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Abstract

Addressing the impact of peer bystanders on school bullying, this cross-sectional study examined whether student responses to bullying that they witnessed varied as a function of sex and grade. In a school-based survey regarding social experiences at school, Grade 4 to 11 students ($N = 9397$, 51% male) who reported witnessing bullying (68%) rated how often they had engaged in different bystander responses. Results indicated significant differences across sex and grade level, such that younger students and girls were more likely to report taking positive action than were older students and boys by directly intervening, helping the victim, or talking to an adult. Generally, boys and girls were equally likely to report that they *ignored or avoided the person(s) who bullied* although reports that they *did nothing* increased with grade level. Implications for schoolwide antibullying intervention efforts are discussed.

Résumé

Abordant l'impact des pairs témoins de l'intimidation à l'école, cette étude transversale examine si la réponse des élèves à l'intimidation à laquelle ils assistent varie en fonction du sexe et du degré de scolarité. Dans un questionnaire distribué en milieu scolaire sur les expériences sociales à l'école, les élèves de 4^e à 11^e année ($N = 9,397$, 51% masculin) qui rapportent avoir été témoins d'intimidation (68%) ont évalué la fréquence à laquelle ils s'engagent dans différents types de réponses. Les

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résultats montrent des différences significatives entre le sexe et le degré de scolarité. En effet, les élèves plus jeunes et les filles rapportent plus souvent recourir à des actions positives que ne le font les élèves plus vieux et les garçons, en intervenant directement, en aidant la victime ou en parlant à un adulte. Les garçons et les filles de tous les degrés de scolarité rapportent dans la même proportion qu'ils ignorent ou évitent la personne qui se fait intimider, bien que la proportion de ceux qui rapportent qu'ils ne font rien augmente avec le degré de scolarité. Les implications pour les efforts de prévention de l'intimidation dans les écoles sont discutées.

Keywords

bullying, victimization, bystander, witness

Bullying, a unique form of aggression (Olweus, 1996), is a problem that affects an entire school community (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Rates of reported bullying and victimization vary as a function of context (e.g., country, school) and sex, but results of several studies indicate that one third or more of students are directly involved as bullies, victims, or both (Craig & Harel, 2004; Currie et al., 2008; Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001; Olweus, 1996; Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD] 1997/1998; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2007), with serious, long-term social, emotional, and academic consequences for both bullies and victims (McDougall, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2008; Nansel et al., 2001; Nansel, Overpeck, Haynie, Ruan, & Scheidt, 2003; Olweus, 1993). Bullying is clearly embedded within the culture of all schools (Jalon, 2006), with a typical elementary classroom containing at least one or two victims (Schuster, 1999).

Children who bully and those who are victimized are not the only individuals implicated, however. Researchers have long recognized that bullying is a group phenomenon (e.g., Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli, 1999; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009) occurring in a social context involving bystanders as well as bullies and victims. Most, if not all, members of the peer group are well aware that bullying takes place (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). Observational research by Craig and Pepler (1997) showed that, among elementary students, peers were present in 85% of bullying incidents, and survey research indicates that the majority of students report that they witnessed school bullying (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). In two Canadian studies, 60% of students in Grades 3 to 6 reported witnessing verbal bullying in the past four weeks (Aboud & Miller, 2007), and 87% of students in Grades 8 to 10 reported witnessing bullying at school in the past year (Bonanno & Hymel, 2006a, 2006b).

Unfortunately, the presence of other students is not sufficient to inhibit bullying. Rather, one of the core features of bullying is that it is maintained by the indirect involvement of others (Jalon, 2006), with bystanders often behaving in ways that support or encourage bullying, either actively or passively (e.g., Doll, Song, & Siemers, 2004; Pellegrini & Long, 2004). Indeed, although elementary students are present in

85% of bullying episodes, observational research shows that they intervened on behalf of victims in only 25% of bullying incidents, and spent most of their time passively watching (54%) or actively joining the bullies (21%; Craig & Pepler, 1997; O'Connell et al., 1999). Similarly, student perceptions of bystander behaviour indicate that a small but significant minority acts in ways that actively encourages bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Salmivalli, 1999). Among sixth graders, 20% of peers were identified by peers as "Reinforcers" who actively encouraged the bully and another 7% as "Assistants" or followers of the bully. Only 17% of students were recognized by peers as "Defenders" who intervened on behalf of victims, and the largest proportion of peers (24%) were seen as passive "Outsiders". Although these participant roles appear to be relatively stable over time, the percentage of "Outsiders" increased with age (e.g., 24% to 30%, Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998). Although passive, the presence of these bystanders may nevertheless encourage bullying, sending a silent message that such behaviour is acceptable.

