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# Children's Experience of Loneliness at School and its Relation to Bullying and the Quality of Teacher Interventions

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## Children's Experience of Loneliness at School and its Relation to Bullying and the Quality of Teacher Interventions

### Abstract

Forty-two children aged between 8 and 10 years were interviewed about their experience of loneliness at primary school. The children were further asked to describe their experiences of being bullied, as well as to comment on their perception of the consequences of particular teacher interventions. It was found that a majority of children (80%) had periods of being lonely at school and that these experiences were associated with boredom, inactivity, a tendency to withdraw into fantasy, and a passive attitude towards social interactions. Moreover, children who invested in very few friendships were more vulnerable to becoming isolated. Similarly, a majority of children (68%) claimed to have been bullied, with lonely children being more likely to be victimized by peers. Furthermore, children reported that teacher interventions were on the whole not effective in bringing an end to their victimization experiences. Thus, the findings indicated that both bullying and particular kinds of teacher interventions were contributing factors to children's prolonged sense of loneliness at school. A developmental model of the interrelationship of these three variables is proposed and discussed.

### Keywords

Loneliness, Bullying, School, Phenomenology, and Life-World

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## **Children's Experience of Loneliness at School and its Relation to Bullying and the Quality of Teacher Interventions**

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*Forty-two children aged between 8 and 10 years were interviewed about their experience of loneliness at primary school. The children were further asked to describe their experiences of being bullied, as well as to comment on their perception of the consequences of particular teacher interventions. It was found that a majority of children (80%) had periods of being lonely at school and that these experiences were associated with boredom, inactivity, a tendency to withdraw into fantasy, and a passive attitude towards social interactions. Moreover, children who invested in very few friendships were more vulnerable to becoming isolated. Similarly, a majority of children (68%) claimed to have been bullied, with lonely children being more likely to be victimized by peers. Furthermore, children reported that teacher interventions were on the whole not effective in bringing an end to their victimization experiences. Thus, the findings indicated that both bullying and particular kinds of teacher interventions were contributing factors to children's prolonged sense of loneliness at school. A developmental model of the interrelationship of these three variables is proposed and discussed. Key Words: Loneliness, Bullying, School, Phenomenology, and Life-World*

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The focus of the present research is the experience of loneliness, an area of human relating which, although universal, has not been given sufficient attention by contemporary psychological research. Although it is possible to discuss loneliness in its existential sense, as a condition which is interwoven into our everyday human activities (Jaspers, 1970; Moustakas, 1961), the approach that will be adopted here is to view it as a response to an interpersonal situation. The rationale for adopting this approach is rooted in the work of Sullivan (1953), who argued that loneliness in childhood could best be understood as the frustration of intimacy needs. Moreover, this approach is in keeping with the suggestion that a phenomenological approach to human development would seek to clarify children's life-worlds by means of descriptions of their intersubjective experiences (Berguno, 2003). Thus, in the present study, loneliness is construed as a human response to having had and lost a certain type of relationship. It is a situation in which the need for contact and tenderness are frustrated (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959). It can be such a frightening and painful experience that an individual may feel driven to reestablish communication with others without concern for the interpersonal consequences.

Nevertheless, the experience of loneliness can be extraordinarily persistent, since it is not solely a desire for company, and therefore cannot be satisfied by simply being around others. Loneliness only yields to a very specific form of relationship; it

can be interrupted by social activity but not alleviated by it (Bowlby, 1969; Sullivan, 1953). Social activity may, in fact, deepen the loneliness by highlighting the absence of meaningful interaction. Once a specific relationship has been established or repaired, loneliness vanishes, although the lonely individual may not in fact be in a position to establish the wished for relationship through his or her own efforts. The experience of loneliness is often accompanied by boredom and aimlessness. Everyday tasks and routines may lose their meaning and the lonely individual may blame him- or herself for his or her "weakness." Moreover, the lonely individual may find that others respond to his or her loneliness with irritation and a lack of empathy, a situation which may then lead to further isolation.

The psychoanalytic literature considers that the roots of loneliness can be found in infancy, whenever the earliest need for contact is frustrated (Klein, 1990). The developmental literature has highlighted that children have a deep need to involve others in their personal concerns, as well as the need to be invited into relationships by others. Thus, the lonely child would be one who cannot obtain the participation of his or her parents and/or significant others in his or her social arena and who compensates for this lack by developing a rich fantasy life. This way of dealing with the pain of loneliness may have consequences for later periods of life, as interpersonal demands continue to gain in complexity (Terrell, Terrell & Von Drashek, 2000). This is especially true of the early adolescent phase, when the need for both interpersonal security and intimacy "collide" with the need for sexual contact (Sullivan, 1953).

