

# **Australian School Children's Self Appraisal of Interpersonal Relations: The Bullying Experience**

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**ABSTRACT:** The extent and nature of bullying among South Australian primary school children and their self appraisals of peer relations were investigated in a survey of 412 primary school children between the ages of 7 to 13 years. It was found that 10% of boys and 6% of girls were subject to peer group bullying and for 8% of such children the bullying episodes lasted 6 months or more. Factor analysis of styles of interpersonal relating amongst children identified three independent factors including a tendency to bully, to be victimised and to act in a pro-social manner. The tendency to be victimised correlated negatively with self appraisals of the number of friends, popularity, happiness at school and feelings of safety at school. The findings are discussed in relation to research linking negative self appraisals of interpersonal competence with isolation and proneness to depression in later years.

## **Introduction**

"Robert" is a year 6 primary school child who was being interviewed as part of a study on the nature of bullying. He was being told a pretend story involving two imaginary classmates (John and Shaun) where John was bullying Shaun. Before the interviewer could complete the whole story involving the two boys Robert interrupted saying "That's me, I'm like Shaun". Later as part of the interview when

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Robert was asked to identify from a series of facial expressions ranging from happy to sad the one most like him at school he pointed unhesitatingly to the saddest facial expression saying "There, that's me". Robert was very clear about his status in the social group at school and very unhappy about it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that children differ considerably in the way they view themselves, their social competency and their standing in the peer group. The focus of the present study is on the nature of children's social perceptions with a particular emphasis on the self perceptions of children who demonstrate a tendency to bully, to be victimised or to be pro-social.

A number of researchers<sup>1,2</sup> have noted that until recently, little attention has been given to the nature of children's self perceptions of their social relationships despite the emerging evidence that such reports are reliable and valid sources of information. In evaluating the literature Hymel & Franke<sup>2</sup> argue that developmental changes occur in terms of increasing accuracy in children's self perceptions, of their own academic competence and peer status. The same authors also note that children's self reports are a valid source of information particularly in terms of undesirable characteristics regarding themselves. That is, while children may over-estimate their own abilities relative to the perceptions of others in the case of positive evaluations, their self reports are accurate in terms of undesirable characteristics. For example researchers<sup>3</sup> have successfully used self perceptions to study social skills in children. In relation to the purpose of the present study it is proposed that there is little available information on the self perceptions of children who are affected by a type of interpersonal aggression commonly identified as bullying.

Bullying is now recognized as a reliably identifiable sub-type of children's aggressive behaviour characterised by an imbalance in strength, deliberate intention to hurt the other and repetitive negative acts against the other.<sup>4</sup> Evidence from Australia<sup>5</sup>, England<sup>6</sup> and the United States<sup>7</sup> suggests that approximately 10% of school children are victimised 'often' or 'more than once a week'. Some 7% of children can be identified as bullies. Overall, the figures tend to be higher in primary than secondary school. For a small group of children then, being bullied is a cruel and spiteful facet of school life and researchers are just beginning to examine the implications of such an experience for the individual's development and the development of both the bully's and victim's interpersonal relations.

Recent research by Rigby & Slee<sup>8</sup> has drawn attention to the complex nature of children's peer relations in enumerating three dimen-

sions of interpersonal relating among children, namely (i) a tendency to bully (ii) a tendency to be victimised and (iii) a tendency to be pro-social. In examining the relationship among the three dimensions of interpersonal relating and psychological well-being a number of features were highlighted. Victimisation was linked with low self esteem and unhappiness at school. Bullying was linked with unhappiness at school and a dislike of school. The dimensions of interpersonal relating reported by Rigby & Slee<sup>8</sup> relate to secondary school children but it is hypothesised in the present study that similar dimensions will underpin primary school children's peer relations. Presently though significant questions remain concerning the relationships among dimensions of inter-personal relating and children's perceptions of their social relations with peers.

Even to the casual observer primary school children's peer relations are a very significant facet of their school life. As Asher<sup>9</sup> notes, friends serve as ". . . important sources of companionship and recreation, share advice and valued possessions, serve as trusted confidants and critics, act as loyal allies and provide stability in times of stress and transition". The primacy of children's friendships in their lives has been identified by writers such as Sullivan<sup>10</sup> who has argued that the child's growing sense of self is a function of their personal relationships with significant others. Research links the quality of a child's peer relationships with self perceptions of social competence. Negative self perceptions of social competence in children has been linked with withdrawal and isolation, depression and loneliness<sup>11</sup> (p.3).

As already noted, research evidence is mounting which clearly links victimisation at school to adverse developments in psychological well being such as self esteem and unhappiness. In the present study it is proposed to extend this understanding to parameters of interpersonal relations. It is hypothesised that the tendency to be victimised would be associated with poorer self perceptions of popularity with peers. The hypothesis regarding children who bully others is less clear. Such children generally see themselves as strong and powerful, are of average or thereabouts self esteem and appear to enjoy a certain popularity with peers<sup>5</sup>. Boulton & Underwood<sup>12</sup> have argued that bullying others has a great deal to do with social status and dominance. Contrary to what might be expected bullying might not necessarily lead to peer rejection particularly where the victim is seen to 'deserve it' and/or where the children bully in groups which may buffer against the effects of peer rejection. The findings of the present

study which utilise children's self perceptions of their peer group social standing should provide further insight into the phenomenon of bullying, which as research indicates, is an unfortunate aspect of some children's peer relations.