A few studies have addressed the strategies bystanders use when they do intervene in bullying situations. Rocke Henderson (2002) found that Canadian students described a variety of strategies for dealing with bullying, with the most common strategies being *talking to the bully* and *supporting the victim* (both mentioned by 18% of students), followed by *direct intervention*, *seeking adult involvement* and *inaction* (13% each). In England and Japan, students generated three major bystander responses: *take direct action/get involved* (endorsed by 66% of the sample), *seek help from teachers, parents, or friends* (39%), and *support the victim* (21%; Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006).

Although bystanders can respond in various ways, little is known about the factors that impact their choice of reactions. With regard to age and sex differences, previous research indicates that secondary students report significantly lower rates of intervention than elementary students (Stevens, Van Oost, & de Bourdeaudhuij, 2000) and that girls are more likely to defend victims and less likely to reinforce bullies than boys (Rocke Henderson, 2002; Salmivalli et al., 1996). Observational research indicates that Grade 4 to 6 boys were more likely to reinforce the bully, whereas Grade 1 to 3 boys and Grade 4 to 6 girls were more likely to support the victim (O'Connell et al., 1999). Extending these findings, the present cross-sectional study evaluated grade and sex differences in bystanders' responses to bullying across a broad age range (Grades 4-11). Consistent with previous studies, more prosocial bystander responses (e.g., helping the victim) were expected from girls than boys. Active intervention efforts were expected to decrease with age, as reports of nonintervention increased.

Method

Procedure

As part of a districtwide initiative to monitor school safety and social experiences, students from an entire school district were asked to complete an extensive survey developed by the district in consultation with academic researchers and administered

by classroom teachers. Parents were informed of the survey through Parent Advisory Council meetings, newsletters, and computer announcements. All students present on a specified testing date completed the survey. Students whose parents withdrew consent or who themselves withdrew were excluded without penalty.

Participants

Students from 28 elementary schools (Grades 4-7) and 10 secondary schools (Grades 8-12) in a mostly suburban district in western Canada were asked to complete a survey regarding their social experiences at school. A total of 10,422 students (49% girls, 50% boys, 1% did not report gender) out of 13,044 (80%) completed the survey. Grade 12 students ($N = 915$) were excluded, given their reduced participation rate relative to other grades. The final sample included 9,397 students (51% male, 49% female, 62% elementary; 38% secondary) divided into four grade pairs (Grades 4-5, 1,147 male, 1,103 female; Grades 6-7, 1,187 male, 1,116 female; Grades 8-9, 1,213 male, 1,256 female; and Grades 10-11, 1,214 male, 1,104 female) that preserved the existing transition between elementary (Grade 7) and secondary schools (Grade 8). The final sample was racially diverse: 44% White, 16% Mixed, 13% Asian, 6% Middle Eastern, 2% Aboriginal, 2% Latin American, 2% South Asian, 1% African/Caribbean, 12% "Don't Know," and 2% not reporting their racial/ethnic background.

Measures

The present study considered student reports of their experiences with bullying and victimization, and how they respond to bullying witnessed at school. Following Vaillancourt et al. (2008), students were given a written definition of bullying and asked about the frequency with which they (a) had been bullied by other students this school year and (b) had taken part in bullying others this school year, for each of four different forms of bullying—physical, verbal, social and cyber bullying—with examples provided of each type. Responses were made on a 4-point scale¹ (*never, once or a few times, about once a month, every week or more, many times a week*), with higher scores reflecting greater involvement as a victim or bully, respectively.

When asked if they had witnessed bullying at school, approximately one third of students at each grade indicated that they had *not* "seen others being picked on, discriminated against, bullied, harassed or attacked" at school or school events.² Those students (68%) who had witnessed bullying were asked to rate how often they engaged in each of 16 bystander responses (*never, hardly ever, some of the time, most of the time, always*), with higher scores reflecting greater endorsement of a particular response.

Given the number of bystander responses considered, initial efforts focused on data reduction. Although factor analytic results did not support a clear factor structure, correlational analyses were used to identify overlapping responses. Highly correlated item pairs (Pearson's $r > 0.60$) were averaged into composite indices, resulting in 12 bystander response categories. The strategies *talked to an adult at home, reported it*

to an adult at school and talked to an adult at school, $r(7169) = 0.78, p < .05$; $r(7157) = 0.78, p < .05$; $r(7170) = 0.87, p < .05$, were combined into the composite *talked to an adult*. *Helped the victim get away and talked to the victim after*, $r(7177) = 0.64, p < .05$, were combined into the composite *helped the victim*. *Told the person doing the bullying to stop and talked to the person(s) doing the bullying*, $r(7365) = 0.64$ were combined into the composite *told the bully to stop*. Students responded to nine other strategies including *talked to the bully's friends, walked away, ignored or avoided the person(s) who bullied, did something to distract the person(s) who bullied, got your friends to help solve the problem, got your friends to get back at the person(s), stayed home from school, talked to another teen/youth about it, and did nothing*.

