

5-31-2012

Bullying and Children's Peer Relationships

Philip C. Rodkin
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues>

Recommended Citation

Rodkin, Philip C. (2012) "Bullying and Children's Peer Relationships," *Colleagues*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 4.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol8/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colleagues by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.



FEATURE



Illustration by Danielle Fritz, GVSU Student

Bullying and Children's Peer Relationships

By Dr. Philip C. Rodkin, Guest Contributor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

On first thought, the words *bully* and *peer* hardly belong in the same title; for all intents and purposes the two words are opposites. A peer is an equal, of the same social standing as oneself (Hartup, 1983). Bullying lacks the elements of equality and free choice. What distinguishes bullying from other forms of childhood aggression, whether a hard-fought basketball game or rough-and-tumble play, is *unequal, coercive power* (Olweus, 1993; Vaillancourt, McDougall, Hymel, & Sunderani, 2010). It's this sense of inequality, abuse, unfairness, and of a peer culture valuing all the wrong things that makes the problem of bullying fundamentally incompatible with the American character. Bullying violates our democratic spirit that all youth should be free to learn, in peace and safety, making the most of their talents and goals.

What kind of power does a bully really have? Children and youth (and some adults) use bullying to acquire resources and—here is where peers come into the picture—to demonstrate to an audience that they can dominate (Pellegrini, Long, Solberg, Roseth, DuPuis, Bohn, & Hickey, 2010; Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010). The success of bullies in attaining resources and recognition—indeed, the very extent to which children turn to bullying—depends on factors that include the characteristics of the bully, the relationship existing between bullies and whom they target for harassment, and the reactions of classmates who witness bullying. Do schoolmates embarrass the harassed and stroke the bully's ego, do they ignore the bullying in front of their eyes, or does somebody intervene to support the victim and help stop the bullying? Of course, peer

culture in elementary, middle, and high school exists not in some *Lord of the Flies* lawlessness, but rather under the presumably watchful eyes of responsible adults: teachers, principals, bus drivers, school staff, and of course parents. The importance of how peers and adults act in response to—or even better, in anticipation of bullying, can't be overestimated.

Two Social Worlds of Bullying

In a recent article, Tom Farmer and his colleagues report on the “two social worlds” of bullying (Farmer, Petrin, Robertson, Fraser, Hall, Day, & Dadisman, 2010). These social worlds are *marginalization* on the one hand, and *connection* on the other. To quote Farmer and colleagues, socially marginalized bullies “may be fighting against a social system that keeps them on the periphery” while socially integrated bullies “may use aggression to control” others (p. 386).

“The importance of how peers and adults act in response to—or even better, in anticipation of bullying, can't be overestimated.”

With respect to rejection and marginalization, many bullies seem to continuously come into conflict with others, to run against the world. These children, mostly boys, tend to be characterized by a clear pattern of deficits in broad domains of developmental functioning. They're consistently identified as being at-risk, even from bullying and harassment by others (what Olweus (1993) terms “bully-victims”). Their aggression is impulsive and overly reactive to real or perceived slights. Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, and Sadek (2010, p. 76) write that this type of bully: “has comorbid externalizing and internalizing problems, holds significantly negative attitudes and beliefs about himself or herself and others, is low in social competence, does not have adequate social problem-solving skills, performs poorly academically, and is not only rejected and isolated by peers but also negatively influenced by the peers with

whom he or she interacts.” Farmer and colleagues report that marginalized, unpopular bullies, whether girls or boys, are often shunted into peer groups with other bullies, and sometimes even with the children they harass. Marginalized bullies have a host of problems of which bullying behavior is but one manifestation. Their bullying might stem from an inability to control their impulsive actions, or from a desire to gain status that generally eludes them.

