

Exploring the Nature and Impact of School Bullying: the effects of individual and environmental factors

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Abstract: School bullying is a severe issue that accounts for a considerable proportion of juvenile delinquency. The increasing amount of research from different countries and ages related to school bullying shows various findings that confuse the public. As a result, this paper aims to review the leading causes and impacts of general school bullying that covers elementary children to high school students and school response to students' bullying behavior. Regarding the bully, their behavior is associated with gender, grades, relationships, family, and other factors. Not only individual and environmental risk factors triggering the bullying are interpreted, but also the mental health problems and academic achievement influence of victims who suffered from bullying are revealed in the result.

1. Introduction

School bullying is the aggressive behavior of abusing power, which can be done by physical contact, words, gestures, or intentional exclusion [1]. It is considered the common precursor of juvenile delinquency and is a sign of more severe violent behaviors [2]. School bullying is widespread worldwide, and as a prototype of juvenile delinquency, it carries extreme consequences for children who suffer from bullying [3]. Nevertheless, it is often a neglected issue, as schools and parents tend to believe bullying is due to guilty victims instead of reprimanding bullies and intervening in bullying behaviors. It is essential to prevent bullying, and schools should understand the causes of bullying and provide an environment that allows students to maintain a healthy well-being [4]. The factors and consequences of school bullying are examined in numerous research, and there are multiple results. For instance, anger is significantly associated with bullying levels [5]. Families and teachers, especially stressful relationships are considered as notable factors [4]. There was also a study on negative impacts of bullying on the mental health of middle and high school girls, and they found that girls are more accessible to suffer from bullying and sexual harassment at school than boys [6].

Currently, the majority of studies have explored school bullying from a psychological or social perspective that focuses on different grades and countries. However, there needs to be a review of those investigations. As a consequence, this paper attempts to review individual and environmental risk factors and summarize the considerable impacts on victims that can apply to all grades and different gender globally.

2. Concept of school bullying

Bullying is defined as negative actions that are repeated over time on other students [7]. It derives from unequal power, which can be physical or mental strength. There are several types of school bullying behaviors. For instance, there is physical bullying (pushing, slapping, threatening, and hurting students) [8]. It is named direct bullying due to the tangible method. Another type is called indirect bullying, which means bullies psychologically hurt students. The common ways are verbal bullying (teasing, making fun of other students, name-calling), social exclusion, and gossip spreading in order to disrupt the victims' relationships with peers. Recently, owing to the progress of internet development, cyberbullying has started to be an emerging type, meaning that unfriendly messages, images, and videos are spread on the internet by electronic gadgets [9].

The views of bullying are diverse, but their core concept is similar: bullying is a group process because students exclude students from a specific group, which leads to victims challenging to accept or be accepted in that group [10]. Besides, from children's perspective, they focus more on direct bullying behaviors like physical fighting and verbal abuse, whereas ignoring the social exclusion and psychological effect, while adults have a more comprehensive and inclusive definition [8]. The interpretation of school bullying is various. Educators and the public should help children develop the idea of bullying so that people can be more sensitive to it and intervene in it. Understanding bullying is the first step to stopping bullying.

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3. Factors influencing school bullying

3.1 Individual Risk Factors

It is worth noting that gender plays a nonnegligible factor in school bullying, since boys have dramatically more bullying behaviors even though boys and girls can be both victims. The reason for such difference is that boys have worse social cognitive skills, so they might endorse bullying. This fact also explains the phenomenon that boys tend to directly, which means their behavior is more violent to hurt peers physically [11]. On the contrary, more girls would bully others indirectly. Isolation is one of the behaviors that can effectively influence victims' relationships [12]. Besides, academic performance is one major factor of bullying, as bullies have relatively negative attitudes to study and school, and their academic achievement is relatively low. From the data illustrated in the study, 48% of bullies have low non-verbal IQ, which is twice as much as the proportion of non-bullies, and 34% of bullies have low verbal IQ, and non-bullies only account for 21% [11]. The study found that higher academic achievements in Grade 2 can predict bullying behaviors, as the bullies in Grade 4 had high SAT scores in year 2. Moreover, the result also shows that bullies would like to go to school [13]. The statement that low academic achievement corresponds to bullying needs to be rethought.

Generally, the public believes there is a connection between bullying and narcissism and social dominance, which bullies have higher popularity than others. Unsurprisingly, boys who are high in narcissism were evidently more possibly to behave with both direct and indirect bullying than male peers with lower narcissism. The characteristic of a strong narcissistic personality is relevant to bullies' high popularity and social status. Those bullies are usually popular in their peer group and have the dominant power and central position [14]. Interestingly, high narcissism does not result in high self-esteem. The research reports that bullies have higher self-esteem than victims, which causes them to be insensitive and violent. However, only a slight (even cannot be noticed) difference between bullies and normal children shows that self-esteem does not closely link to school bullying behavior [15].