Results

Experiences With Bullying and Victimization

As shown in Table 1, verbal and social bullying and victimization were more frequently reported than physical and cyber bullying in the present sample. Results of independent t tests revealed significant sex differences in student reports of bullying and victimization (Bonferroni correction $\alpha = .006$). Boys reported engaging in significantly more physical, verbal, and cyber bullying than girls, whereas girls reported more social bullying. Boys also reported significantly more physical and verbal victimization than girls, who reported more social victimization. Boys and girls were equally likely to report being a victim of cyber bullying.

Bystander Responses

To evaluate variations in bystander responses as a function of sex or grade, separate 2 (Sex) \times 4 (Grade group) univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted for each of the 12 bystander responses (Bonferroni correction $\alpha = .004$). As shown in Table 2, results indicated significant sex differences for 8 of the 12 response categories although two of these effects were qualified by significant grade \times sex interactions. Boys were significantly more likely than girls to report that they *got their friends to get back at the bully*. Girls, in contrast, were significantly more likely to report that they *told the bully to stop, talked to the bully's friends, helped the victim, got friends to help solve the problem, and talked to another teen/youth*. Boys and girls were equally likely to report that they *walked away, ignored/avoided the bully, or distracted the bully*.

As shown in Table 3, significant main effects for grade were observed for 8 of the 12 responses although four of these effects were qualified by significant interactions. Follow-up, post hoc analyses (Scheffé, $\alpha = .004$) indicated that older students were less likely to report that they *told the bully to stop or talked to an adult* compared to younger students. In contrast, students in higher grades were more likely to report that they *walked away, got friends to get back at the bully, and did nothing*, relative to students in lower grades. Students across grade levels were equally likely to report

Table 1. Frequency and Sex Differences in Student Reports of Victimization and Bullying

	<i>n</i>	Percentage of students				Sex differences			
		Never (%)	Once or a few times (%)	Once a month (%)	Once a week or more (%)	<i>t</i> value (<i>df</i>)	Effect Size (η^2)	Males <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Females <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Victimization									
Physical	9,116	67	25	4	4	20.34 (8331)*	0.42	1.60 (0.84)	1.29 (0.60)
Verbal	9,096	37	41	10	12	6.95 (9043)*	0.15	2.04 (1.02)	1.89 (0.92)
Social	9,073	49	36	8	7	-7.89 (9070)*	-0.17	1.67 (0.90)	1.82 (0.88)
Cyber	9,079	88	8	2	2	-0.89 (9069)	-0.02	1.17 (0.55)	1.18 (0.52)
Bullying									
Physical	8,921	79	17	2	2	20.19 (7536)*	0.43	1.39 (0.69)	1.14 (.43)
Verbal	8,907	54	37	5	4	14.09 (8578)*	0.29	1.71 (0.84)	1.49 (0.68)
Social	8,901	63	29	4	3	-5.22 (8898)*	-0.11	1.43 (0.72)	1.51 (0.71)
Cyber	8,917	92	6	1	1	4.36 (8275)*	0.09	1.13 (0.51)	1.09 (0.37)

*Significant at $\alpha = .006$, with Bonferroni correction.

Table 2. Frequency and Sex Differences in Student Endorsement of Bystander Responses

Bystander response	<i>n</i>	Percentage of students endorsing response					Sex differences			
		Never (%)	Hardly ever (%)	Some of the time (%)	Most of the time (%)	Always (%)	<i>F</i> value (<i>df</i> ₁ , <i>df</i> ₂)	Effect size (η^2)	Males <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Females <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Told the bully to stop	6,784	11	17	35	24	13	87.11 (1, 6776)*	0.013	2.81 (1.14)	3.05 (1.08)
Talked to the bully's friends	6,748	42	25	20	9	4	59.25 (1, 6740)*	0.009	1.99 (1.15)	2.20 (1.16)
Walked away	6,781	26	27	28	13	6	0.03 (1, 6773)	0	2.48 (1.21)	2.46 (1.14)
Ignored or avoided the bully	6,746	28	23	28	14	7	0.97 (1, 6738)	0	2.49 (1.26)	2.50 (1.21)
Distracted the bully	6,612	41	23	24	8	4	2.84 (1, 6604)	0	2.13 (1.17)	2.05 (1.09)
Helped the victim	6,607	10	12	29	31	18	174.14 (1, 6599)*	0.26	3.00 (1.18)	3.35 (1.10)
Got friends to help solve the problem	6,661	26	20	27	18	9	195.35 (1, 6653)*	0.29	2.43 (1.27)	2.85 (1.26)
Got friends to get back at the bully	6,669	55	23	13	5	4	55.91 (1, 6661)*	0.008	1.90 (1.17)	1.69 (0.99)
Stayed home from school	6,693	87	7	4	1	1	4.22 (1, 6685)	0.001	1.25 (0.73)	1.22 (0.69)
Talked to another teen/youth about it	6,663	37	20	23	13	7	181.86 (1, 6655)*	0.27	2.14 (1.24)	2.54 (1.31)
Talked to an adult	6,550	33	22	21	13	11	44.21 (1, 6542)*	0.007	2.18 (1.27)	2.38 (1.29)
Did nothing	6,699	46	23	18	9	4	30.81 (1, 6691)*	0.005	2.09 (1.33)	1.91 (1.07)