Given the above observations, it seems surprising that there have been few studies of the experience of loneliness in childhood. It is possible that this is so because the problem of loneliness has been attributed mainly to the elderly or those with learning disabilities (Margalit & Ben-Dov, 1995). Or perhaps it is due to a reluctance to admit that children are capable of experiencing this kind of interpersonal pain. There have also been correlational studies that have shown that loneliness is associated with shyness, poor social skills, low self-esteem and social dissatisfaction (Ames, Ames & Garrison 1997; Demir & Tarhan 2001). Most importantly, it has been suggested that loneliness is the essential quality of mental illness (Van Den Berg, 1993) and indeed, there have been a number of studies indicating a relationship between loneliness and a variety of mental health problems such as drug abuse, suicide, delinquency, school adjustment problems, alcoholism, anxiety disorders and depression (Anderson & Harvey, 1988; Brennan & Auslander, 1979; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman, 1997; Sullivan 1953).

Nevertheless, research into loneliness in childhood has been relatively scarce, so that we do not as yet have reliable descriptions of the development of this interpersonal phenomenon (Asher, Hymel & Renshaw, 1984). Moreover, these studies have tended to focus on children aged ten years or above, with self-reports and questionnaires as the favoured research tools (Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). Among the noticeable exceptions to this trend are the studies by Hart, Yang, Nelson, Robinson, Olsen and Nelson (2000) and Gazelle and Ladd (2003). Hart et al. (2000) have provided evidence that passive solitary behaviour may be associated with peer rejection as early as preschool, while Gazelle and Ladd (2003) have shown that the combined influence of anxious solitude and peer exclusion in the early school years are predictive of depressive symptoms later. However, a number of observations can be made at this point. First, knowledge of the experience of loneliness in children aged six to ten is still severely lacking. Second, the methodological tools mentioned above are limited in that they are unable to provide us with sufficiently detailed descriptions of the experience of loneliness in young children. Finally, these

methods neglect the interpersonal dimensions of the experience (Rokach, Bacanli & Rambaran, 2000).

The association of children's solitary behaviour with peer rejection, as described above, raises the possibility of a more direct link between children's experiences of loneliness and bullying (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996a). Might it be that children's victimization experiences lead them to withdraw from interpersonal contact? Research by Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996a), Kochenderfer-Ladd and Wardrop (2001) and a more recent study by Ladd and Troop-Gordon (2003) have given support to this possibility. Moreover, victimized children are more likely to have negative views about school and to perceive the overall school environment as unsafe or even threatening, than those children who do not report being bullied (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996b; Slee, 1994). Or might it be that the child's solitary behaviour increases the likelihood of being bullied? This second possibility has not yet been sufficiently investigated, nor has the possibility of a bi-directional influence been tested empirically.

Previous researchers have approached the phenomenon of loneliness in one of two ways. Loneliness has either been construed as a predictor of interpersonal difficulties (Boivin & Hymel, 1997) or it has been perceived as the result of negative self-appraisals and negative peer beliefs, or peer victimization (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996a; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Kupersmidt, Buchele, Voegler, & Sedikides, 1996; Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003; Renshaw & Brown, 1993). In both approaches, the underlying assumption is that there is a unidirectional causal link between loneliness and some other phenomenon. A phenomenological approach to understanding loneliness, however, would seek to clarify its 'horizons' (Husserl, 1977). This would entail provisionally suspending our causal assumptions about the phenomenon and turning our attention to the meaningful configuration of events that presents itself to observation. The complexities of adopting such an approach to the study of loneliness was first highlighted by Sullivan (1953). He indicated that loneliness was difficult to describe because, although it could be construed as a response to an interpersonal situation, it also becomes an important motivational factor in the child's interpersonal development. It is on this basis that we have raised in the present study the question of a bi-directional influence, as follows. If as a consequence of peer victimization, a child withdraws into loneliness, might it be that the child's experience of loneliness is communicated to peers in a way that invites further victimization?

Similarly, although children's victimization experiences have been studied extensively, researchers have tended to focus on the age range ten to thirteen, by which time the bully-victim interpersonal patterns have become well established (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Espelage, Bosworth & Simon, 2000; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Originally, it was thought that boys were more likely to be bullied than girls, but later studies suggest that girls are just as likely to become victims of peer aggression (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996b). It has been difficult for researchers to ascertain how many children, during a particular school year, experience peer victimization, but it is believed that as many as three out of every ten children are victims of school bullies (Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996a) and that perhaps eight out of ten peers, who are neither victims nor bullies, are involved in victimization episodes (Craig & Pepler, 1997). In a similar way to children's experiences of loneliness, it is considered that peer victimization experiences increase children's risk of suffering anxiety, depression, interpersonal difficulties and low self-esteem (Graham & Juvonen, 1998; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996a). Moreover, victimized children are more likely to suffer a decline in their academic performance.

