

Background

Dan Olweus' Swedish study of 'mobbing', *Aggression in the schools: Bullies and whipping boys* (1978), was the first notable bullying study. Since its publication a research tradition has emerged in many other countries, including the United Kingdom, Norway, the United States, Canada, Australia, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Japan. Other early studies attracted a lot of media attention due to the levels of bullying reported, as well as high-profile suicide cases linked to bullying in several countries. Bullying remains a topic often in the news, which highlights the ongoing public concern and continual need for anti-bullying work in schools.

This research briefing summarises what is currently known about school bullying, based on a review of the available literature. It covers large-scale surveys of bullying as well as smaller studies, which used a variety of methodologies. It also mentions the types of anti-bullying interventions currently used, but an evaluation of their effectiveness was beyond the scope of this briefing.

What is bullying?

Essential components of bullying behaviour

The studies examined for this briefing used different definitions of bullying, but overall the literature suggests five essential components. The following components are shared with general aggressive behaviour:

- **Intention to harm:** bullying is deliberate, with the intention to cause harm. For example, friends teasing each other in a good-natured way is not bullying, but a person teasing another to upset them is bullying.
- **Harmful outcome:** one or more persons are hurt physically or emotionally.
- **Direct or indirect acts:** bullying can involve direct aggression, such as hitting someone, as well as indirect acts, such as spreading rumours.

However, bullying also has characteristics that set it apart from other aggressive behaviours:

- **Repetition:** bullying involves repeated acts of aggression: an isolated aggressive act, like a fight, is not bullying.
- **Unequal Power:** bullying involves the abuse of power by one or several persons who are (perceived as) more powerful, often due to their age, physical strength, or psychological resilience.

Types of bullying

Bullying can involve many different types of behaviour. Physical, or ‘direct’ bullying hurts an individual in a tangible way, but ‘indirect’ actions such as stealing or damaging their belongings can hurt them emotionally. This also applies to verbal bullying, which involves name-calling or being otherwise insulted or humiliated. Relational or social bullying refers to behaviours that disrupt the victims’ relationships with their peers (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995), such as social exclusion or spreading gossip. Bullying can be motivated by race, religion, culture, gender or sexuality. Sexual bullying may involve sexual acts or demands.

Cyberbullying, a relatively more recent phenomenon that has attracted increasing attention in the last decade, involves using electronic means such as the internet, email and mobile phones. It is particularly vicious, as nasty messages or images can be spread quickly and seen by many. Research evidence suggests that it tends to happen outside of school (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004; Dehue, Bolman and Völlink, 2008; Smith et al, 2008a).

Bullying in different countries

Pupils in different countries have different perceptions of what counts as bullying (Smith et al, 2002). Even within countries, there are often multiple terms to describe the behaviour: in England, bullying is also described as ‘teasing’, ‘harassment’ and ‘victimisation’.

In western countries, bullying broadly involves older pupils victimising younger children, largely by physical and verbal means (Smith, 2004). In contrast, *wang-ta* in Korea and *ijime* in Japan involve social exclusion by large groups such as the victim's entire class, or year (Morita et al, 1999; Kanetsuna and Smith, 2002; Koo et al, 2008).

Teachers' and pupils' definitions of bullying

Teachers are less likely than pupils to recognise verbal aggression, indirect physical aggression and social exclusion as bullying (Boulton, 1997; Craig and Pepler, 1997; Craig et al, 2000; Menesini et al, 2002).

Primary school children tend to include a greater range of behaviours, such as one-off acts of aggression, but pupils' definitions of bullying become narrower with age (Smith and Levan, 1995; Swain, 1998; Smith et al, 2002; Menesini et al, 2002; Naylor et al, 2006).

How common is bullying in schools?

Overall it seems that bullying can be expected to occur in any school. Its prevalence in many countries suggests that most children will experience school bullying at some stage, be it as bullies, victims or as witnesses.

There is a lot of variation in the reported rates, however, which is partly due to the different methodologies used to survey bullying. The most common method is self-reporting: asking pupils in questionnaires or interviews about their bullying experiences. Other ways include asking teachers or pupils to nominate which children are victims or bullies; observing children; and recording bullying incidents. Different methods produce different bullying estimates: peer and teacher nominations tend not to correspond well with self-report information (Österman et al, 1994; Salmivalli et al, 1996) and observations produce higher rates than surveys (Pepler et al, 2004).