*Significant at $\alpha = .004$, with Bonferroni correction.

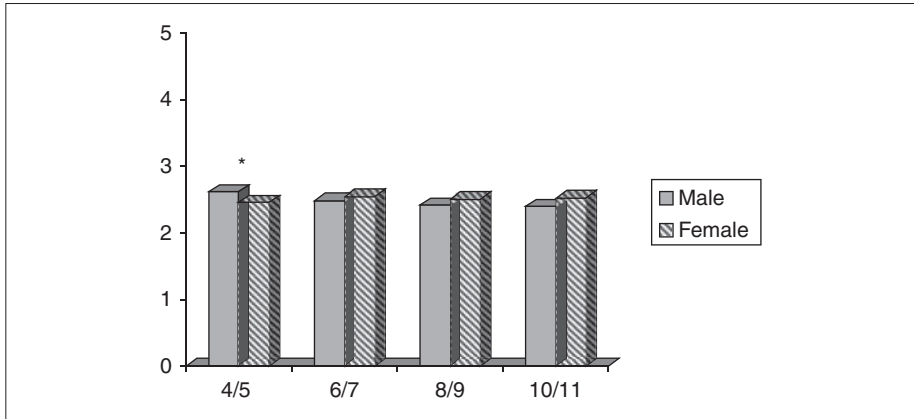


Figure 1. Grade and sex differences for *ignored or avoided the bully*
 *Significant sex difference within grade level at $\alpha = .008$

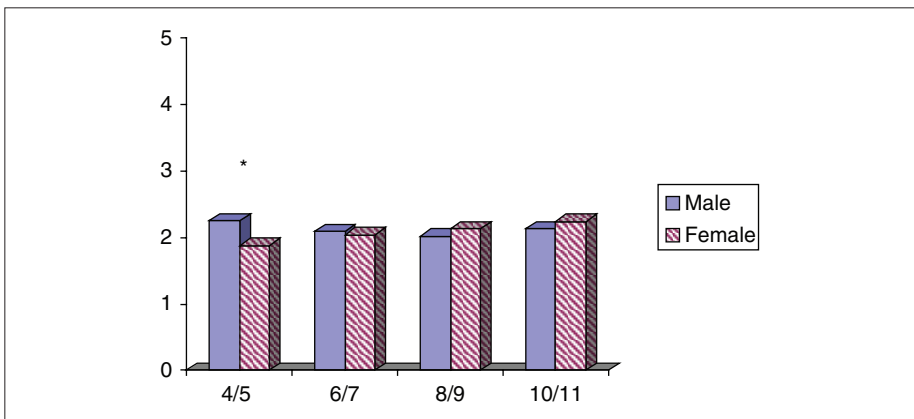


Figure 2. Grade and sex differences for *distracted the bully*
 *Significant sex difference within grade level at $\alpha = .008$

that they *talked to the bully's friends, ignored or avoided the bully, distracted the bully, and stayed home from school.*

Significant grade by sex interactions were found for 6 of the 12 bystander responses (Figures 1-6): *distracted the bully*, $F(3, 6604) = 16.93, \eta^2 = .008$; *helped the victim*, $F(3, 6599) = 4.08, \eta^2 = .008$; *got friends to help solve the problem*, $F(3, 6653) = 7.30, \eta^2 = .003$; *talked to another teen/youth*, $F(3, 6655) = 9.68, \eta^2 = .004$; and *did nothing*, $F(3, 6691) = 3.20, \eta^2 = .001$. A significant interaction was also observed for *ignored or avoided the bully*, $F(3, 6738) = 5.05, \eta^2 = .002$, despite nonsignificant main effects.

