

PEER VICTIMIZATION: FROM PRESCHOOL TO ADULTHOOD

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Abstract: *In recent years it can be noted an intensive study on school bullying and peer victimization. The majorities of psychological and pedagogical studies have illustrated the effects of socio-cultural factors (e.g., school climate, peer pressure, parental education, cultural beliefs) on children’s involvement in aggressive behavior, and the significant distress related to ongoing peer victimization in children, regardless of they age. The researchers found that victimization is related with social and psychological maladjustment, reduced physical well-being, at all ages*

Keywords: *peer victimization, school bullying, distress, educational policies, prevention and intervention program*

1. INTRODUCTION

Although, at international level, bullying among children and youth is not new, in Romania, however, studying it is only in the beginning stage. Bullying is a significant global problem, on the rise, which affects a great number of students attending all types of education institutions, no matter their size or the financing status. During the last few years, because of its devastating effects on students (starting as early as pre-school age), this phenomenon has drawn the attention of professors, politicians, professionals of the mental health domain and of the medical system, and mass-media.

A recent study (2016), conducted by the Save the Children in Romania organization, which researched the perception of parents and children on bullying, as well as their attitudes and behavior towards this phenomenon, revealed the fact that 1 out of 4 children is repeatedly humiliated by his/her peer-group, 3 out of 10 students is repeatedly excluded from his group of colleagues, and 4 out of 10 children were hurt as a result of other children’s repeatedly violent behavior. By analyzing this information, we may draw the conclusion that more than 30% of the students have been in the position to witness/participate in such an event at least once. Similar results were obtained by Robers, Kemp, & Truman (2013) [33] as well, who emphasized the fact that 33% of the students had reported having been bullied during school.

No matter the form of its manifestation, violence has a devastating impact on children at all evolution levels (cognitive, emotional, social, behavioral), irrespective of the age, sex, or other criteria.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Bullying represents a form of manifesting violence in school, which threatens the child's process of development and learning. Various definitions of this concept have been provided over the years, most researchers considering it a sub-type of aggressive behavior, by means of which one intends to gain/exercise control or power over a victim perceived as weaker (physically, socially, or from any other point of view), by resorting to diverse methods, repeated over time [44]. Studies in this respect mention three main characteristics of bullying: 1. there is clear intention to inflict suffering to harm the other(s); 2. the relationship between the bully and the victim is unequal from the perspective of power balance; 3. aggressive behavior is repeated [5, 19, 29, 40]. The empirical observations recorded so far suggest a fourth characteristic: aggressive behavior is not manifested overtly, but in spaces that authority has no control over (in spaces where the adults are not present).

Bullying is an umbrella concept for a series of varied attitudes and behavior, relatively stable in time (Save the Children, 2016), which may come in different forms, from using words (ironizing, teasing, labeling, threatening, blackmailing, slandering) [29] to physical actions (bumping, shoving) or to more subtle actions such as social exclusion (by spreading rumors, manipulating friendships, prohibiting speech to or about certain colleagues or prohibiting playing with someone or that somebody may play with them) [14, 25, 29, 36].

Another classification distinguishes between the psychological and the physical aspect, the former being most often considered less important than the latter, particularly because of the difficulty in identifying certain forms it takes [2]. Psychological bullying refers to social and relational aggressions such as verbal manifestations, threatening gestures, malevolent phone calls, slandering rumors, social exclusion, etc. As we recorded the evolution of technology, communication media, and, especially, the internet and social networks, a new phenomenon emerged, called cyber-bullying, and bullying behavior gained a larger area of manifestation, thus increasing the impact on the victim, who finds it sometimes impossible to defend herself/himself (anonymous posts/messages, areas where the victim has no access to/no possibility to retaliate).

Considering the manner in which the victim experiences the aggressor's attack, bullying behavior may be direct or indirect. Direct bullying includes physical or verbal attacks on the victim, whereas indirect bullying is represented by the attempts to isolate/marginalize the victim by means of subtle attacks on social relations, social status, which makes it more difficult to identify.