There is, however, little evidence to suggest that interventionist strategies to reduce bullying in secondary schools have had a significant impact on children's subsequent psychosocial adjustment problems (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). Thus, without an understanding of how peer victimization patterns develop over time and the effects that these have on children's interpersonal relationships, any efforts to intervene may well be ineffective. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Wardrop (2001) have also noted that one of the unspoken assumptions about children's experiences of peer victimization is that adjustment difficulties, such as loneliness, would diminish if the bullying could be brought under control. However, according to these researchers, children who move from a victim to a non-victim status do not necessarily report feeling less lonely. This raises the question of whether it might be possible to investigate children's perceptions of their interpersonal world following an experience of victimization and the subsequent application of an interventionist strategy by a teacher. From a phenomenological perspective, it would be of particular interest to examine children's perceptions of the consequences of teacher interventions in response to known cases of bullying.

In conclusion, the experiences of loneliness and peer victimization in primary school children are as yet little understood. This becomes apparent when we consider that at present there have been no qualitative studies of the experience of loneliness and its relation to bullying in children aged six to ten years from an interpersonal perspective. The aim of the present study was to address this issue by investigating the experience of loneliness in primary school children, using the empirical-phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1985). In particular, we aimed to address the following research questions. First, given the opportunity to talk about their time at school, would primary school children be able to give a coherent narrative of the experience of loneliness? Second, what were children's perceptions of the essential interpersonal characteristics of loneliness? Third, what was the perceived relationship between children's experience of loneliness at school and their experience of being bullied? Finally, what is the relationship between the experience of loneliness at school and children's perception of the quality of teacher interventions?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 42 children were interviewed in several schools in the West London, Central London and Brighton areas. There were nine eight-year-olds ( $M = 8$  years, 6 months,  $SD = 4.1$  months), 20 nine-year-olds ( $M = 9$  years, 6 months,  $SD = 3.19$  months) and 13 ten-year-olds ( $M = 10$  years, 4 months,  $SD = 3.64$  months). There were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls in all age groups. Children were from various ethnic backgrounds and levels of economic standing. The largest proportion of children consisted of White-British, followed by smaller groups of Asian, Black-British, Hispanic and Eastern European.

### **Procedure**

Children were interviewed individually in a quiet area of their school for approximately 20 minutes. The interview took a semi-structured format. That is, although children were encouraged to speak freely about their experience of loneliness at school, all children were asked a series of set questions. Some of these questions were direct requests for information about the experiences of loneliness and bullying, and some of the questions were designed to elicit general descriptions of the children's

interpersonal life at school. All questions were carefully phrased in simple language, as follows. First, all children were asked, "Have you ever felt lonely at school?" If a child answered yes to this question, they were then asked to provide a description of their experience of loneliness: "Can you tell me more about your feeling of loneliness?" If the child answered in the negative, they would then be asked to describe their experiences at school in a general way: "Can you tell me what school is like for you?" Next, children were asked, "What happens when you feel lonely at school?" This question allowed us to examine the children's perceptions of the consequences of their experience of loneliness. Furthermore, all children were asked, "Have you ever been bullied at school?" Children who responded in the affirmative to this question were then asked, "Please tell me more about how you were bullied." Children who responded in the negative were then encouraged to describe their friendships and play companions: "Please tell me about your friends at school and the children you play with." Children who described themselves as having been bullied were further asked to explain the consequences to them of experiencing peer aggression. The question was phrased using a temporal marker, as follows: "Can you tell me what happens to you after you are bullied?" Children were also asked to describe how teachers responded to the knowledge that they had been bullied: "What do the teachers do when they find out about the bullying?" as well as to give their perceptions of the consequences of teachers' interventions: "Do you think that what teachers do stops the bullying?"

### **Analysis**

Children's descriptions of loneliness and peer victimization were analysed rigorously according to the systematic steps of the empirical-phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1985), whereby each child's narrative was divided into meaning units. For each transcript, meaning units that repeated material or were considered irrelevant to the experience were eliminated, leaving the most essential and coherent descriptions of the experience of loneliness. The final part of the analysis consisted in the transformation of children's narratives into psychological language, followed by a synthesis of the transformed meaning units into a general description of the situated structure of loneliness. To ensure analytic rigour, we proceeded as follows. Three of the four researchers who were involved in this project carried out the interviews. They also transcribed the recordings and completed all steps of the analysis, as recommended by Giorgi (1985). These analyses were then passed on to the fourth researcher, who then checked that all the transformations of the original narrative had been systematically and reliably carried out. It was also decided that special attention needed to be given to the following procedures: the identification of meaning units and themes, the transformation of children's descriptions into psychological language, and the identification and coding of children's attributions. The rationale for giving special attention to these aspects of the empirical-phenomenological method was to ensure that we were not imposing our own biases or preconceptions onto the data. Thus two researchers were involved in the analysis of each transcript. These researchers had to agree on all the critical aspects of the analysis before it could be considered complete.

As a brief example of the use of the empirical-phenomenological method, we give the following excerpt from one of the interviews. The child being interviewed, "Delta," was one of the youngest participants (aged 8):

Interviewer: Have you ever felt lonely at school?

