

SAFE SCHOOLS:
**Bullying Prevention
& Intervention**
REVIEW PANEL

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Bullying in Childhood and Adolescence
**A Literature Review for the
HWDSB Safe Schools:
Bullying Prevention and
Intervention Review Panel**

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What is bullying?

Bullying is defined as a systematic abuse of power. Although all bullying is aggression (i.e., behaviour that is intended to cause harm), not all aggression qualifies as bullying. Bullying is a subcategory of aggression that is characterized by intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance. The most often used definition in the academic literature is the one advanced by Olweus (1994), who states that “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (p. 1173). Although not explicitly mentioned in his definition, Olweus further adds that “in order to use the term bullying, there should also be an imbalance in strength” (p. 1173).

One of the issues with Olweus’ (1994) definition is that it does not take into account critical incidents that elicit ongoing fear in those victimized, who worry that the unwanted aggression will reoccur. Olweus’ definition also does not acknowledge that the bullying student’s perception of the victimized youth is central to establishing a power imbalance. For example, while educators may not perceive students of equal size and physical strength as having an asymmetrical power relationship, it is possible that the victimized students feel unable to defend themselves because of differences in

social status. Having a comprehensive definition is important for establishing the true prevalence of bullying and victimization (Vaillancourt et al., 2008) and for identifying the developmental course, predictors, and outcomes of bullying. Prevention science is predicated on a foundation of sound scholarship that includes a valid assessment of the phenomenon so that insight into processes and mechanisms can be identified, with the ultimate goal of ameliorating the problem.

In 2018, the Ontario Ministry of Education (the Ministry) authored the following definition of bullying, which takes into account the aforementioned nuances and ambiguities. Specifically, the Ontario Ministry of Education defines bullying as:

“...typically, a form of repeated and aggressive behaviour directed at an individual or individuals that is intended to cause (or should be known to cause) fear and distress and/or harm to another person’s body, feelings, self-esteem, or reputation. Bullying occurs in a context where there is a real or perceived power imbalance.”

Vaillancourt (2018) argued that the Ontario Ministry of Education’s bullying definition is the best in the world. It allows for the inclusion of critical incidents; it includes intentionality and perceived power imbalance; and it captures the types of harm bullying causes its targets, along with the various forms bullying takes. Specifically, the Ministry states that bullying can be physical (e.g., hitting, shoving, stealing, or damaging property), verbal (e.g., name-calling, mocking, or making sexist, racist, or homophobic comments), social (e.g., excluding others from a group or spreading gossip or rumours about them), written (e.g., writing notes or signs that are hurtful or insulting), and electronic, which is also known as cyber-bullying (e.g.,

spreading rumours and hurtful comments by email and text message and on social media sites).

It is common for cyber-bullying to be treated as a distinct form of bullying in the scientific literature, the media, and in education. However, studies using sophisticated analytic techniques to assess the overlap and uniqueness of the various forms of bullying suggest that there is substantial commonality. All forms of bullying overlap and co-occur, are predicted by similar factors, and are associated with comparable outcomes. Accordingly, the current state of knowledge indicates that the extent of difficult outcomes experienced by children who are bullied is linked to the frequency and severity of the abuse, rather than the type of abuse (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2013; Haltigan & Vaillancourt, 2018; Nylund et al., 2007).

How common is bullying?

Bullying is a pervasive problem affecting approximately 10% of children on a regular basis and another 30% of children and adolescents occasionally worldwide (Nansel et al., 2001; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016; UNICEF, 2017). The Canadian rates for bullying are similarly high. The UNICEF Report Card (2017) provides prevalence rates for the exposure of children aged 11 to 15 to chronic bullying victimization, defined as occurring at least twice in the past month. According to UNICEF, Canada ranks in the top five of 31 economically advanced countries for highest bullying victimization rates. Unfortunately, this is an all too familiar problem. For the past 14 years, Canada has always been at the top of the distribution for bullying victimization (UNICEF, 2017). Indeed, while most countries have reported a decline in bullying rates, Canada's rates increased from 2006 to 2014.

The published prevalence rates for Hamilton, Ontario are in keeping with population-based studies of Canadian children. For example, Vaillancourt et al. (2010b) examined the bullying experience of 16,799 students (8,195 girls, 8,604 boys) in Grades 4 to 12 and found that 37.6% of students reported being bullied by others and 31.7% reported bullying others. In this study, girls reported being bullied by their peers at a higher rate than boys, and boys reported bullying others at a higher rate than girls. Grade differences were also noted. Students in elementary school reported higher rates of bullying victimization compared to students in secondary school. In contrast, reported rates of bullying others were lower in elementary school than in secondary school.