Then there are bullies whose social worlds are networked and integrated—these children don't lack for peer social support. Socially integrated bullies are more evenly split between boys and girls. They have a variety of friends, some bullies but others not, and strengths that are easy to recognize, like social skills, athleticism, or attractiveness. Socially connected bullies tend to be proactive and goal-directed in their aggression. They have lots of experience with peers, perhaps as far back as the day care years (Rodkin & Roisman, 2010). Some bullies incorporate prosocial strategies into their behavioral repertoire, for example reconciling with their targets after conflict, or becoming less aggressive once a clear dominance relationship has been established (Pellegrini et al., 2010). Socially connected bullies are both underrecognized as seriously aggressive, and popularized in the media as in, for instance, *Mean Girls*. Vaillancourt and colleagues (2010, p. 218) go so far as to call these socially connected bullies “Machiavellian”: “popular, socially skilled and competent... [with] high self-esteem.. low on psychopathology... [and] many assets” (see also Hawley, 2003). This portrait of mental health may be overdrawn, as Cook and colleagues (2010) and Rodkin and Roisman (2010) find substantial deficits even for more popular bullies, but there is no doubt that a substantial proportion of very aggressive children and youth have moderately low to surprisingly high levels of popularity among their peers.

Bullying may peak in early adolescence, but these two social worlds of bullying exist as early as kindergarten (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010), or in Farmer and colleagues' study, second grade. The two social worlds of bullying represent two central but seemingly inconsistent views of aggressive behavior: as dysfunctional and maladaptive, or functional and adaptive. As light can be

both wave and particle, aggression can be maladaptive or adaptive depending on why the aggression occurs, the time frame (e.g., “good in the short run, but bad in the long run”), the consequences of aggressive acts, and one’s perspective (Rodkin & Wilson, 2007). Educators and parents need to ask why bullying is working from the perspective of the bully and what goals are being served by bullying behavior, as they will be different for different children.

The Bully-Victim Relationship

Any law enforcement official would quickly want to establish the relationship that might exist between an alleged perpetrator and victim. However, in the area of bullying research, little is known about the relationship between a bully and the child whom he or she targets. Instead, the focus has been on identifying children who fall into *bully*, *victim*, and *bully-victim* categories, and then determining prevalence rates and behavioral characteristics of bullies, victims, and bully-victims (e.g., Cook et al., 2010). This procedure puts bullies and victims into separate boxes and overemphasizes their separateness. In practical terms, this could mean that there is no known relationship between a bully and victim, or something of a random targeting.

Reality is more complicated. Bullies and victims often have a previously existing relationship that presages bullying before it happens, which if known would alert knowledgeable adults about possible trouble spots (Card & Hodges, 2008). One clear predictor of bullying is reciprocated dislike and animosity. Potential bullies, particularly socially connected bullies, actualize angry thoughts into aggressive behavior towards low status peers whom they already dislike, and who dislike them (Hodges, Peets, & Salmivalli, 2009). Socially connected children choose same-sex bullying as part of a struggle for dominance, particularly in the beginning of the school year or between transitions from one school to another, when the social hierarchy is in flux and unpopular children can be targeted (Pellegrini et al., 2010). The bullying behavior of socially connected children is thus quite responsive to changing opportunities in the peer social ecology.

One finding that becomes obvious once bullies and victims are considered as a two-person dyad is that there are a disturbing number of cases, possibly half, where aggressive boys are harassing girls (Berger & Rodkin, 2009; Rodkin & Berger, 2008; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Zijlstra, DeWinter, Verhulst, & Ormel, 2007). Olweus (1993, p. 18) first reported this overlooked finding, writing that “*boys carried out a large part of the bullying to which girls were subjected*” (italics original): 60% of fifth through seventh grade girls whom Olweus (1993) reported as being harassed said that they were bullied by boys. Similarly, the American Association of University Women (2001, p. 25) reported that 38% of girls who experience sexual harassment “say they first experienced it in elementary school.” Unpopular, rejected-aggressive boys are most likely to harass girls (Rodkin & Berger, 2008), whereas socially connected bullies tend to demonstrate within-sex bullying and dominance against unpopular targets (Pellegrini et al., 2010). Still, boys’ physical and verbal aggression against girls can too often become an accepted part of peer culture. Peer sexual harassment is often seen as a purely adolescent phenomenon, but its origins may be linked to when and how boys harass girls in early and middle childhood (Garandau, Wilson, & Rodkin, 2010; Hanish, Hill, Gosney, Fabes, & Martin, 2011; Rodkin & Fischer, 2003; Rosenbluth, Whitaker, Valle, & Ball, 2011; Ybarra, Espelage, & Martin, 2011). More generally, gender and sexuality is a hidden underbelly of much bullying, as described in the white paper by Espelage. Any notable difference between people that can be associated with power differentials, such as religion, disability, or ethnicity, has the potential to be seized upon as an object of harassment.

