

# Reading A

## Sweden

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### Definition of bullying

*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. It is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another – basically what is implied in the definition of aggressive behavior (Olweus, 1973b; Berkowitz, 1993). Negative actions can be carried out by physical contact, by words, or in other ways, such as making faces or mean gestures, and intentional exclusion from a group. Although children or youths who engage in bullying very likely vary in their degree of awareness of how the bullying is perceived by the victim, most or all of them probably realize that their behavior is at least somewhat painful or unpleasant for the victim ...*

In this context, it is also natural to consider briefly the relationship between bullying and teasing. In the everyday social interactions among peers in school, there occurs a good deal of (also recurrent) teasing of a playful and relatively friendly nature – which in most cases cannot be considered bullying. On the other hand, when the repeated teasing is of a degrading and offensive character, and, in particular, is continued in spite of clear signs of distress or opposition on the part of the target, it certainly qualifies as bullying. Here it is thus important to try and distinguish between malignant and more friendly, playful teasing, although the line between them is sometimes blurred and the perception of the situation may to some extent depend on the perspective taken, that of the target or of the perpetrator(s) ...

### Characteristics of typical victims

The typical victims are more anxious and insecure than students in general. Further, they are often cautious, sensitive, and quiet. When attacked by other students, they commonly react by crying (at least in the lower grades) and withdrawal. In addition, victims suffer from low self-esteem, and they have a negative view of themselves and their situation. They often look upon themselves as failures and feel stupid, ashamed, and unattractive.

The victims are lonely and abandoned at school. As a rule, they do not have a single good friend in their class. They are not aggressive or teasing in their behavior, however, and accordingly, one cannot explain the bullying as a consequence of the victims themselves being provocative to their peers (see below). These children often have a negative attitude toward violence and use of violent means. If they are boys, they are likely to be physically weaker than boys in general (Olweus, 1978) ...

In-depth interviews with parents of victimized boys indicate that these boys were characterized by a certain cautiousness and sensitivity from an early age (Olweus, 1993). Boys displaying such characteristics (perhaps combined with physical weakness) are likely to have had difficulty in asserting themselves in the peer group and may have been somewhat disliked by their age mates ... At the same time, it is obvious that the repeated harassment by peers must have considerably increased their anxiety, insecurity, and generally negative evaluation of themselves. In sum, the typical reaction patterns or personality traits characterizing children who have been identified as victims (and who, by definition, have been exposed to bullying for some time) are likely to be both a cause, and a consequence, of the bullying.

... There is also another, clearly smaller group of victims, the *provocative victims*, who are characterized by a combination of both anxious and aggressive reaction patterns. These students often have problems with concentration, and behave in ways that may cause irritation and tension for those around them. Some of these students may be characterized as hyperactive. It is not uncommon that their behavior provokes many students in the class, thus resulting in negative reactions from a large part of, or even the entire class. The dynamics of bully/victim problems in a class with provocative victims differ in part from problems in a class with passive victims (Olweus, 1978).

A follow-up study of two groups of boys (Olweus, 1993) who had or had not been victimized by their peers in school (from grades 6 through 9) shows that the former victims had 'normalized' in many ways as young adults at age 23 ... In two respects, however, the former victims had fared much worse than their non-victimized peers: they were more likely to be depressed and had poorer self-esteem. The pattern of findings clearly suggested that this was a consequence of the earlier, persistent victimization which had left its mental scars on their minds.

## **Characteristics of typical bullies**

A distinctive characteristic of typical bullies is their aggression toward peers – this is implied in the definition of a bully. But bullies are often aggressive toward adults as well, both teachers and parents. Generally, bullies have a more positive attitude toward violence than students in general. Further, they are often characterized by impulsivity and a strong need to dominate others. They have little empathy with victims of bullying. If they are boys, they are likely to be physically stronger than boys in general, and the victims in particular (Olweus, 1978).