In another study involving 11,152 students (5,493 girls and 5,659 boys) in Grades 4 to 12 from Hamilton, Ontario, Vaillancourt et al. (2010b) examined chronic exposure to bullying (i.e., being bullied or bullying others more than two or three times per month) and found that 12.3% of students were identified as targets of bullying, 5.3% were identified as perpetrators of bullying, and 4.0% were identified as students who both bullied others and were bullied. Slightly more girls than boys were classified as targets of bullying. More boys than girls were classified as students who bully others and as students who both bully others and are bullied. As was the case with the other Hamilton sample, there were differences in the proportion of students identified as being involved in bullying by grade division. Far more elementary school students were classified as targets of bullying than secondary school students, and more secondary school students were identified as students who bully others than elementary school

students. The differences in rates by gender and age are consistent with meta-analysis results¹ (Cook et al., 2010).

In a 2020 survey completed for the HWDSB Safe Schools: Bullying Prevention and Intervention Review Panel, Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt, Dr. Debra J. Pepler and Dr. Ann Farrell found that the prevalence of bullying victimization among students in Hamilton's public school board was very high, with 59.8% of surveyed students reporting being bullied by others at any rate (pre-COVID condition) and 19.7% reporting being bullied frequently (pre-COVID condition).

Although race/ethnicity was not examined in the aforementioned population-based studies, two recent meta-analyses have been conducted on bullying victimization and bullying perpetration. Vitoroulis and Vaillancourt (2015) found that for bullying victimization there was only a small effect for American students (ages 6–18). Specifically, in the United States ethnic majority youth experienced more bullying victimization than ethnic minority youth. Regarding bullying perpetration, Vitoroulis and Vaillancourt (2018) found very small or non-significant effects, indicating that the assessment of ethnicity as a descriptive variable was not adequate enough to account for group differences. In a study of ethnically diverse students in Toronto (McKenney et al., 2006), there were no significant differences between the ethnically diverse groups in reports of general victimization. When asked about being victimized about their ethnic identity, immigrant youth who had been born in Canada and whose parents were not

¹ A meta-analysis provides a statistical integration of a number of independent studies on the same topic as a way to establish an overall trend. Meta-analyses are useful for assessing the veracity of an association because spurious findings do not get inflated.

born in Canada reported the highest levels of ethnically based victimization. This form of victimization was linked to a range of psychosocial difficulties. Educators' willingness to take a stand and protect minority and immigrant students from ethnic bullying victimization can send a strong message about acceptance and inclusion at school.

Higher prevalence rates in bullying victimization have been found for sexual-minority youth, youth with disabilities, and obese youth (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). A meta-analysis by Fedwa and Ahn (2011) indicated that sexual-minority youth experience significantly more bullying victimization than heterosexual peers and their experiences with peer aggression contribute to a number of negative outcomes. Similar findings emerged in research in Toronto (Williams et al., 2003), with sexual-minority and questioning youth reporting being targets of bullying, peer sexual harassment, and peer or dating-partner physical abuse more often than heterosexual youth. In a subsequent study, bullying victimization was linked to both externalizing and internalizing problems for sexual-minority youth, but this link was mediated by social support from family and best friends (Williams et al., 2005). In cases where sexual-minority youth receive support and are not victimized by peers, they may not experience psychosocial difficulties. A recent meta-analysis by Myers et al. (2020) found stronger associations between victimization and negative outcomes for transgender students than for questioning students.

More longitudinal studies² are needed to assess the temporal priority of problems among these vulnerable groups. For example, cross-sectional studies support an association between weight status and involvement in bullying; heavier children report greater bullying victimization than average-weight children (see meta-analysis by van Geel et al., 2014). The common assumption is that obese and overweight children get bullied because of their weight status. However, a recent study involving a cohort of Hamilton students who were assessed from Grade 5 to Grade 11 found that body mass index (BMI) did not directly influence bullying victimization (Lee & Vaillancourt, 2018). Rather, exposure to bullying had a direct effect on BMI over time. That is, bullied children gained weight because of their poor peer experiences.