We notice that there are several things that put their mark upon the way in which bullying is perceived, defined and described, such as age (younger children focusing more on physical aspects than on psychological or indirect ones), cultural differences (the interpreting of, the degree of accepting or even encouraging bullying-type behavior), or the work place (e.g. where status is synonymous with authoritarianism) [9, 41].

With respect to bullying patterns, research has revealed differences in point of gender and age in manifesting one form of bullying or another, Crick & Nelson (2002) [8] emphasizing the fact that girls tend to resort more often to verbal or indirect forms of bullying, whereas boys particularly employ direct, physical strategies. Craig & Pepler's study (2003) [7] suggests an evolution of bullying strategies as the individual develops, predominantly physical in early childhood, verbal and physical towards adolescence.

The bullying situation involves and forces, at the same time, all participants to assume one of the three types of roles, according to the behavior adopted: conformist – the bystander, being victimized – the victim, aggressive – the bully [28].

Over the years, certain dynamics of children's involvement in such roles has been noticed, the students taking on different roles in the bullying process.

Thus, as an individual, you may find yourself in various social situations related to bullying: you may be an observer (by-stander), you may be undergoing aggression (victim), or you may be the one perpetuating this behavior (bully)[35].

Studies conducted on the by-stander's role have proved the fact that it plays an essential role in positive encouraging or diminishing/eradicating bullying behavior, with four types of the by-stander's attitude being identified: 1. "assistants" – the ones who get directly and actively involved in bullying behavior, supporting the bully; 2. "reinforcers" – the ones who consider the situation funny and laugh, having fun at the victim's expense or making fun of the situation, or they just look on silently; 3. "outsiders" – who do not take anyone's side and most often leave the group; 4. "defenders" – who intervene and comfort the victim [16; 28; 37]. Because of the by-standers' role in maintaining, perpetuating, diminishing, and even eradicating bullying behavior, utmost importance should be given to elaborating and implementing some educational programs that would match the entire school, all the roles that could be taken on in the bullying process, with a view to preventing or intervening in cases when there are manifestations of such behavior within the educational environment.

Many adults, no matter the role they play in a child's life (parents, grandparents, teachers, counselors), still have wrong beliefs regarding bullying, considering bullying either as a stage, as "normal" strategy in the child's development, in his/her adapting process, or as a "character strengthening" process or "man" building process. Wrong beliefs are also related to verbal bullying, considered harmless, as "words cannot harm anybody." The very victims are sometimes considered guilty because of their attitude, their vulnerability or by "telling on other people." The importance of these myths derives from the fact that their presence prevents the development of efficient intervention strategies that would support transforming, diminishing and even eradicating this type of behavior among children.

3. THE IMPACT AND PERVASIVENESS OF BULLYING

Numerous studies conducted so far have proved the fact that peer victimization, no matter the age when it happens, is associated with psycho-social difficulties, often affecting the victim's physical health [e.g. 4; 17; 32; 43]. Thus, pupils subjected to systematic peer victimization, have problems related to psycho-social adaptation, with a high risk of depression and suicide ideation, low self-esteem, shyness, loneliness, social anxiety, feelings of isolation and helplessness, lack of hope, distortions of self-image [e.g. 3; 6; 34]. Studies in this respect emphasize the fact that, with pupils who had been victims of bullying in school, there is higher probability of them undergoing bullying in the professional environment as well than with those who did not experience such interactions in school [38].

Bullying also determines the emergence of some barriers in the learning process both from the perspective of the students involved, and from the point of view of the educational institution. Bullying has a remarkably strong negative impact on academic achievements, victims displaying a high tendency towards missing school, low academic achievements, and diminished trust in oneself academically and in one's academic future. [e.g. 21; 20; 10; 31; 39]. One experiences and develops negative attitude towards school, low motivation as to the studying activity, low confidence in one's capability of adapting to the school environment.