A commonly held view among psychologists and psychiatrists is that individuals with an aggressive and tough behavior pattern are actually anxious and insecure 'under the surface.' The assumption that the bullies have an underlying insecurity has been tested in several of my own studies, also using 'indirect' methods such as stress hormones (adrenaline and noradrenaline) and projective techniques. There was nothing in the results to support the common view, but rather pointed in the opposite direction: the bullies had unusually little anxiety and insecurity, or were roughly average on such dimensions (Olweus, 1981, 1984, 1986; see also Pulkkinen and Tremblay, 1992). They did not suffer from poor self-esteem.

These conclusions apply to the bullies as a group (as compared with groups of control boys and victims). The results do not imply that there cannot be individual bullies who are both aggressive and anxious.

It should also be emphasized that there are students who participate in bullying but who do not usually take the initiative – these may be labeled *passive bullies*, *followers*, or *henchmen*. A group of passive bullies is likely to be fairly mixed and may also contain insecure and anxious students (Olweus, 1973a, 1978) ...

Bullies are often surrounded by a small group of two or three peers who support them and seem to like them (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest and Gariépy, 1988). The popularity of the bullies decreases, however, in the higher grades and is considerably less than average in grade 9 (around age 16). Nevertheless, the bullies do not seem to reach the low level of popularity that characterizes the victims ...

As regards the possible psychological sources underlying bullying behavior, the pattern of empirical findings suggests at least three, partly interrelated motives (in particular for male bullies who have so far been studied more extensively). First, the bullies have a strong need for power and dominance; they seem to enjoy being 'in control' and to subdue others. Second, considering the family conditions under which

many of them have been reared (see below), it is natural to assume that they have developed a certain degree of hostility toward the environment; such feelings and impulses may make them derive satisfaction from inflicting injury and suffering upon other individuals. Finally, there is an 'instrumental component' to their behavior. The bullies often coerce their victims to provide them with money, cigarettes, beer, and other things of value (see also Patterson, Littman and Bricker, 1967). In addition, it is obvious that aggressive behavior is in many situations rewarded with prestige (e.g. Bandura, 1973) ...

## **Development of an aggressive reaction pattern**

In light of the characterization of the bullies as having an aggressive reaction pattern – that is, they display aggressive behavior in many situations – it becomes important to examine the question: What kind of rearing and other conditions during childhood are conducive to the development of an aggressive reaction pattern? Very briefly, the following four factors have been found to be particularly important (based chiefly on research with boys; for details, see Olweus, 1980; see also Loeber and Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986):

- The basic emotional attitude of the primary caretaker(s) toward the child during early years (usually the mother). A negative emotional attitude, characterized by lack of warmth and involvement, increases the risk that the child will later become aggressive and hostile toward others.
- Permissiveness for aggressive behavior by the child. If the primary caretaker is generally permissive and 'tolerant' without setting clear limits on aggressive behavior toward peers, siblings, and adults, the child's aggression level is likely to increase.
- Use of power-assertive child-rearing methods such as physical punishment and violent emotional outbursts. Children of parents who make frequent use of these methods are likely to become more aggressive than the average child. 'Violence begets violence.' We can summarize these results by stating that too little love and care and too much 'freedom' in childhood are conditions that contribute strongly to the development of an aggressive reaction pattern
- Finally, the temperament of the child. A child with an active and hotheaded temperament is more likely to develop into an aggressive youngster than a child with a quieter temperament. The effect of this factor is less powerful than those of the two first-mentioned conditions.

These are main trends. In individual cases, other factors such as the presence of an alcoholic and brutal father may have been of crucial importance, and the causal pattern may appear partly different ...

It should also be pointed out that the aggression levels of the boys participating in the analyses above (Olweus, 1980) were not related to the socioeconomic conditions of their families such as parental income level, length of education, and social class. Similarly, there were no (or only very weak) relations between the four childhood factors discussed and the socioeconomic conditions of the family (Olweus, 1981).

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