Delta: Once I was. I was in year two and then, I guess, I just sat down in bench and teacher and I played. I am in year three. I just used to sit in a bench and watch the children play, I didn't really actually play with them. The children didn't really, actually, really want to play with me. No, they didn't. But after I became in, it was the last term I have been in year two, they all came to like me and they all wanted to play with me. And then there was a fight, who wanted to play with me, yes, and that and there is still a fight. It's about who is my friend and who is not!

In this example, we have given the child's narrative in its original form, including grammatical and referential inaccuracies. For example, the meaning of the phrase "but after I became in..." is not immediately clear until the child has completed the sentence, whereupon the interviewer was able to see that it was a reference to the child's integration into play activities with other children. The first step in the empirical-phenomenological method consists in identifying the meaning units, as follows:

1. Once I was. I was in year two
2. and then, I guess, I just sat down in bench and teacher and I played.
3. I am in year three.
4. I just used to sit in a bench and watch the children play
5. I didn't really actually play with them.
6. The children didn't really, actually, really want to play with me. No, they didn't.
7. But after I became in, it was the last term I have been in year two
8. they all came to like me and
9. they all wanted to play with me.
10. And then there was a fight, who wanted to play with me, yes
11. and that and there is still a fight.
12. It's about who is my friend and who is not!

The next step in the analysis consists in identifying those meaning units which are not relevant to the phenomenon under study, in this case, loneliness. In this particular example, it was deemed that all of the meaning units contributed to understanding the child's experience, including the child's indirect references to her age (she was in year three). However, meaning unit 3 was moved to a later sequence for the sake of narrative cohesiveness. Moreover, it is clear that the child's phrasings in meaning unit 6 were repetitious. The next step in the analysis consists in re-describing the child's narrative, leaving only the most essential characteristics of the phenomenon, as follows:



Once, when I was in year two, I just sat down on a bench and teacher and I played. I just used to sit on a bench and watch the children play, I didn't really actually play with them. The children didn't really want to play with me. But in the last term of year two, after I became in [with the other children], they all came to like me and they all wanted to play with me. And then there was a fight about who wanted to play with me, and there is still a fight. It's about who is my friend and who is not!

In the re-description of the child's narrative that we have just given above, it can be seen that redundant statements, as well as repetitions have been eliminated. Moreover, we have made minor grammatical corrections, wherever these did not significantly alter the narrative meanings. The identified themes for this portion of the analysis were *no one to play with*, *peer exclusion* and *friendships (lack of)*. The child's last statement was considered to be an indirect causal attribution and was noted separately as such. That is, the child was claiming that loneliness is about not having any friends. We are now in a position to proceed to the next step of the analysis, which consists in transforming the narrative into simple psychological language. Here, we shift from a first-person account of the phenomenon, to a second-person narrative, as follows:

When Delta was in her second year, she found herself playing with the teacher, but not with other children, as they excluded her from their play activities. Later, the children accepted her into their play circle and competed for her company. Thus, Delta discovered that loneliness was about not having friends to play with.

It can be seen, from the example given above, that the steps of the empirical-phenomenological method engage the researcher in the process of taking a raw narrative, identifying the most essential elements and themes, and re-describing the participant's experience into a more condensed narrative with a psychological content. In the illustrative example given above, we have not provided the last step of the analysis (the general description), as that would involve a complete analysis of the entire transcript. It suffices to note that once the researcher has transformed the participant's entire narrative into a series of transformations into psychological language, these transformations are themselves condensed into a general description that aims to express what is most essential about the participant's overall experience.

However, it must be pointed out that the present study introduced two modifications of the empirical-phenomenological method. First, we gave preference to the use of a semi-structured interview format instead of an unstructured one, as practised by phenomenologists (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas 1994). The rationale for this first modification was that we were interested to go beyond children's descriptions of loneliness. In this way, it was expected that a preliminary model of the development of childhood loneliness at school might emerge. Thus, not only did we keep a careful record of children's responses to each question, but we also took careful note of children's attributions. These included: children's implicit and explicit attributions of causality, attributions of praise and blame, and finally, children's perceptions of the consequences of certain actions (both their own and that of others). Second, an additional step was added to the analysis, which consisted in identifying major themes pertaining to loneliness and children's victimisation experiences. This part of the analysis was completed prior to the transformation of children's narratives into psychological language. The rationale for this second modification comes from a

number of sources. To begin with, there was our own previous research experience using the empirical-phenomenological method, which has as one of its aims to take participants' naïve descriptions of everyday experiences and to transform them into more compact and coherent temporal narratives. We have found that the identification of key narrative themes significantly facilitates this process. Moreover, our thinking was guided by the phenomenological principle that a person's experiences need to be elucidated in the context of their life-world (Schutz, 1997). In our experience the clarification of narrative themes greatly facilitates this aspect of the phenomenological investigation.