To interpret these interactions, two sets of follow-up analyses were conducted ($\alpha = .008$). First, a series of independent *t* tests were conducted examining sex differences

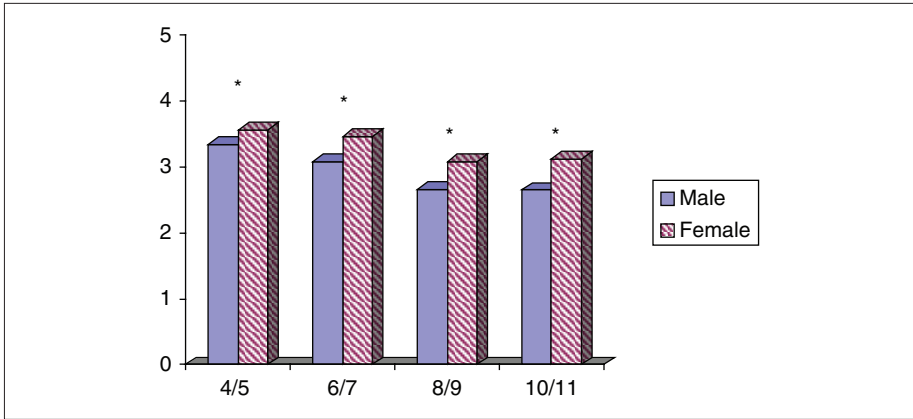


Figure 3. Grade and sex differences for *helped the victim*
 *Significant sex difference within grade level at $\alpha = .008$

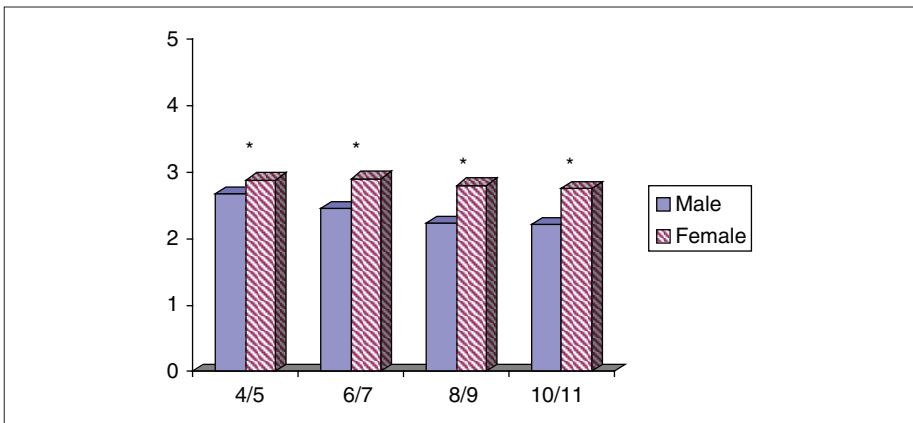


Figure 4. Grade and sex differences for *got friends to help solve the problem*
 *Significant sex difference within grade level at $\alpha = .008$

within grade level for the six bystander responses. Consistent with the reported sex main effects, results indicated that female students at all grade levels were more likely to report that they *helped the victim*, Grade 4/5, $t(1949) = -4.29$; Grade 6/7, $t(2121) = -7.81$; Grade 8/9, $t(1264) = -6.49$; Grade 10/11, $t(1254) = -8.00$; *got friends to help solve the problem*, Grade 4/5, $t(1976) = -3.49$; Grade 6/7, $t(2121) = -8.33$; Grade 8/9, $t(1287) = -8.26$; Grade 10/11, $t(1257) = -8.31$; and *talked to another teen/youth*, Grade 4/5, $t(1962) = -2.69$; Grade 6/7, $t(2091) = -8.09$; Grade 8/9, $t(1281) = -7.67$; Grade 10/11, $t(1259) = -8.53$. Boys in Grade 4/5 were more likely to report that they *distracted the bully*, $t(1925) = 6.88$ and *ignored or avoided the bully*, $t(2003) = 2.67$, than girls, but thereafter, boys and girls were equally likely to report using these strategies:

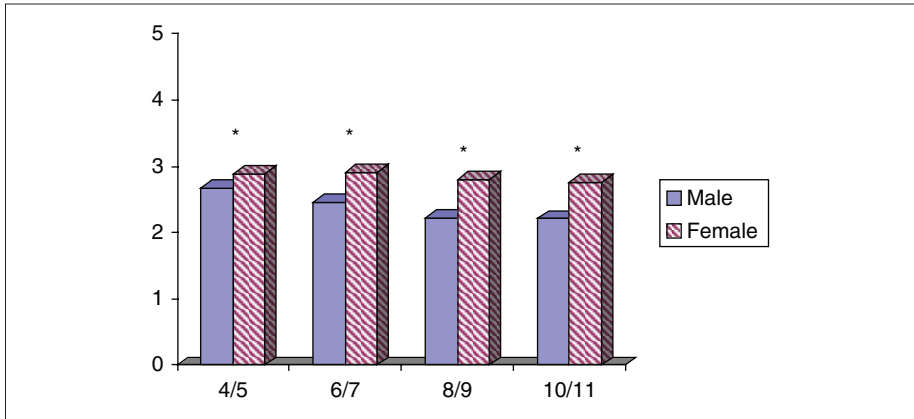


Figure 5. Grade and sex differences for talked to another teen/youth
 *Significant sex difference within grade level at $\alpha = .008$