The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (2016) identified several risk factors for bullying victimization that require more research, including: (1) socioeconomic status, (2) immigration status, (3) minority religious affiliation, (4) youth with multiple stigmatizing statuses, and (5) urban versus rural youth. Pubertal status is another possible risk factor that should be examined more closely. According to the deviance hypothesis, off-time puberty deviations, such as being early or late, are associated with more problematic outcomes (Graber et al., 1997; Haynie & Piquero, 2006), such as bullying (Craig et al., 2001). Haltigan and Vaillancourt (2018) recently found that late-maturing boys were disproportionately more likely to be bullied

² Longitudinal studies are considered a gold-standard methodological approach in developmental research. They allow researchers to statistically control for prior association, permitting the assessment of temporal precedence, and thus provide evidence on cause and effect.

compared to their more advanced and on-time peers. Specifically, late-maturing boys were 22 times more likely to get bullied than their on-time male peers.

What are the consequences of bullying?

The negative impact of bullying has been studied extensively over the past two decades, with several longitudinal cohort studies providing evidence of how bullying impacts perpetrators and victimized youth in the short- and long-term.

Dealing with bullying victimization first, there is a robust literature demonstrating that children who are bullied by their peers experience a range of physical, cognitive, mental, and social problems (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). For instance, bullied children experience more somatic complaints and physical health problems than non-bullied children (see meta-analysis by Gini & Pozzoli, 2013). They also experience more academic difficulties, including poorer achievement, engagement, and attendance (see review by Laith & Vaillancourt, 2020). The most robust correlate of bullying victimization is mental health difficulties like anxiety, suicidality, psychosis, eating disorders, and externalizing problems like substance use (see reviews by McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015; Moore et al., 2017). Moreover, the most common mental health outcome of bullying victimization is depression, which seems to be causal in nature (i.e., bullying victimization leads to depression; see meta-analysis by Moore et al., 2017) and persists long after the abuse has stopped. For example, Ttofi et al. (2011) found that the probability of being depressed was higher for children who were bullied at school than for non-involved students up to 36 years later. In a 40-year prospective cohort study, Takizawa et al. (2014) found that targets of childhood bullying had higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality than non-involved peers at ages 23 and 50. There is

also evidence of a symptoms-driven pathway in which depressed youth are more likely to get bullied, which further exacerbates their depression (Kochel et al., 2012; Krygsman & Vaillancourt, 2017; Rudolph, 2009; Saint-George & Vaillancourt, 2019). A strong predictor of suicidality is depression. Not surprising, then, are recent meta-analytic results demonstrating that experiencing bullying victimization is associated with suicidal ideation and behaviour (Holt et al., 2015) as well as non-suicidal self-injury, which is more pronounced in younger children than older children (Van Geel et al., 2019).

We now turn to the perpetrators of bullying, who are also vulnerable to emotional, psychological, and social difficulties. It is important to think about how bullying patterns develop. For instance, findings from meta-analyses indicate that children who bully are low in agreeableness and conscientiousness (Mistopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015), making it challenging for these children to regulate their anger, frustration, and impulsivity. Meta-analytic results also indicate that childhood bullying perpetration is associated with (1) moral disengagement, which is the tendency to justify an action that is viewed as morally wrong (Gini et al., 2014; Killer et al., 2019), (2) a lack of empathy, which includes difficulty understanding and sharing others' feelings, and (3) callousness, which includes a lack of guilt and concern when harming others (Zych et al., 2019a). It is difficult to tease apart cause and effect in the development of bullying problems. In one longitudinal study that followed youth for six months, lower empathy increased bullying perpetration, whereas higher bullying perpetration reduced empathy (Stavrinides et al., 2010). In another study involving Hamilton students who were

assessed from Grades 9 to 11, lower empathic concern and higher exploitative tendencies were associated with bullying perpetration (Farrell et al., 2019).