Peer Relationships that Promote and Prevent Bullying

Peer relationships are like oxygen that allows bullying to breathe and spread; peer relationships can be used as a cudgel, a weapon of shame against victims, but even one good friend to a victim of bullying can help assuage the harmful consequences of being harassed.

Socially marginalized bullies who are also victims, who predominantly aggress in reaction to provocation, stand out through their segregation from most peers as isolates

or as members of deviant, peripheral peer cliques. These youth would benefit from services that go beyond bullying-reduction programs per se, such as violence reduction therapies and social skills training (Bierman & Powers, 2009; Cook et al., 2010). Where feasible the social ties of marginalized bullies should be broadened to include a greater variety of peers.

My colleague Ramin Karimpour and I have referred to socially connected bullies as “hidden in plain sight” (Rodkin & Karimpour, 2008) because they are on the one hand more socially prominent than marginalized bullies, yet less likely to be recognized as bullies or as at-risk. Since socially connected bullies affiliate with a wide variety of peers, there is an unhealthy potential for widespread acceptance of bullying in some classrooms and schools. This is what Debra Pepler and colleagues call the *theatre of bullying* (Pepler, Craig, & O’Connell, 2010), encompassing not only the bully-victim dyad, but also children who encourage and reinforce bullies (or become bullies themselves), others who silently witness harassment and abuse, and hopefully still others who intervene to support children being harassed (see also Salmivalli et al., 2010). As Pepler and colleagues (2010, p. 470) write: “bullying is a social event in the classroom and on the playground,” with an audience of peers in almost 90% of observed cases. This silent, mocking audience grows exponentially, in frightening anonymity, with cyberbullying. Thus, the problem of bullying is also a problem of the unresponsive bystander, whether that bystander is a classmate who finds harassment to be funny, or a peer who sits on the sidelines afraid to get involved, or an educator who sees bullying as just another part of growing up.

Socially connected bullies target children who will likely *not* be defended (Card & Hodges, 2008; Pellegrini et al., 2010; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Munniksma, & Dijkstra, 2010), but peers who do intervene in bullying can make a real difference. Socially connected bullies thrive on being perceived as dominant, popular, and cool, which is fed by tacit or overt acceptance by peers. Peers who intervene to stop bullying may be successful on over half of such attempts, but unfortunately these defenders stand up in less than 20% of bullying incidents (Pepler et al., 2010;

Salmivalli et al., 2010). *One good friend* can make a crucial difference to children who are harassed. Associations between victimization and internalizing problems (e.g., being sad, depressed, anxious) are minimized for victims who are friends with a non-victimized peer (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999). Even first grade children who have a friend but are otherwise socially isolated seem to be protected from the adjustment problems suffered by other isolated children (Laursen, Bukowski, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). Peer relationships are crucial both for the bully who is looking to maintain or acquire social status, and for the child who is looking to cope with, and better yet end, peer harassment.

Classroom and School Climate

With clouds of war gathering, German émigré and child psychologist Kurt Lewin and his colleagues created clubs for 10-year-old boys that were organized in an authoritarian (fascistic) or democratic fashion (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). Victimization and scapegoating were highest in groups with an *autocratic* atmosphere, with a dominant group leader and a strongly hierarchical structure. Victimization was lowest in groups with a *democratic* atmosphere, where relationships with group leaders were more egalitarian and cohesive.