Emotional distress caused by negative interactions with other people, experiencing daily humiliation, anxiety, sadness and fury, negative cognition related to the educational environment (“I don’t belong here”), difficulties in making friends negatively impact on the student’s involvement in the learning process [19; 26; 39].

The impact of bullying is also experienced somatically, the most frequent symptoms being headaches (migraines) and stomachaches, back pains, sleep disorder, night enuresis [45; 15].

Bullying represents a vicious circle, a cyclic, conflicting interaction, which becomes a significant source of chronic stress, with profound consequences on social, emotional, academic and physical development of students, no matter what age they are.

The negative effects of bullying may be noticed with all participants, no matter the role they play. Thus, distress symptoms have been found with bystanders as well, anxiety (the fear that they might become targets themselves), feeling helpless and beyond help, the vulnerability when confronted with aggressors requiring, many times, the intervention of professionals.

Although bullies are usually popular people, feared in class or school, yet, from a psycho-social perspective, one cannot neglect the negative effects that bullying has on the bullies. In their cases, there was recorded higher tendency towards alcoholism than with their peers, other types of antisocial behavior, low results and adapting to school, dropping out of school [17; 22; 27; 29].

To summarize, getting involved in bullying behavior, no matter the role a student plays, has a significant impact on all aspects of life, resulting in negative consequences at academic, social and psychological level.

4. CAUSES AND FACTORS THAT ARISE IN THE BULLYING PROCESS

Although it is a form of interpersonal aggression, bullying is not, however, a simple dyadic process between aggressor and victim, but a complex one, which manifests itself in different social contexts, taking various forms and involving diverse actors. The complexity of this umbrella-concept also relies on the existence of various factors which cause, promote, preserve or eradicate this behavior. Nowadays, bullying is considered to be a social phenomenon resulting from the interaction of the individual and the social environment, the relationships that the individual establishes with family, school, community, group of friends, the media (Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological theory) [11; 12; 18; 42], aggressive actions representing, in fact, the result of imitating some models, of being subjected to violent contents (Bandura’s social study theory, 1973).

Which are the characteristics of target children? What makes them vulnerable? Studies have shown that these children are generally suffering from anxiety, they are afraid, they cry very quickly, they do not possess coping mechanisms and strategies that would help them deal with other people’s aggressive behavior [24].

Olweus (1993) includes, among individual risk factors in adopting bullying behavior, impulsiveness, the desire to dominate, underdevelopment or lack of empathy, physical strength.

The family environment is one of the most important factors of bullying behavior. The lack of positive parent models, physical punishments, violence within the family, lack of affection or insecure affection during early childhood, the lack of clear behavior rules, an overprotective and intrusive parenting style may constitute predictors of bullying and of roles within this phenomenon [1; 13; 29; 30]. The negative influence of the peers also presents a factor of getting involved in bullying behavior [13; 29], such people being able to initiate, maintain and encourage such behavior and attitudes

The way in which school, as the main educational milieu of the child, is perceived with regard to personal safety and that of others, of social relations and interactions, the importance granted to the family-school-community partnership, particularly influences students' behavior. A positive climate, based on positive values (respect, communication, getting involved, social support, security and safety, is related to positive behavior regarding both academic results and social interaction among students.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Prevention and intervention programs concerning bullying must address all these factors simultaneously. Not taking one into account diminishes or even cancels the positive effects of actions performed so far. A first step is awareness and accepting the existence of such behavior and of the extremely negative consequences for all parties involved (directly or indirectly), no matter the form of bullying. Each program must address both victims and by-standers and aggressors, as, behind each of them, there are numerous other factors motivating one to resort to such a type of behavior.

Due to its complexity, bullying behavior represents genuine risk factors for the psycho-social development of children, as they require attention and action from adults, institutions and community members.

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