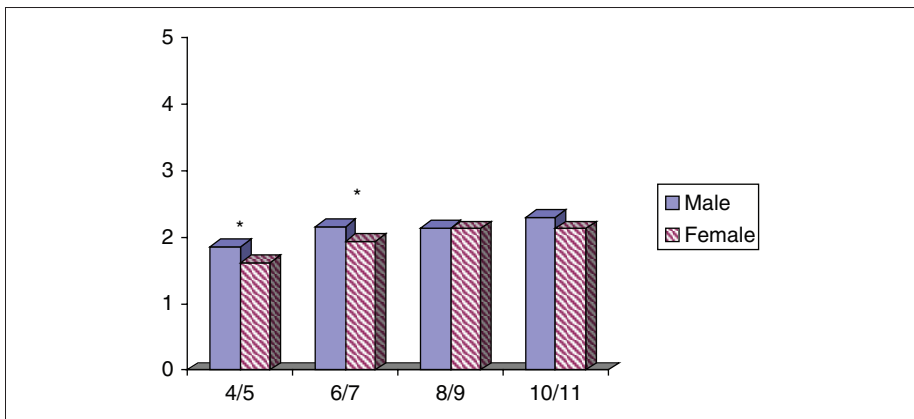


Figure 6. Grade and sex differences for did nothing
 *Significant sex difference within grade level at $\alpha = .008$

distracted the bully, Grade 6/7, $t(2117) = 1.07, ns$; Grade 8/9, $t(1270) = -1.88, ns$; Grade 10/11, $t(1259) = -1.80, ns$; ignored or avoided the bully, Grade 6/7 $t(2166) = -1.23, ns$; Grade 8/9 $t(1297) = -1.44, ns$; Grade 10/11 $t(1271) = -2.04, ns$. Also consistent with the sex main effects, elementary school boys (Grades 4 to 7) were more likely to report that they *did nothing* compared to girls, Grade 4/5 $t(1932) = 5.31$; Grade 6/7 $t(2139) = 4.37$, whereas male and female secondary students were equally likely to endorse this strategy, Grade 8/9, $t(1260) = 0.18, ns$; Grade 10/11, $t(1256) = 2.42, ns$.

Second, a series of one-way ANOVA's were conducted to examine grade differences separately for boys and girls ($\alpha = .008$). As shown in Figures 1 to 6, for boys, significant grade effects were found for the strategies *ignored or avoided the bully*,

$F(3, 3449) = 5.66$; *distracted the bully*, $F(3, 3449) = 5.98$; *helped the victim*, $F(3, 3395) = 70.22$; *got friends to help solve the problem*, $F(3, 3405) = 24.54$; *talked to another teen/youth*, $F(3, 3406) = 3.39$; and *did nothing*, $F(3, 3420) = 20.65$. Further post hoc analyses (Scheffé's, $\alpha = .008$) revealed that older boys were significantly less likely to report that they *ignored or avoided the bully*, *distracted the bully*, *helped the victim*, and *got friends to help solve the problem*, but significantly more likely to report that they *did nothing*. The strategy *talked to another teen/youth*, $F(3, 3406) = 3.39$, *ns*, did not vary significantly as a function of grade level for boys.

For girls, significant univariate effects of grade were obtained for the strategies *distracted the bully*, $F(3, 3204) = 14.88$, *helped the victim*, $F(3, 3204) = 37.62$, *talked to another teen/youth*, $F(3, 3249) = 15.68$, and *did nothing*, $F(3, 3271) = 47.31$. Girls' endorsement of *ignored or avoided the bully*, $F(3, 3289) = 1.00$, *ns*, and *got friends to help solve the problem*, $F(3, 3248) = 2.13$, *ns*, did not vary across grade levels. Further post hoc analyses (Scheffé's, $\alpha = .008$) demonstrated that, with increasing grade level, girls were more likely to report that they *did nothing*, *distracted the bully*, and *talked to another student* about what they saw. In contrast, older girls were significantly less likely to report that they *helped the victim*.

Discussion

The results of the present investigation demonstrate that the behaviour of witnesses to bullying varies considerably as a function of both grade and sex.