Students who believe they are taller, heavier, and stronger are more likely to bully peers, particularly males, as males with muscular body sizes can signify power and control. Nonetheless, there is a lack of studies showing that body size is an essential factor in bullying. Meanwhile, mildly overweight students are often the target of being bullied, thereby physical strength, height, and weight do not lead to bullying behavior substantially, but they lead to bullying outcomes among students indeed [11][16]. In the meantime, children with disability suffer more frequent bullying, which might cause them to be aggressive and potentially be bullies [17].

3.2 Environmental Risk Factors

The school climate has several dimensions, such as adult support and respect, school discipline, academic achievements, a sense of school community, adult and child diversity, and school safety [18]. Schools with a better climate exhibit fewer bullying events. The explanation is that the school climate can influence students' behavior, meaning that youth who stay in a friendly school environment is more likely to engage in positive and healthy behaviors rather than delinquency. Even if there are bullying behaviors, well-managed schools would intervene and discourage [18]. Oppositely, in highly conflictual schools, ineffective management, and guidance boost bullying behaviors [17]. Furthermore, the ethnic diversity of teachers and students also contributes to less school bullying owing to less percentage of racism and better acceptance. During school years, students have the opportunity to experience with their ethnically diverse peers, so the hostile and unfriendly peer interactions reduce efficiently [19].

As the most critical environment of children's growth and development, the family has contributed to bullying. The investigation revealed that bullies have a disunited family due to the markedly low cohesion scores [20]. The lack of caring and accomplishment of family and marginalization causes children to be aggressive. They want to get attention from peers at school to cover the neglect from family. In addition, family disorder (parents fighting, drinking, using drugs, and being physically or sexually abusive) gives rise to bullying and crime in children [21].

4. Impacts of school bullying on victims

Numerous correlated studies show that the consequences of school bullying have mainly appeared as psychological symptoms. Impacts on mental health, trauma symptoms, and life satisfaction are significantly related to bullying, in which depression and low self-esteem represent poor health outcomes [7]. Students tend to deny their self-worth, keep negative emotional reactions (anxiety, sadness, unhappiness, loneliness) and find it hard to make friends and maintain relationships with classmates or teachers after suffering bullying [22]. Furthermore, at school, victims are more likely to lack a positive self-image and feel more prominently insecure than other pupils [23]. At the same time, insomnia, loss of appetite, nightmares, and other psychological effects continuously afflict students. Consequently, substance abuse accounts for a large proportion of victims, and alcohol or drugs suggest that victims use these substances as a relief [10]. Concerning suffering bullying from others, sufferers are more likely to self-blame. They believe their issues (such as not being cool enough or timid) contribute to bullies' aggressive behavior. In this case, they would keep doubting themselves, and therefore this situation develops the risk factors for mental health problems in the future, which explains the high depression probability of

sufferers. Such psychological problems strengthen the association between mental health and bullying [24].

Several researchers also examined physical health problems, in which both psychological effects and physical bullying behaviors would hurt students' health. Youths who suffer from bullying would not only feel pain mentally, but they may also suffer headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, and other physical ailments [7] [24]. By examining the altered cortisol levels of students, the report reveals that victims are more stressed and have a different altered cortisol level compared to non-victimised students [25].

It is justifiable that there is a relationship between academic achievement and bullying, since the physical and mental health consequences stop them from coming to school and focusing on learning. It is concluded that bullied students display lower academic achievements than their non-bullied peers due to absenteeism and difficulties concentrating, and receiving lower grades from teachers would exacerbate their stress and depression levels [10]. Although many teachers are likely to conduct team works to develop students' collaborative skills, it increases the experience of victimization for victims and stimulates bullying actions [25].

5. Conclusion

This study reviews the primary factors and impacts of school bullying. Individual and environmental risk factors are the leading causes. The individual ones are inherent traits, including gender, academic performance, narcissism and popularity, and physical characteristic. The environmental factors are school climate and family relationships, which both influence children's behavior in negative environments through external guidance, encouragement, or carelessness. Moreover, poor mental and physical health outcomes are notable for victims, leading to academic achievement.

The findings contribute to the prevention actions of school bullying for schools and parents, which means they can understand the importance of preventing bullying behaviors and seek suitable methods of intervention by knowing the causes of bullying and improving the environment to minimize the environmental risk factors. It is suggested to examine the psychological differences between bullies and normal children and the impacts or symptoms of bullies after bullying others. Research can help the public to think from the perspectives of bullies, thereby we can improve the efficiency of stopping bullying because bullies can be persuaded during communications if we can understand them. School bullying is a serious global issue that is threatening juveniles' healthy lives, and exploring its nature and impact is necessary to solve this.

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