

'Almost four in every five children (79%) reported being bullied to some degree, and almost half the children (48%) admitted to bullying others at least once.'

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Bullies, victims, and the code of silence

In the late 1980s, media headlines appeared to heighten public interest in the sensitive area of bullying. Schools, parents and children alike are demanding investigations and intervention to conquer this seemingly large and very serious problem.

Smith & Thompson (1991) state that bullying comes under the umbrella of aggressive behaviour and, as with aggressive behaviour generally, bullying intentionally causes hurt (physical or psychological) to the recipient. Furthermore, they state three criteria that distinguish bullying. These are that:

- It is unprovoked.
- It occurs repeatedly.
- The bully is stronger, or perceived to be stronger, than the victim.

Often prevalence of bullying is underestimated because the victims find it hard to tell others. As a consequence, the problem may go unnoticed.

Although research into bullying is now widespread, there has been no previous research in South West England (Devon and Cornwall). This study aimed to establish figures for the

incidence of bullying, in addition to age and gender differences that are associated with it. It should also be noted that previous research into bullying has been confined to state-run schools. As a consequence, this study attempted to redress the balance by investigating bullying behaviours in independent schools also. It was hypothesised that differences between the two types of school may exist due to differing philosophies, ethos, and climate.

The study

From a pool of approximately 2500 pupils, a sample of 767 (248 girls and 519 boys) from eight schools completed the questionnaire. Four schools were independent (183 children) and four were state-run (584 children). It should also be noted that of these schools, three were junior (132 children) and five were senior (635 children). The participating schools were located in the Plymouth area of Devon and the Truro area of Cornwall.

Although there are various ways of defining what bullying is, the questionnaire and definition used in this study were based on the ones developed and tested by Olweus (1991). The

definition of bullying used in his study is outlined below:

We say a child is being bullied or picked on when another child, or a group of children, say nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a child is hit, kicked, threatened, locked inside a room, sent nasty notes, when no-one ever talks to them and things like that. These things can happen frequently and it is difficult for the child being bullied to defend himself or herself. It is also bullying when a child is teased repeatedly in a nasty way. It is not bullying when two children or young people of about the same strength have the odd fight or quarrel.

Extent of bullying

Almost four in every five children (79%) reported having been bullied to some degree and almost half the children (48%) admitted to bullying others at least once. Further analysis examined *moderate bullying* and *severe bullying*. Moderate bullying incorporated all the responses by children who ticked the boxes *sometimes*, *once a week* and *several times a week*, whereas severe bullying incorporated the final two categories only, i.e. *once a week or more*).

Moderate or severe?

Using the 'moderate bullying' criteria, just over a third of children (34%) were being bullied with 13% bullying others. For severe bullying, 12% and 3% said they were bullied or bullied others, respectively. Slightly more boys said they were bullied and bullied others than girls (both moderately and severely). In addition, more boys than girls were both bully and victim. Junior school children reported being bullied more but did less bullying than senior school pupils (see below).

Junior or senior?

The results revealed that in junior schools a large minority of children were moderately bullied (44%) with only a third (32%) of senior school children reporting the same — a difference that was significant. Being bullied severely was reported by 16% of juniors and 11% of seniors. No significant difference between girls and boys in the frequency of being bullied was found.

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State or independent?

Collected data for junior schools were then broken down into two different school types, independent and state. The figures for being bullied were slightly higher in state junior schools for moderate bullying (46% versus 40%) and severe bullying (16% versus 15%), but these differences were not significant. Boys from junior state schools reported being moderately bullied (49% versus 41%) and severely bullied (21% versus 16%) more often, but again this was not significant.

In senior schools no significant differences were found between independent and state senior schools with respect to the overall percentage being bullied. More girls in independent schools reported being bullied, and more boys from state schools did the same, although neither of these results reached significance.

Bully or victim?

One in ten junior-school children (10%) reported bullying others to a moderate extent, although this figure dropped to 2% for severe bullying. Moderate and severe bullying of others was reported by 13% and 3% of senior school children respectively. Although all the girls from independent junior schools said they had bullied others 'sometimes' or more often, overall significance revealed that more boys than girls bullied others, and that no significance difference existed between the independent and state schools with respect to the percentage bullying others.

Results further demonstrated that a large number of children were both bullies and victims of bullying (42%), although there were no differences between school types. However, significantly more boys than girls were simultaneously found to be both bullies and victims.

Types of bullying

By far the most common type of bullying behaviour reported was being called nasty names (64%). This was followed by being physically hurt (33%), having rumours spread about themselves (27%), being threatened (24%), not being spoken to (18%), and having belongings stolen (16%).

Further analysis showed that the bullying was mostly carried out by several boys (46%). However, it was reported that bullying was also carried out both boys and girls (22%), one boy

Action	Percentage
Introduce more strict punishments	18%
Tell someone about the bullying	12%
Have more supervision at breaktimes	11%
Suspend and/or expel the bullies	10%
Nothing can be done	10%
Make school staff more aware of bullying	8%
Have strict rules regarding bullying	5%
Have better staff and student relationships	3%
Have someone special to deal with bullying problems	3%
Have anti-bully support groups	2%

Table 1: Open-ended responses by 767 junior and senior schoolchildren as to what can be done about bullying in schools.

(21%), several girls (8%) and least likely by one girl (4%).

The bullies were usually older than the victim (45%), from the same year but a different class (28%) or from the same class (26%). Only 1% of victims reported that the bullies were younger than themselves.