## Results

First, we provide descriptive results for the fixed interview questions. Of 41 children who answered the question on loneliness, 33 (80%) claimed to have experienced loneliness at school. Children's accounts of loneliness were confined to playtime (recess), and included descriptions of losing a best friend, of being excluded from play and from interpersonal situations, as well as being inactive and preoccupied with their own thoughts. Twenty-eight (68%) of 41 children described themselves as having been bullied in one form or another. In most cases, bullying took the form of being called names on a regular basis, or of being humiliated in an interpersonal context. But in other cases, bullying escalated to include physical aggression. Overall, out of the 29 reported cases of bullying, teachers intervened on only 18 occasions (62%). However, in almost all cases of non-intervention teachers were simply not aware that bullying had occurred. Nevertheless, children's perceptions of the consequences of teacher interventions were that they were on the whole not effective, except in the short-term. Specifically, only 3 of the 18 cases of teacher interventions were considered to be effective by the children (17%), that is, that bullying did not reoccur.

A careful examination of the descriptions of the loneliness as given by the children revealed that they considered the main characteristic of loneliness to be a lack of interpersonal connectedness. In particular, loneliness for a child consisted in either the lack of a playmate or, more specifically, it was defined as the absence of a very special friend. Shelley, aged 9, described her loneliness such, "Sometimes it's because I'm only really friends with people in my class, and sometimes they're playing games I don't want to play, so I go sit down and think about the day until they play something different." Moreover, children pointed out that loneliness was further associated with boredom, inactivity and a passive attitude to their environment, such that they were little inclined to initiate contact with other children. Coral, aged 10, described this process as:

...being lonely is really boring. In the playground, like it's all right unless we start an argument and then it goes a bit weird...It hasn't happened for absolutely ages but I usually sit on the wall and think about ways to make up.

All descriptions of loneliness were focused on children's interactions in the playground and were not related to events in the classroom.

Children's perceptions of the origins of their experience of loneliness included interpersonal conflict, separation from a special friend and bullying. In most cases, the separation from the special friend was itself a result of complex interpersonal conflicts with other children. For example, some children reported that their special friend had been taken away from them by other children, so that they were left without a regular playmate. Annabel, aged 9, reported:

I get lonely when I'm playing with people and Katy comes and takes them away. She's a student. I'm playing with my best friend and she just pulls my friend away, saying come on let's go and play a game. I play with someone else then.

In some cases, loneliness followed a period of being bullied. A minority of children reported that they would then search for a new companion, but in most cases children described themselves as accepting their situation, even as they fantasised about repairing the friendship or planned new activities to keep themselves busy. Nathaniel, aged 10, gave a good description of this phenomenon:

When I'm bullied, I can't do nothing about it. If I punch them they're just going to give me more than a black eye. Sometimes, they say stuff about me. Sometimes it's just that, but other times they hit me. And then I find myself alone and I go and sit on a bench and watch other people play.

Children's descriptions of the consequences of prolonged loneliness was that it led to new interpersonal difficulties and in some cases, being isolated during playtime made them vulnerable to victimization by other children.

A detailed examination of children's descriptions of bullying revealed four kinds of victimization: ridiculing a child's physical appearance or family name or ethnic origins, physical aggression, malicious gossip and the destruction or stealing of another child's personal property. It is interesting to note that children indicated that being ridiculed was not necessarily an example of bullying, unless it was a regular and persistent event. Casey, aged 10, explained it in the following manner: "I've been called a few names, but not like properly bullied. Properly bullied is when everyone is always horrible to you all the time." Similarly to their descriptions of loneliness, all descriptions of bullying were focused on children's interactions in the playground and free time. Children identified two kinds of situations that sometimes led to bullying: interpersonal conflict and loneliness. A careful examination of children's descriptions of the process of victimisation revealed that these two conditions were related. For example, it sometimes happened that a friendship was ended because of interpersonal conflicts with other children. Then, the child who remained most isolated following the break-up of the friendship became vulnerable to victimization.

In most cases, children informed teachers of their experience of being bullied. In a small number of cases, children unsuccessfully attempted to ignore bullying in the hope that it would end. Others attempted to negotiate a resolution with the bully, with the help of a teacher. Most of the children who claimed no experience of being victimized reported having a large number of friends. Children's descriptions of the consequences of teacher interventions revealed several interesting findings. In most cases of teacher non-intervention, children reported an increase in feelings of loneliness and isolation. Cai, aged 10, gave a moving description of this process:

Teachers don't normally do anything because I don't normally say. I just try my best to ignore it, not that that ever works. No! I just get bullied, so I normally try to find something to do like help out other teachers or something or I just sit in a quiet area and do some drawing. There are some benches I quite often go there. Sometimes if I don't feel like drawing I just walk around in circles.

A small number of children responded to teacher non-intervention by physical retaliation directed at the bullies, a strategy which in most cases succeeded in bringing the pattern of victimization to an end. Most cases of teacher interventions consisted in punishing the children identified as bullies, but this was not perceived by the victims as being an effective strategy in the long-term. A typical description of this situation is given by Luka, aged 9, a victim of peer victimization:

Teachers talk to the bully and they tell them to stop it, but they carry on, so they take them to see miss H [the Head Teacher], and miss H has a talk with them. But they mostly start picking on me more because they know that like I told the teacher. Then, they just think great, now he's told the teacher and they're going to have a word with us. But they just carry on doing it.