## Method

### *Subjects*

Three primary schools (2 state and 1 Catholic) located in lower to middle class metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia participated in the study. There were 412 children (201 males) and (211 females) ranging in age from 7 to 13 years (average = 10.9 years).

Children were asked to complete a questionnaire developed for the study. They were asked to identify how often they had been bullied at school on a 6 point scale ranging from 'everyday' to 'never'. They were also asked to indicate if they had been bullied to think back to the last time and indicate how long the bullying lasted on a 7 point scale ranging from 'a day or two' to 'more than half a year'. Children were then asked to complete a number of questions about themselves using 4 point scales including (i) the number of friends they had at school and (ii) their popularity with other students and teachers and (iii) how safe they felt from being bullied at school. They were asked to indicate on a 6 point scale by referring to 'happy' and 'sad' faces the face most like them when they were at school.<sup>13</sup>

The questionnaire also contained a common set of questions developed by Rigby and Slee<sup>5</sup>. Four of the questions were relevant to the tendency to bully others e.g. 'I like to make other kids scared of me' and a further four to the tendency to be victimised by others e.g. 'I get picked on by other kids', while four more dealt with a tendency to act in a pro-social or cooperative manner, e.g. 'I share things with others'. The response categories ranged from 'never' to 'very often' with the highest score being given to a response indicating greater frequency. As reported by Rigby and Slee<sup>8</sup> research with secondary school students using this measure has identified three factorially independent factors namely the tendency to: (i) bully others (ii) be victimised by others and (iii) act in a pro-social manner. The three scales all have satisfactory internal consistency with alphas greater than 0.70.

*Results*

In Table 1 the findings are presented for the frequency of bullying and the length of time the bullying lasted analysed by gender and year level. If we took 'once a week' as the criteria then males consistently reported more bullying than females across all grade levels. Overall, some 10% of the boys and 6% of the girls reported being bullied with this frequency. From Table 1 it can also be seen that the frequency of reported bullying is greater in the higher grades. The duration of bullying episodes lasting a month or more are more frequently reported in the lower grades. For some 8% of the children bullying episodes lasted 6 months or more.

Scores obtained for the set of questions relating to the tendency to bully, to be victimised and to be pro-social were subjected to principal components analysis, followed by varimax rotation. Three factors accounting for 47.0% of the variance were identified. From Table 2 it can be seen that there were three interpretable factors, namely a tendency to bully, a tendency to be victimised and a pro-social factor. The factor loadings were similar to that identified by Rigby and Slee<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1**  
Frequency and Duration of Bullying in Primary Schools

<i>Frequency</i>		<i>Once a Week or More</i>		<i>Less than Once a Week</i>	
<i>Year Level</i>					
5	M (n=78)	7.0		35.7	
	F (n=77)	6.0		35.6	
6	M (n=66)	10.0		38.6	
	F (n=65)	5.1		22.4	
7	M (n=57)	12.9		46.2	
	F (n=69)	6.6		41.8	
<i>Duration</i>					
<i>Year Level</i>		<i>A Day or Two</i>	<i>A Few Weeks</i>	<i>A Few Months</i>	<i>&gt;6 Months</i>
5	M (n=78)	42.6	14.7	10.3	7.4
	F (n=77)	51.7	5.2	6.9	12.1
6	M (n=66)	58.6	6.9	5.2	5.2
	F (n=65)	53.2	14.9	6.4	10.6
7	M (n=57)	54.8	2.4	2.4	7.1
	F (n=69)	60.7	5.4	1.8	7.1

**Table 2**  
Factor Loadings on Selected Questionnaire Items

	<i>Factor 1</i> <i>Tendency to</i> <i>Bully</i>	<i>Factor 2</i> <i>Tendency to</i> <i>be Victimised</i>	<i>Factor 3</i> <i>Pro-social</i> <i>Tendency</i>
Items (abbreviated)			
How often do you:			
Enjoy upsetting wimps	.74	-.14	.12
Like to make other kids scared	.63	-.21	.23
In a group tease others	.61	-.16	.17
Fight kids you can easily beat	.70	-.15	.24
Get picked on by others	.33	.73	-.16
Get made fun of	.31	.75	-.24
Get called names by other kids	.26	.65	-.08
Get hit and pushed	.31	.60	-.15
Enjoy helping others	-.52	.38	.41
Help harassed kids	-.26	.45	.53
Like to make friends	-.20	.38	.49
Share things	-.36	.29	.39
Variance Percentage of Total	24.4	14.8	7.7