A primary focus of this study was how bystander responses changed with grade. Cross-sectional differences were observed for 9 of the 12 bystander responses considered. Generally, younger students were more willing to take direct, positive action against bullying than older students, while reports of passive or aggressive bystander responses increased with grade level. Interestingly, elementary students (i.e., Grades 4-5) were more likely to report directly intervening in ways that would be recommended by adults, including telling the bully to stop, helping the victim, or talking to an adult at home or school. Older, secondary students were less likely to endorse these strategies and were more likely to report walking away or doing nothing. Older students were also more likely to report that they got friends to get back at the bully, an indirect and retaliatory strategy. What is not clear from these data is whether the cross-sectional differences observed reflect age-related changes in behaviour within the individual. Longitudinal studies replicating these findings are an important area for future research. Still, these results suggest that as students move from elementary to secondary school, their bystander responses become increasingly passive and less directly involved, unless to seek retaliation. These observed developmental patterns, however, varied across boys and girls.

With regard to sex differences, the present results both replicate and extend previous research on bystander behaviour. Specifically, boys and girls in the present study were equally likely to report that they *walked away* or *ignored/avoided the bully* although boys were more likely than girls to report that they *did nothing*. In contrast, using peer

Table 3. Grade Differences in Bystander Responses

Bystander Response	Grade Differences						Significant Post Hoc Effects
	F-value (df ₁ , df ₂)	Effect size (η^2)	4/5 M (SD)	6/7 M (SD)	8/9 M (SD)	10/11 M (SD)	
Told the bully to stop	71.71 (3, 6776)*	0.03	3.14 (1.15)	3.01 (1.09)	2.66 (1.09)	2.72 (1.05)	4/5 > 6/7 > 8/9, 10/11
Talked to the bully's friends	0.93 (3, 6740)	0	2.07 (1.23)	2.09 (1.16)	2.09 (1.11)	2.13 (1.10)	All ns
Walked away	16.76 (3, 6773)*	0.007	2.34 (1.23)	2.47 (1.16)	2.50 (1.13)	2.63 (1.07)	4/5 < 6/7, 8/9, 10/11 6/7 < 10/11
Ignored or Avoided the bully	1.72 (3, 6738)	0.001	2.53 (1.36)	2.51 (1.23)	2.45 (1.15)	2.45 (1.12)	All ns
Distracted the bully	3.67 (3, 6604)	0.002	2.07 (1.20)	2.07 (1.11)	2.08 (1.09)	2.18 (1.11)	All ns
Helped the victim	104.39 (3, 6599)*	0.05	3.45 (1.15)	3.26 (1.12)	2.87 (1.16)	2.88 (1.10)	4/5 > 6/7 > 8/9, 10/11
Got friends to help solve the problem	19.06 (3, 6653)*	0.009	2.78 (1.34)	2.66 (1.27)	2.52 (1.27)	2.47 (1.19)	4/5 > 8/9, 10/11 6/7 > 10/11
Got friends to get back at the bully	24.84 (3, 6661)*	0.01	1.64 (1.05)	1.79 (1.10)	1.93 (1.12)	1.91 (1.08)	4/5 < 6/7, 8/9, 10/11 6/7 < 8/9
Stayed home from school	3.82 (3, 6685)	0.002	1.21 (0.69)	1.22 (0.70)	1.28 (0.73)	1.27 (0.70)	All ns
Talked to another teen/youth	10.56 (3, 6655)*	0.005	2.28 (1.33)	2.28 (1.26)	2.34 (1.28)	2.50 (1.27)	4/5, 6/7 < 10/11
Talked to an adult	437.06 (3, 6542)*	0.17	3.00 (1.34)	2.28 (1.25)	1.74 (0.94)	1.70 (0.93)	4/5 > 6/7 > 8/9, 10/11
Did nothing	60.52 (3, 6691)*	0.26	1.73 (1.06)	2.05 (1.16)	2.13 (1.20)	2.23 (1.17)	4/5 > 6/7, 8/9, 10/11 6/7 > 10/11

*Significant at $\alpha = .004$, with Bonferroni correction.

assessment data, Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) found that girls were more likely than boys to be viewed as “outsiders” by peers, passively responding to observed bullying, or not responding at all. This discrepancy across studies is likely attributable to methodological differences. Salmivalli et al. (1996, 1998) used peer assessments to categorize students into one of six distinct participant roles, and two of the roles that were more common among boys than girls involved directly supporting the bullying (i.e., “reinforcer” and “assistant”). In the present study, students were able to report on the degree to which they utilized multiple bystander responses, but pro-bullying responses were not options provided to students. Given these variations, it is not surprising that boys in the present study were more likely than girls to report that they *did nothing*.

Salmivalli and colleagues also found that girls were more likely than boys to be cast in the role of “Defender” by peers, suggesting more active bystander involvement. Similarly, in this study girls were more likely than boys to report telling others about the bullying that they observed and to attempt to deal with the problem by addressing the students involved. Specifically, girls were more likely to report that they directly confronted the bully, helped the victim, or sought help from their friends. Thus across studies and methodologies, female students are more likely to engage in prosocial responses aimed at supporting the victim or reducing bullying behaviour than male students. Further research is needed to determine the factors underlying these sex differences.