Only on the occasions when teachers attempted to implement an interpersonal solution to the victimization, did the bullying cease.

### **Discussion**

Four questions motivated the present study. First, we sought to determine children's understanding of loneliness from their spontaneous narratives. It was found that primary school children described loneliness in ways that are similar to an adult's conception of this phenomenon. In particular, the children experienced loneliness as the absence or loss of a very special relationship, a view which is supported by the psychoanalytic literature (Bowlby, 1969; Fromm-Reichmann 1959). Our second research question concerned the interpersonal characteristics, as well as the possible causal conditions of loneliness as perceived by the children. In our analysis of children's causal attributions, we were guided by the distinction between implicit and explicit causal attributions (Labov, 1997). Implied causality is generated through a series of temporal sequences, whereby one event is indirectly associated with another by means of an action sequence. Thus, Anna, aged 10 was implying that her not coming out to play led to her being teased when she stated:

Once my friends came home to ask about me but I pretended I wasn't there. My mother said 'she's not here. She is not coming out today', and they went. Then the next day I came back to school and they started teasing me.

In contrast, Manon, aged 9, made an explicit causal reference between bullying and loneliness when he said:

Sometimes kids bully me. They push me and call me names. Chicken, they call me chicken most of the time and sometimes they make fun of my surname and that makes me lonely because I haven't got any friends to play with.

Since, according to Labov (1997), implied causality is created primarily for the sake of the narrative structure, we only coded children's explicit causal attributions of causality. On this basis, we found that, besides the loss of a special playmate,

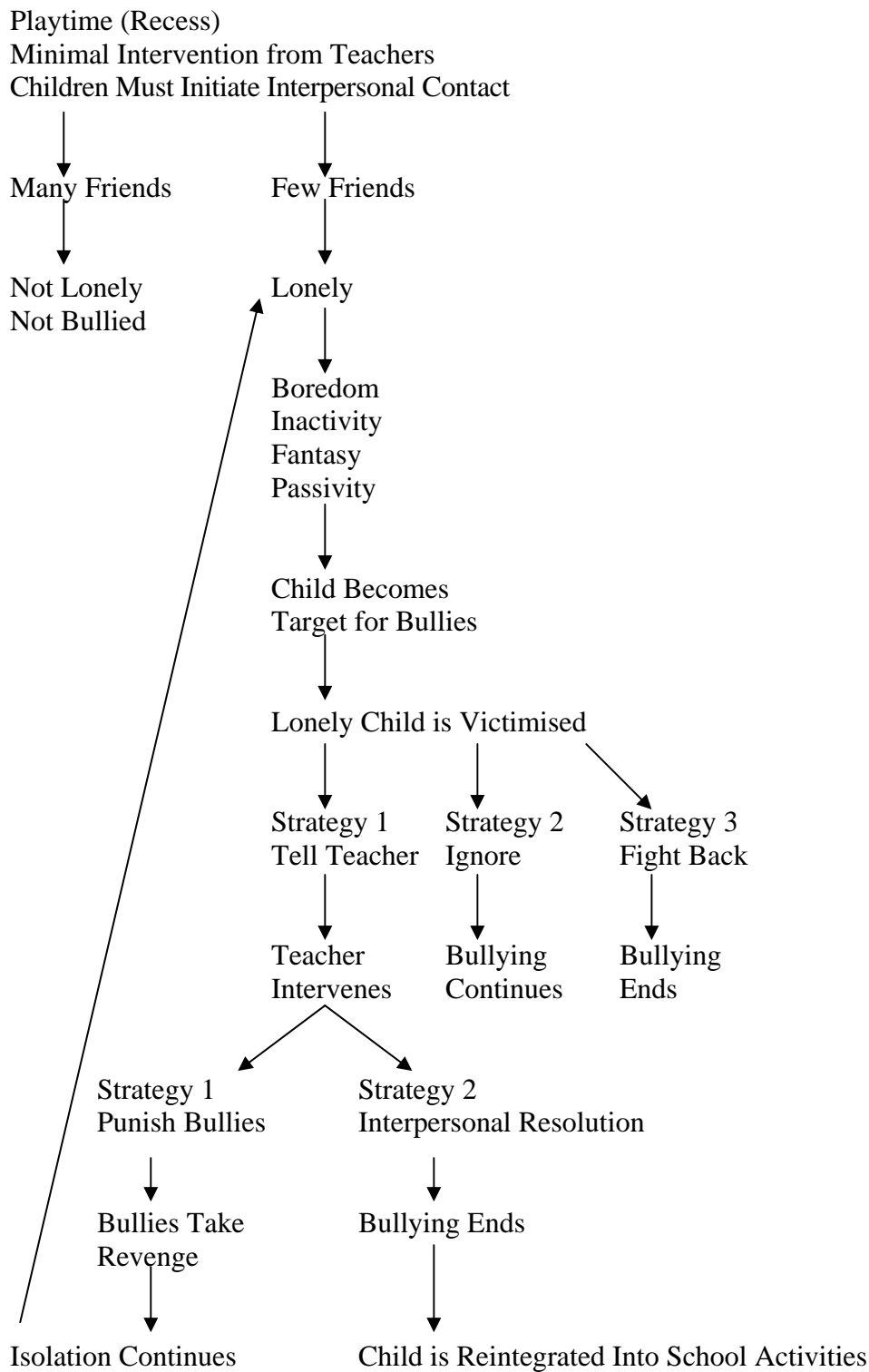
loneliness for children was associated with a passive attitude to their interpersonal environment leading to boredom and inactivity.