**Table 3**  
Partial Correlations Between Psychological Well-Being Factors and the  
Tendency to Bully, to be Victimised and to be Pro-Social

		<i>No. of</i> <i>Friends</i>	<i>Popularity</i> <i>with Peers</i>	<i>Popularity</i> <i>with</i> <i>Teachers</i>	<i>Happiness</i> <i>at School</i>	<i>Safety at</i> <i>School</i>
Tendency to Bully	M	.16*	.17*	-.21*	-.12*	.04
	F	-.09	-.04	.01	-.23**	-.16*
Tendency to be Victimised	M	-.41**	-.37**	-.16*	-.20*	-.47**
	F	-.21*	-.15*	.01	-.15*	-.27**
Tendency to be Pro-Social	M	-.01	.00	.16*	.09	-.05
	F	.17*	-.13*	.12	.19*	-.07

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

in the study with secondary school students, although the pro-social factor was not quite as evident in the present study.

Next we examined the relationship between the psychological well-being factors of friendship, peer and teacher popularity, happiness at school, safety at school and the tendency to bully and to be victimised. In doing so, the contribution of age was controlled for by partial correlation, and the results computed for males and females separately (See Table 3).

The results confirmed the hypothesis that victims perceive themselves to have less friends, to be less popular and feel less happy at school. Amongst the boys a positive correlation was obtained between tendency to bully and friendship and popularity with peers while a significant negative correlation was obtained with popularity with teachers.

## Discussion

In this study of primary school children approximately 10% of the boys compared with 6% of girls reported that they were bullied once per week and this figure is generally consistent with those reported in previous research<sup>5,6,7</sup>. The present findings add to the current understanding of the phenomenon of bullying in indicating that for approximately 8% of the victims the experience is reported as lasting 6 months or more. Although reference has been made to the possible long-standing nature of some bullying (Smith<sup>6</sup>) there is little available published material to support such a claim. As such, the present findings add to our understanding of the consequences of both bullying and being bullied. For the bully the experience potentially provides powerful reinforcement that they can over a period of time intimidate others with impunity. Olweus<sup>4</sup> has documented the consequences of such learning in terms of the greater likelihood of school bullies to go on to adult offending. The consequences for the victims of bullying are now better understood in terms of later impairment of adult relationships<sup>14</sup>. The findings have implications for schools highlighting the need to have specific policy directives in place which sanction against bullying, and behaviour management practice which facilitates the early identification and prevention of bullying<sup>4</sup>.

The results of the present study also confirm the existence of three dimensions of primary school children's interpersonal behaviour,

namely a tendency to bully, a tendency to be victimised and a pro-social tendency. Previous research<sup>8</sup> has confirmed the existence of these three dimensions with secondary school students. In the present study the finding that the pro-social factor was not quite as evident as in Rigby & Slee's<sup>8</sup> study of adolescents suggests there may be a developmental component to the tendency. These dimensions can be appraised in the light of the self appraisals of the children of their peer relations.

The finding that children who are victimised also perceive themselves to have fewer friends, to be unpopular with peers, to be unhappy and feel unsafe at school highlights the complex relationship between victimisation and perceived self competence and affective experience. The findings strongly suggest that being victimised is associated with a good deal of isolation and alienation at school. Coie, Dodge and Kupersmidt<sup>14</sup> have noted that social isolation can have consequences in terms of peer rejection although the same authors observe that it is by no means clear whether children withdraw because they are rejected or are rejected and then withdraw. Slee and Rigby<sup>16</sup> in a study of the personality factors associated with victimised children argued on the basis of their research that introversion may be the major personality factor differentiating victims from others. This conclusion would support the research of Rubin, LeMare and Lollis<sup>17</sup> that some children are rejected because they are consistently withdrawn. The basis for this behaviour may relate to some temperament factor. For such children attempting to remediate the situation with social skills aimed at increasing their interaction with others may be an oversimplification of a complex problem. Given that such children have a genuine preference for their own company it may be more productive to teach other children to respect other's needs as part of any school intervention.

For those children who demonstrate a tendency to bully, the relationship with the psychological well-being factors of friendship and popularity appears somewhat more complex. For the boys the small but significant positive correlations with number of friends and degree of popularity suggest that they perceive themselves and have some status in the peer group. That is, their bullying behaviour is not rejected by all children who may admire such behaviour as a demonstration of 'manliness' or 'toughness'. As Rigby and Slee<sup>5</sup> have noted such attitudes have important implications for intervention programmes where peer-group pressure must be mobilised to under-cut the tendency of some children to approve of bullying behaviour or



simply act as bystanders. School policy and behaviour management practice must make it clear to all children that bullying is not an acceptable form of behaviour and that it will not be tolerated<sup>4</sup>. Children *and* adults should understand that victims suffer considerably and that at the very least bullying reinforces their perceptions of being lonely, unhappy, unloved individuals for whom school is perceived to be a very unsafe environment. In a more positive vein the pro-social tendencies of some children as identified in this study suggest that there is a basis for using the peer group in school programmes to help ameliorate the effects of bullying.

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