this issue whether at home or in school. The efforts should focus on preventing bullying behaviors as well as providing support to children and youth from becoming the target of bullying.

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