Classroom and school climates are built by the relationships peers have to one another and to their teachers. These interpersonal bonds need to be healthy, or bullying and antisocial behavior can overpower the learning environment. It’s well worth asking whether today’s schools are characterized by a democratic or autocratic social climate, and whether differences in school climate are related to bullying. Classroom peer ecologies with more egalitarian social status hierarchies, strong group norms in support of academic achievement and prosocial behavior, and cohesive, positive social ties between children should deprive many socially connected bullies of the peer regard that they require (Ahn, Garandea, & Rodkin, 2010; Frey, Edstrom, & Hirschstein, 2010; Pellegrini et al., 2010; Rodkin & Gest, 2011; Wilson, Karimpour, & Rodkin, 2011). In contrast, even children who are not themselves bullies will form pro-bullying attitudes in classrooms where bullies are popular (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008), feeding

a vicious cycle of bullying reinforcement and failure to stand up for victims of harassment.

Managing School Social Networks to Prevent and Intervene in Bullying

In a review of bullying-reduction programs, Farrington and Ttofi (2009) found that interventions that explicitly work with peers, such as using students as peer mediators, or engaging bystanders to disapprove of bullying and support victims of harassment, were associated with *increases* in victimization! In fact, of twenty program elements included in 44 school-based programs, work with peers was the *only* program element that was associated with significantly *more* bullying and victimization. (In contrast, there were significant and positive effects for parent training and meetings in reducing bullying.) Still other reviews of bullying intervention programs have found generally weak effects (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008).

These disheartening results speak to the fact that peer influences can be a constructive or destructive force on bullying, and need to be handled with knowledge, skill, and care. Antisocial peer groups can undermine behavioral interventions (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011). The most potentially important peer effects have yet to be studied adequately. For instance, children who are chosen to be peer mediators should probably be identified as popular and prosocial for peer mediation to be effective (Pellegrini et al., 2010; Pepler et al., 2010; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). Some of the most innovative, intensive, grass-roots uses of peer relationships to reduce bullying, such as the *You Have the Power!* Program in Montgomery County, Maryland (Holstein-Glass, Silliman, & Nahin, 2010), are never scientifically evaluated. The final verdict awaits on some promising programs that take advantage of peer relationships to combat bullying, such as the KiVa program of Salmivalli et al. (2010), and the Steps to Respect program of Frey et al. (2010).

Teachers can ask what kind of bully they face when dealing with a concrete victimization problem. Is the bully a member of a group, or a group leader? How are bullies and victims situated in the peer ecology? Educators who ex-

clusively target peripheral, antisocial cliques as the engine of school violence problems may leave intact other groups that are more responsible for mainstream peer support of bullying. A strong step educators could take would be to periodically ask students about their social relationships, taking advantage of increasingly powerful techniques of social network analysis that are becoming more user-friendly to educators (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001; Rodkin & Hanish, 2007). Of course, these efforts can only work in a larger climate where families and educators teach and model strong moral character to our next generation of Americans. Some additional recommendations are listed below (for more, see Berger, Karimpour, & Rodkin, 2008; Garandau et al., 2010):

- **Ask students about bullying.** Survey students regularly on whether they are being harassed or have witnessed harassment. Make it easier for students to come to an adult in the school to talk about harassment. Consider what bullying accomplishes for a bully.
- **Ask students about their relationships.** Bullying itself is a relationship—a destructive, asymmetric relationship. Know who students hang out with, who their friends are, and who they dislike. Know who students perceive to be popular and unpopular. Connect with children who have no friends. School staff vary widely in their knowledge of students' relationships, and tend to underestimate the popularity of aggression among peers.
- **Build democratic classroom and school climates.** Identify student leaders who can encourage peers to stand against bullying. Assess whether student social norms are really against bullying. Train teachers to better understand and manage student social dynamics, and to handle aggression with clear, consistent consequences. Master teachers not only promote academic success, they also build relationships, trust, and a sense of community.
- **Be an informed consumer of anti-bullying curricula.** Anti-bullying interventions can be successful, but there are significant caveats (Merrell et al., 2008) Some bullies are challenged in broad domains of developmental functioning. Some programs work well in Europe, but not as well here in the U.S. (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009). Most anti-bullying programs have not been rigorously

evaluated, so be an informed consumer when investigating claims of success. Even with a well-developed anti-bullying curriculum, understanding students' relationships at your school is critical.