Although the absence or loss of a special friend stands out as one of the causal conditions of loneliness, it was interesting to discover that children also perceived a clear association between their experience of loneliness and their experience of being bullied. This finding, which answered our third research question, indirectly supports recent studies by Hart et al. (2000) and Gazelle and Ladd (2003), who have provided evidence for the association between solitude and peer rejection in very young children. Finally, our findings indicated that, given the link between loneliness and bullying, the way in which teachers intervened in cases of bullying had an indirect but powerful influence on children's interpersonal experiences. Nevertheless, although bullying and particular kinds of teacher interventions may have contributed to a child's loneliness, it appears from our findings that it is equally correct to state that loneliness was a contributing factor to children's experience of being bullied. This last observation leads us to hypothesise a dynamic model of the association between loneliness and bullying, based on the findings reported in the previous section.

The proposed developmental model of the association between loneliness, bullying and the quality of teacher interventions is as follows (see Figure 1). At school, playtime (recess) allows children the opportunity to relate to each other with minimal intervention on the part of teachers. This is the time when children must initiate contact with others and negotiate play activities. Children who use this opportunity to establish a wide network of friends or playmates appear to be less vulnerable to loneliness and bullying. In contrast, children who invest in a small network of friends or who are more interested in establishing a special friendship with one other child are more likely to find themselves alone. This may occur because the special friend is away, or it may be the result of an interpersonal conflict such that the special friendship is ended. In the case of an end to the special friendship, a child may experience loneliness, followed by boredom and inactivity. In consequence, the lonely children spend most of their free time at school on their own, lost in their own thoughts, slowly developing a passive attitude to their school environment such that it becomes increasingly more difficult to initiate contact. There comes a point when the child's feelings of loneliness are not likely to be resolved without some intervention from another person.

A child who is perceived by peers to be alone may become the target of bullying, an experience which is likely to lead to an intensification of their experience of loneliness. The experience of peer victimization can take a number of forms. For example, it may be that the lonely child is initially teased, but that this teasing gradually develops into ridiculing the child's appearance or ethnic origins. It may be that peers resort to malicious gossip about the lonely child, which in turn may escalate into sustained physical aggression. But it is equally possible to find cases of bullying that began as physical aggression and later developed into more subtle forms of peer aggression. Once the child has experienced bullying, he or she is faced with the choice of either attempting to resolve the conflict on his or her own, or of informing the teacher. Teachers who fail to intervene and allow the bullying to continue are also contributing to the child's continued experience of loneliness.

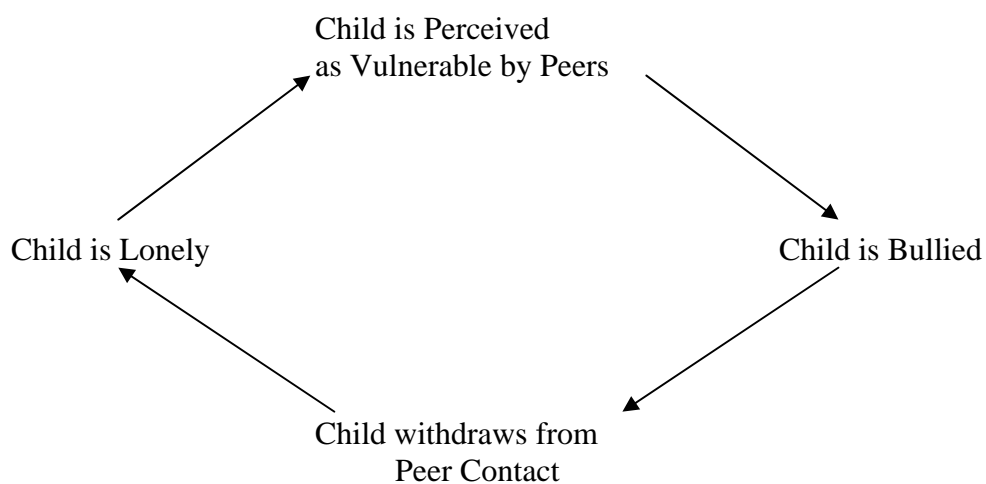
Figure 1. Developmental Model Illustrating the Association Between Children's Experience of Loneliness at School and Bullying Episodes.



