Once a bully, always a bully?

Investigating whether and how the roles of bully and victim change during adolescence

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Approximately a third of adolescents bully their peers, and a third are victims, according to worldwide research. Bullying, which may take the forms of physical harm, verbal taunts or threats, or cyberattacks, can bring significant negative consequences for victims, including a higher risk of anxiety, depression, sleeping problems, and self-harm.

Izabela Zych, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Cordoba, together with Manuel P. Eisner, David P. Farrington, Maria Ttofi, Denis Ribeaud, and Vicente J. Llorent wanted to understand whether bullying roles remained stable over time or whether adolescents could change their roles and escape bullying. Zych and her colleagues used data from the Zurich Project on the Social Development from Childhood to Adulthood (z-proso), a longitudinal study led by Manuel P. Eisner, that began with children who were entering their first year of primary school in 2008. The students subsequently answered survey questions every two years, from ages 11 to 17.

Participants included 916 children (equal numbers of boys and girls) from culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds in 56 public schools in Zurich, Switzerland. Data was collected throughout six years at four time points through written surveys. Students were asked whether they had experienced bullying by their peers or had been a bully themselves in different settings, such as school, home, neighborhood, or the Internet. The surveys were carried out in classrooms through a pencil-and-paper questionnaire, and answers remained hidden from other students.

Based on the students' actual response patterns, Zych and her colleagues discovered that just over half of the students were uninvolved in bullying at each data collection point, and 70 percent of these remained so over time. Those who were involved took on the roles of victim, bully, or bully/victim. At all ages, the proportion of students who were bullies was greater among boys than girls, and victimization rates were higher among girls. Also, as the participants grew older, perpetration rates increased among boys, but decreased among girls.

As researchers examined how students might transition among these roles or escape bullying over time, they found most victims remained victims, and bullies remained bullies, rarely transitioning to victims. Bully/victims, the smallest group, mostly remained involved in bullying, transitioning either to perpetrators or victims.

Overall, however, the percentage of children involved in bullying decreased from ages 13 to 17, as aggressive behavior tends to decrease throughout development, and therefore, early intervention may accelerate this trajectory. Importantly, involvement was episodic and occasional among most students, and those who were persistently involved at all ages amounted to only 15 percent.
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“This study shows that it’s possible to escape from bullying. But it is also possible to remain involved throughout all the adolescent years,” Zych said. “This is why early detection and intervention are crucial. It is important to prevent bullying and stop it before it becomes persistent. Anti-bullying interventions are therefore urgently needed.” Her findings also suggest that interventions could be more effective if they are targeted at the identified bullying roles, especially bully/victims, who rarely became uninvolved.

The researchers are now focusing on childhood risk and protective factors for adolescent involvement in bullying. For instance, they are exploring linkages between family, school, and peers and children’s sporadic versus persistent involvement in bullying. Zych hopes that such future studies will uncover ways to help children to escape bullying roles or to avoid involvement altogether.

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