Mental and physical health, as well as social difficulties such as substance abuse, self-harm, delinquency, school adjustment problems, and employment challenges, are associated with bullying perpetration (see Wolke & Lereya, 2015 for a review). In one study, childhood bullying perpetration at age 9 was associated with anxious/depressive symptoms, delinquency, and violent offences five years later (Lösel & Bender, 2011). In another study, bullying perpetration assessed between the ages of 9 and 16 was associated with a risk of antisocial personality disorder assessed between the ages of 19 and 26 (Copeland et al., 2013). Finally, the most prominent correlate of bullying perpetration is the continued use of aggression within social relationships (termed heterotypic continuity). Over 85% of childhood bullying incidents occur in the presence of peers (Craig & Pepler, 1997). As a result of the attention received from bullying perpetration, children can continue to use bullying for social benefits such as popularity (e.g., status, power) despite often being disliked by peers (e.g., Reijntjes et al., 2013; Vaillancourt et al., 2003). The abuse of power over others that is practiced during childhood can extend to other forms of violence in adulthood. In one longitudinal study, bullying perpetration during early middle school was associated with homophobic name-calling during late middle school and, in turn, with sexual violence perpetration during high school (Espelage et al., 2018). In another study of Hamilton youth, bullying perpetration in Grade 5 predicted sexual harassment, homophobic taunting, and dating violence in adulthood (Humphrey & Vaillancourt, 2020). Results from several meta-analyses further support the continuity of aggression, as childhood bullying perpetration

is associated with multiple forms of violence (e.g., assault, carrying weapons, robbery) (Ttofi et al., 2012), criminal offending (Ttofi et al., 2011), and dating violence (Zych et al., 2019b). There is also longitudinal research demonstrating that being the target of bullying predicts becoming a perpetrator of bullying over time (Barker et al., 2008; Haltigan & Vaillancourt, 2014).

Which factors help reduce the impact of bullying?

The factors that have been shown to help protect children from being bullied and help them cope with this type of abuse align with the quality of relationships with friends, family, and schools. Specifically, having friends and being liked by peers have been shown to protect children from being a target of bullying (Hodges et al., 1999; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Although having friends is important, the benefit is reduced if friends are themselves targets of bullying (Fox & Boulton, 2006; Hodges et al., 1999; Pellegrini et al., 1999). Family also plays an important role in bullying prevention. Poor family functioning, which relates to factors like low family participation and high conflict, is associated with greater involvement in bullying for targets and perpetrators (Holt et al., 2008; Stevens et al., 2002). Conversely, high parental support has been shown to buffer children against the negative impact of bullying victimization (Poteat et al., 2011).

School-level factors have also been associated with poorer outcomes for students who are bullied. Poor teacher-student relationships (Richard et al., 2012), lack of engagement in school activities (Barboza et al., 2009), poor teacher training (Bauman et al., 2008), and a poor school climate (Unnever & Cornell, 2004) are linked to deleterious outcomes for students who are bullied. Using data from 1023 Grade 5 students from Hamilton, Wang et al. (2014) found that bullying victimization was not

only associated with a poorer perception of school climate at the individual and school level, but it also had a negative impact on students' GPA. In contrast, the prevalence of bullying has been shown to be reduced when discipline practices are fair and transparent (Cornell et al., 2013; Gregory et al., 2010).

The challenge for teachers trying to address bullying is that learning is a social experience. Teachers establish the expectations for behaviour and relationships in their classrooms. When these expectations are for cooperative and positive peer relationships, students learn that the teachers do not accept bullying and there is, in turn, a lower rate of bullying (Saarento et al., 2014). Teachers, themselves, need support in creating a positive classroom climate. For example, due to bullying's covert nature, the dynamics of bullying in the classroom are often difficult for the teacher to detect and understand (Blain-Arcaro et al., 2012). Teachers need education and coaching to address complex peer interactions and challenging students.

What can be done to reduce bullying in schools?

Most of the bullying prevention research conducted to date has focused on universal school-based programs. The impact of these programs has been modest at best (Yeager et al., 2015). A recent meta-analysis of school bullying intervention programs that included 100 evaluations and 103 independent effect sizes found that bullying prevention programs were effective in reducing bullying perpetration by about 19–20% and bullying victimization by 15–16% (Gaffney et al., 2019). Larger reductions in bullying perpetration were associated with programs that included parent training and playground supervision. Moreover, greater reductions were associated with programs that were more intense and of longer duration. Greater reductions in bullying

victimization were associated with specific intervention components such as the use of videos, disciplinary methods, co-operative group work, and, again, intense and longer programs.