• **Remember that bullying is also a problem of values.**

Implement a character education or socioemotional learning curriculum that is intellectually challenging. Teach children how to achieve their goals by being assertive rather than aggressive. Always resolve conflicts with civility, among and between staff and students. Involve families.

Charles Payne, in his outstanding 2008 book *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, makes the point that even the best, most rigorous and validated intervention won't be successful without appreciation of the weak social infrastructure and dysfunctional organizational environments of some schools. If adult social networks can doom educational reform, then surely youth social networks can as well. Child and youth peer ecologies can provide resistance or support to adults' best efforts. When popular children

engage in or endorse bullying, they send a message to all students that conflicts with basic values of respect and tolerance that we all should share. The task ahead is to better integrate bullies and the children they harass into the social fabric of the school, to better inform educators of how to recognize, understand, and help guide children's relationships. With guidance from caring, engaged adults, youth can organize themselves as a force that makes bullying less effective as a means of social connection, or as an outlet for alienation. As detailed in the white paper by Limber, clear, enforceable anti-bullying school policies, including strong consequences for bullying, are also critical. The scourge of bullying has no role in the truly democratic, American school.

This article reprinted with the permission of Dr. Philip C. Rodkin and Educational Leadership, a publication of ASCD. It was commissioned for the White House Conference of Bullying Prevention in 2011. *For a complete reference list and additional articles from the conference, please visit www.stopbullying.gov/references/white_house_conference.

References*

- Ahn, H.-J., Garandeau, C. F., & Rodkin, P. C. (2010). Effects of classroom embeddedness and density on the social status of aggressive and victimized children. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 30*, 76-101.
- Alsaker, F. D., & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, E. (2010). Social behavior and peer relationships of victims, bully-victims, and bullies in kindergarten. In S. R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 87-99). New York: Routledge.
- American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (2001). *Hostile hallways: Bullying, teasing, and sexual harassment in school*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women.
- Berger, C., Karimpour, R., & Rodkin, P. C. (2008). Bullies and victims at school: Perspectives and strategies for primary prevention. In T. W. Miller (Ed.), *School violence and primary prevention* (pp. 287-314). New York: Springer.
- Berger, C., & Rodkin, P. C. (2009). Male and female victims of male bullies: Social status differences by gender and informant source. *Sex Roles, 61*, 72-84.
- Bierman, K. L., & Powers, C. J. (2009). Social skills training to improve peer relations. In K. H. Rubin, W. M. Bukowski, & B. Laursen (Eds.), *Handbook of peer interactions, relationships, and groups* (pp. 603-621). New York: Guilford.
- Card, N. A., & Hodges, E. V. E. (2008). Peer victimization among schoolchildren: Correlations, causes, consequences, and considerations in assessment and intervention. *School Psychology Quarterly, 23*, 451-461.
- Cook, C. R., Williams, K. R., Guerra, N. G., Kim, T. E., & Sadek, S. (2010). Predictors of bullying and victimization in childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic investigation. *School Psychology Quarterly, 25*, 65-83.
- Dijkstra, J. K., Lindenberg, S.M., & Veenstra, R. (2008). Beyond the classroom norm: The influence of bullying of popular adolescents and its relation to peer acceptance and rejection. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 36*, 1289-1299.
- Dishion, T. J., & Tipsord (2011). Peer contagion in child and adolescent social and emotional development. *Annual Review of Psychology, 62*, 189-214.
- Farmer, T. W., Petrin, R. A., Robertson, D. L., Fraser, M. W., Hall, C. M., Day, S. H., & Dadisman, K. (2010). Peer relations of bullies, bully-victims, and victims: The two social worlds of bullying in second-grade classrooms. *Elementary School Journal, 110*, 364-392.
- Farrington, D. P., & Ttofi, M. M. (2009). School-based programs to reduce bullying and victimization. *Campbell Systematic Reviews, 6*.
- Frey, K. S., Edstrom, L. V., & Hirschstein, M. K. (2010). School bullying: A crisis or an opportunity? In S. R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 403-415). New York: Routledge.

*For a complete reference link please visit www.stopbullying.gov/references/white_house_conference.