Teachers who intervene by punishing the bullies are similarly contributing to the child's experience of loneliness since, according to our findings punishment is not an effective long-term strategy for dealing with instances of peer aggression. It would appear that the only effective teacher interventions are those that attempt an interpersonal resolution between victim and bully.

The developmental model outlined above, on the association between bullying, loneliness and the quality of teacher interventions, has been constructed entirely from a qualitative analysis of children's narratives of their experiences at school. This model has parallels with a recent longitudinal study by Ladd and Troop-Gordon (2003), examining the confluence of early behavioural dispositions, children's beliefs about self and peers, and psychological adjustment problems. Among their more significant findings, Ladd and Troop-Gordon (2003) found an indirect association between chronic friendlessness and loneliness, mediated by children's negative views of self, as well as negative assessments of peers. That is, children's negative views of peers' social orientations towards the self were directly related to loneliness. The researchers also found an indirect association between chronic peer rejection and loneliness, similarly mediated by children's negative views of self and peers. It is interesting to further note that Ladd and Troop-Gordon proposed that their findings indicate both direct and indirect relationship between peer victimization and loneliness. However, it must be pointed out that where Ladd and Troop-Gordon hypothesize a unidirectional account of the influence of peer victimization on children's experiences of loneliness, our findings suggest a bi-directional influence (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Diagrammatic Representation of Bi-Directional Influence (Loneliness and Bullying).



Moreover, the Ladd and Troop-Gordon model describes the mediating influences in cognitive terms, whereas our model examines the interpersonal action strategies that children resort to in response to both loneliness and peer bullying.

The above observations therefore suggest that our model is in need of further empirical testing and there are a number of questions that may be raised at this point. Focusing on the experience of loneliness, one could enquire further into the links between children's strategies for choosing friendships and their family background.

Similarly, one could examine cross-cultural differences in the way children's friendships are established and the way that loneliness is experienced and coped with (Rokach & Neto, 2000; Rokach, Bacanli & Ramberan, 2000). One very important question raised by the present study is a methodological one, concerning the extent to which children's descriptions of their interpersonal experiences can be relied upon. For example, according to our findings 68% of all children claimed to have experienced some bullying at school. This figure appears to be rather high when compared to other studies in the literature, where the estimated rate of peer victimization has rarely exceeded 30% (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996a). Given this discrepancy, it could be argued that children have an understanding of bullying that is very wide and includes all forms of victimization. On this argument, children would not as yet have a clear understanding of what constitutes bullying. However, a careful examination of the transcripts indicated that children as young as eight years do indeed understand the concept of bullying and are fully aware of how bullying differs from other forms of interpersonal tension. An alternative and more plausible explanation is that previous studies have reported instances of peer victimization among older children, whereas the present study has focused on a much younger group. It may well be that higher estimates of victimization are to be found among children in the younger grades or that the high estimates obtained in the present study are due to the use of the phenomenological interview.

Reflecting on the overall process of researching children's interpersonal worlds as carried out in this project, we would like to comment on two issues, which for us represent major areas of learning as researchers. First, it strikes us from reading and working with children's narratives that their understanding of the experiences of loneliness at school has been greatly underestimated by contemporary developmental research. Moreover, developmental research in general attempts to understand children's knowledge-base as if it were independent of the intersubjective world of shared meanings. This observation leads us to propose that developmentalists interested in researching children's subjective understandings of interpersonal relations need, first and foremost, to undertake a life-world analysis (Schutz, 1997) that clarifies the taken-for-granted aspects of their everyday experiences. Second, it appears to us that although we were on the whole pleased with the modifications that we introduced to the empirical-phenomenological method, in the course of this research we became aware of a new difficulty. The empirical-phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1985) is based on the assumption that, before a more condensed and coherent narrative can be obtained from the participant's original narrative, the original must be broken down into component parts (the meaning units). However, it appears to us that the process by which the new narrative is arrived at does not in any way resemble the way the participant spontaneously constructs meaning in everyday life. In our view, this constitutes a major weakness to the empirical-phenomenological method, as it is applied in contemporary psychological research. This observation raises the possibility of searching for new ways by which children's narratives could be analysed (Labov, 1997; Labov and Waletzky, 1967). As a consequence of the present research, it is now our intention to develop a new empirical-phenomenological method of working with participants' descriptions of everyday experiences, in a way that would respect and capture their spontaneous attempts to communicate meanings (Berguno, 2003).

In summary, the present study set out to investigate children's understanding of loneliness at school. It was discovered that children as young as eight years have a clear understanding of loneliness and that the experience of loneliness is associated with particular interpersonal events. Specifically, children who invest in very few friendships are more likely to experience loneliness at school. Similarly, children who are bullied are



more likely to become and remain isolated. An interesting finding was that teachers who are aware that a particular child is being bullied and who decide to intervene, are more often than not contributing to the child's experience of loneliness in indirect ways. A developmental model of the association between loneliness, bullying and the quality of teacher interventions was proposed and discussed.

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