The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (2016) concluded from their expert group, which included Dr. Vaillancourt, that the best outcomes were obtained from intervention programs that have the following components: (1) multi-tiered approaches that leverage universal, selective, and indicated programs and activities, (2) school-wide efforts that address the social environment, culture, and climate with clear anti-bullying policies, (3) data to monitor progress in bullying prevention, (4) engagement of families, and (5) bullying prevention efforts incorporated into existing programs and supports that have been shown to be effective at reducing bullying, aggression, and/or violence. The National Academies also warned against using the following approaches: (1) zero tolerance programs (e.g., automatic suspensions or expulsions for bullying-related behaviour), (2) programs that encourage youth to fight back, (3) conflict resolution programs, even if facilitated by adults, (4) one-day awareness raising events, and (5) youth-facilitated programs like peer mentoring.

There are some evidence-based homegrown Canadian programs for bullying prevention at the elementary and secondary level. Universal interventions reach all students in the school with the goals of raising awareness of bullying problems, changing peer group norms to identify and intervene in bullying, providing strategies for intervening or reporting to stop bullying, and general supports for a safe, respectful, and inclusive school. Principals, teachers, other school staff, and parents are also part of

universal interventions to ensure that their awareness and responses align with the expectations placed on students.

The *WITS* program (Walk away, Ignore, Talk it out, Seek help; www.witsprogram.ca) was developed in British Columbia as a universal intervention. This evidence-based program is effective in bringing together schools, families, and communities to create safe, responsive environments and help elementary school children deal with bullying. An evaluation of students in the WITS program and comparison schools showed significant and meaningful changes in physical and relational victimization as well as significant reductions in physical aggression from Grades 1 to 6 (Hogland et al., 2012).

The *Fourth R* is a Canadian universal violence prevention program for junior high and high school students (www.youthrelationships.org). The Fourth R focuses on youth relationships to prevent violence (bullying, peer, and dating violence), substance abuse, and unsafe sex. The overall goal is to promote healthy youth relationships by supporting schools and communities through innovative programming, research, education, and consultation. The program is designed for youth in Grades 7 to 12 and is delivered by classroom teachers. There have been many studies of its effectiveness on target behaviour problems. For example, a randomized control trial of the Grade 7 and 8 programs showed that students in the Fourth R classes had an increased awareness of both the impact of violence on others and healthy coping strategies (Crooks, Scott, et al., 2015).

Roots of Empathy (ROE) is another universal, evidence-based Canadian program with a long history in Hamilton (rootsofempathy.org). It is a classroom-based

social and emotional learning program designed for children in kindergarten to Grade 8. A neighbourhood infant and parent who visit the classroom throughout the school year are at the heart of the program. The visits serve as a starting point for lessons on emotion understanding, perspective taking, caring for others, and infant development. ROE is used in classrooms around the world and has been shown to significantly reduce levels of aggressive behaviour as well as improve prosocial behaviour such as empathy and perspective taking (Connolly et al., 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012).

On an international level, there is strong evidence for the effectiveness of the *KiVa* bullying prevention program (Karna et al., 2011), which was developed in Finland for students in Grades 1 to 9 (see www.kivaprogram.net). Almost all schools in Finland participate in the *KiVa* program, which was designed to be a permanent feature of a school's bullying prevention work rather than a short-term project. *KiVa* is both a universal program for all students and an indicated program for students who are involved in bullying. The universal program focuses on bystander roles and peer support through teacher-delivered student lessons and online games. The indicated programming for students involved in bullying (as a perpetrator or target) is carried out by a *KiVa* team of three school staff who deal with acute cases of bullying (Garandeau et al., 2014). The team screens referrals for the three criteria of bullying: a power differential between the aggressor(s) and the victimized student, intent to harm, and repeated abuse. The team members speak individually with the student being victimized and with the student(s) who bullied to ensure that the bullying stops. In addition, the team works with the classroom teacher to engage high-status, prosocial students in the class as collaborators. These students are asked to set the standards for respect and

inclusion of others, make the victimized student feel better, and prevent further bullying. Shifting peers' attention and reinforcement dynamics around the bullying problem may contribute to sustained improvements. KiVa's effectiveness has also been demonstrated in other European countries.

Conclusion

Bullying is a problem within the school system but it is not a school problem—it is a societal problem. As the societal institution responsible for child and youth development, schools are mandated to focus on educating the whole child, which not only includes the capacities for numeracy, literacy, and science, but also the capacities for healthy relationships. Bullying comes with a high cost at the individual, school, community, and societal level. Developmentally attuned and effective bullying prevention programs for all students from kindergarten through Grade 12, together with interventions for students with the highest needs, will have substantial benefits in terms of mental health, social wellbeing, productivity, and crime prevention over the lifespan.

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