Being called nasty names and being physically hurt were by far the most common types of bullying in both independent and state junior and senior schools, the combined total being over 50% in all types of school. Significantly more junior than senior school pupils reported being physically hurt; also, more boys than girls experienced this. It was also revealed that children in state schools were more likely to be threatened. Non-direct forms of bullying (e.g. being sent to coventry and having rumours spread about them) were found to be gender-specific, in both cases towards girls. Junior-school children reported having their belongings stolen more frequently than senior school pupils did. No other significant differences regarding school or gender were found.

In general, a comparison of independent and state schools did not reveal differences in bullying incidents.

To whom is bullying reported?

Reports of bullying were most likely to be told to a friend (43%) or to someone at home (40%) with a teacher being the least likely to be informed (23%).

Overall, junior school children who report being bullied at least once say that they have told someone at home about the incident (average 72% of respondents). They are next likely to tell a friend (on an average of 55% of occasions), then lastly an average of 45% say that they have told a teacher. These figures are similar in a breakdown of independent and state schools. The figures also show that pupils are more likely to tell someone at home, or a teacher, the more

frequently they are bullied although this relationship was not significant.

For senior schools, overall figures depict that a friend is told about the bullying on more occasions (average 39%) than either a teacher or someone at home. In state schools second favoured to be told is someone at home (35%), and for independent school children it is a teacher (19%). As in junior schools, the more severe the bullying the more likely is a teacher to be told about it.

What should be done to prevent bullying?

The last question on the questionnaire was open-ended to allow the children to express their views on what could be done about bullying in their school. The responses fell into several categories and did not vary very much between individual schools.

Table 1 illustrates the ten most popular responses, and shows that 18% of school children thought bullying could be combatted by the introduction of more severe or strict punishments for the bullies. The next two most popular responses were telling someone about the incident (12%) and increasing supervision at breaktimes by teachers (11%).

Other responses not tabled included finding out why the bully was bullying in the first place, having more activities to take part in at breaktimes, different breaktimes for different age groups, and retaliation.

Some general comments

The results generally failed to support the hypothesis that a comparison of independent and state schools would reveal differences in bullying incidents. However, some differences did emerge regarding the type of bullying behaviour and where the bullying took place. The following findings were statistically significant.

- More state school children reported that they had been *threatened*.
- More independent school children said they were *bullied in the playground*.
- More state school children reported being *bullied in the classroom*.

Several differences were uncovered when data from junior and senior schools were analysed — although none of them are particularly surprising.

The results echo earlier findings that bullying is more prevalent in England than elsewhere in the UK.

- Significantly more junior school children were *victims*.
- Significantly more senior school children were *bullies*.
- Being *physically hurt* and having *belongings taken* was more prevalent in junior schools, and more bullying opportunities arose in the *playground*.
- In the case of senior schools, significantly more bullying occurred in the *corridors and classrooms*.

These differences in the situations in which the bullying occurred may be explained by the fact that in most junior schools children are not given the opportunity to be unsupervised within classrooms and corridors in school buildings. In senior schools, gaining access to rooms whilst unsupervised is considerably more likely.

The South West sample in context

Overall figures for bullying showed similar proportions of victims (34%) and bullies (13%) for moderate bullying in these South West schools when compared with elsewhere in England (e.g. Malik, 1990).

However, figures for senior schools were higher than those discovered by Whitney & Smith in Sheffield (1993), i.e. 32% versus 10% for victims and 13% versus 6% for bullies. The inflated figures from the South West of England (32% and 13% for victims and bullies respectively) could be due to the fact that the questionnaire did not specify when the bullying incidents occurred. Consequently, pupils could have been reporting incidents that took place in previous terms or even years.

The results echo earlier findings that bullying is more prevalent in England than elsewhere in the UK (e.g. Mellor, 1990, in Scotland).

Gender differences

Some of the most convincing findings from this study are those regarding gender differences. A highly significant finding was that bullies were most likely male. In addition, males were over represented as both victims of bullying and of being bullies themselves. They also suffered from physical forms of bullying and were more likely to be bullies in the playground than girls.

These significant results confirm previous findings by such authors as Boulton & Underwood (1992) and Stephenson & Smith (1989). Consistent with Whitney & Smith (1993), it was

found that

- Significantly more girls than boys experienced indirect forms of bullying such as having no one speak to them (sent to coventry) or having rumours spread about them.
- More boys experienced direct forms of bullying (e.g. being hit and kicked).

By far the most common form of bullying was name-calling — a finding also reported by Whitney & Smith (1993). However, the question arises as to whether being called nasty names, sent to coventry, or having rumours spread about them, are actually forms of bullying?

What to do about it

The open-ended question on how to combat bullying provided some well-thought-out and potentially useful ideas. This question was included with the belief that if ideas for stopping bullying came from the pupils themselves they would be willing to support the introduction by the school of any ideas that they had themselves proposed.

- Pupils wanted more *strict punishments* for bullies, more *strict rules* and more *supervision* at breaktimes.
- Other interventions suggested that *teachers* should supervise breaktimes rather than untrained supervisors, who do not necessarily command the same respect or control.
- Some pupils proposed that at breaktimes there should be *occupying activities*.
- Another extremely important point made by teachers and pupils alike was that the victims should *tell someone* about the bullying, or someone witnessing the bullying incident should inform a responsible adult.

Confidence

All too often, fear and a code of silence stop victims denouncing what is happening. As a consequence, bullying continues. Until children have confidence in a successful and proven intervention scheme, bullying will unfortunately continue in our schools and the suffering of many young people will go undetected.

A full and very much more detailed version of this paper appears in the British Psychologi-

cal Society's *Education Section Review*, 20 (2), 12-22.

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