Extending previous research, the present study further examined how sex differences in bystander behaviour varied across grades. Consistent with previous findings (O’Connell et al., 1999; Salmivalli et al., 1996), girls across grade levels were more likely to stand up for the victim than boys. However, similar to boys, as girls moved from elementary to secondary school their prosocial helping behaviour decreased significantly. Moreover, with increasing grade level, girls were more likely to endorse indirect bystander strategies such as soliciting help from friends, talking to peers, and distracting the bully. In contrast, older boys were less likely to distract the bully and less inclined to seek help from their friends. In general, sex differences in bystander responses remained relatively stable across grade levels, with two exceptions. Among younger students (Grade 4/5) boys were more likely than girls to report that they tried to distract and ignore/avoid the bully. However, among older students (Grades 6-11), boys and girls were equally likely to endorse these strategies.

Relative to elementary school boys, secondary school boys were increasingly disengaged and passive in their bystander responses. Although girls intervened less frequently as grade level increased, they continued to be more likely than boys to report helping when they witnessed bullying. However, secondary school girls adopted more indirect strategies of intervention, such as talking to other students or trying to distract the bully. Such changes could reflect girls’ preference for preserving relationships by avoiding direct conflict with others. Older girls may also be more skilled in implementing more indirect methods of helping the victim. The shift from direct intervention strategies (i.e., *telling the bully to stop, helping the victim, talking to an adult*) to more indirect strategies (i.e., *distracting the bully, talking to a friend*) appears to be a

“slippery slope” for bystanders. Indirect strategies may imply less individual responsibility for intervention or may lower expectations that one’s intervention will be effective, which could explain why the tendency to do nothing in response to bullying increased significantly with grade for both boys and girls.

Several limitations to this study should be acknowledged. First, this study relied on student self-reports, based on retrospective accounts of the strategies that they used to address bullying at school. Also, only a limited number of bystander responses were considered ($n = 12$); notably absent were responses that supported bullying (i.e., “assistant” and “reinforcer” roles in the Salmivalli et al., 1996 research). Although self-report data can be influenced by social desirability and retrospective accounts can be vulnerable to memory biases, the consistency of findings across studies employing both observational (Craig & Pepler, 1997; O’Connell et al., 1999) and peer assessment methodologies (Salmivalli et al., 1996) suggests that the effects reported here are meaningful and replicable and lends confidence to the validity of the present findings. Future research would benefit from continued use of multiple methodological approaches to fully appreciate the range of bystander responses available to students.

The consistency of findings across studies also speaks to the relative importance of the present findings. Overall, the effect sizes observed in the present study were small, ranging from 0.001 to 0.17 across bystander responses. As Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998) suggest, it is incumbent on researchers to determine both the practical and statistical significance of their results; even small effects can be important insofar as they are meaningful and replicable (Trusty, Thompson, & Petrocelli, 2004). Given the importance of considering a range of options for responding to observed bullying, the practical significance of these findings remains a question for future research. The present findings suggest that there may be a relatively short developmental window wherein students are motivated to take a stand against bullying.

A small but growing number of antibullying programs have been developed that target bystanders as playing a critical role in reducing bullying. Consistent with the present findings, results of these studies suggest that younger children may be more willing to intervene on behalf of victims in ways recommended by adults. For example, after hearing adult and student role models, students provided more explicit responses to a name-calling scenario although Grade 3 students were more influenced by adult models than Grade 6 students (Aboud & Miller, 2007). Similarly, after participating in a curriculum-based antibullying intervention that incorporated discussion, modelling, and role-playing activities, Stevens and colleagues (2000) found that elementary students were more likely than secondary students to report directly intervening to stop the bullying and help the victim.

In a much larger intervention effort, the KiVA program developed by Salmivalli and colleagues in Finland, employs a computer game to teach students a variety of ways that bystanders can address bullying (Salmivalli, Karna, & Poskiparta, in press). The effects of this intervention program are currently being evaluated in Finnish schools. Of interest with regard to the present results is whether this extensive bystander-focused intervention will prove to be more effective when implemented with younger than

older students and whether the intervention can maintain proactive bystander responses to bullying across grade levels. Regardless of the specific methods used to promote bystander intervention, the present study suggests that programs aimed at reducing bullying begin in elementary school and teach specific antibullying strategies to provide students with the skills they need to effectively address the bullying they witness at school.

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Notes

1. Although the same bullying/victimization items were used across grades, elementary students were given five response options (*never, once or a few times, about once a month, every week, many times a week*), whereas secondary students were given four options (*never, once or a few times, about once a month, every week or more*). Elementary students' responses of *every week* and *many times a week* were combined to make it comparable to the options given to secondary students.
2. Type of bullying was not distinguished for this question.

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