

Coping Strategies of Secondary School Children in Response to Being Bullied

Paul Naylor, Helen Cowie & Rosario del Rey

Through a questionnaire survey, the present study investigated the coping strategies of Year 7 (11–12 years old) and Year 9 (13–14 years old) pupils (N = 324) to find out what strategies they have used to overcome the difficulties of being bullied by peers. Fifty-one UK secondary schools, in each of which an anti-bullying peer support system had been in place for at least a year, participated. The coping strategies of those pupils who said that they had told someone (N = 279) about being bullied were compared with those who said that they had not (N = 45). These coping strategies differ, not only according to whether or not they report the bullying, but also according to their age and gender. Implications of the findings for professionals who work with children and adolescents are suggested.

Keywords: Bullying; peer support; sex differences; age trends

Introduction

Bullying is centred on the systematic abuse of power. It is typified by the bully and victim's inequality of access to power in favour of the bully. It may be physical (for example, hitting, kicking or punching) or verbal (saying nasty things to a person) and be intentionally hostile (Olweus, 1991; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). It includes being 'sent nasty notes' (Smith & Sharp, 1994, p. 13). It may also be indirect by, for example, involving subtle social manipulation such as gossip, spreading of rumours, and exclusion (Lagerspetz, Björkvist, & Peltonen, 1988) and it may cause physical and psychological distress (Smith & Sharp, 1994).

Studies of children's definitions of bullying (e.g., Arora & Thompson, 1987; Boulton, 1997; Smith & Levan, 1995) show that they think similarly about what constitutes bullying. Boulton (1997), for example, found that there is broad consensus between children's definitions and those discussed above. The major differences are that children tend to focus on the more obvious and less subtle forms of bullying, such as direct verbal and physical abuse, and to overlook social exclusion.

However, there is confirmation from a number of studies

(e.g., Ahmad & Smith, 1990; Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Whitney & Smith, 1993) that bullying is extensive in UK schools. In the largest questionnaire survey ever undertaken in the UK, involving 6758 Sheffield school pupils in the age range 8–18 years, Whitney and Smith (1993) found that almost 27% of 7–11 year-olds were bullied at least 'sometimes' and that 10% of these were bullied at least 'once a week'. For secondary age children (11–18 years old), the respective figures were 10% and 4%. Overall, this study found that reports of bullying showed a decrease from 8 through to 16 years with a slight increase at the beginning of secondary education (generally occurring at 11–12 years). The findings of this study have been broadly confirmed by other recent UK surveys (Miller, 1995; Pitts & Smith, 1995).

Although bullying has been widely investigated (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; Boulton & Smith, 1994; Olweus, 1993; Smith & Sharp, 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993), it appears that adults are only aware of a small amount of the bullying behaviour which takes place in schools (Olweus, 1991; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Scott (1996), for example, suggests that official records underestimate the extent of the problem except in the most severe cases. A major problem is that many children are reluctant to intervene or to inform adults

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(Cunningham et al., 1998; Olweus, 1993; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Another is the reluctance of victims to tell.

Whitney and Smith (1993) found that around 50% of bullied pupils said that they had told neither a teacher nor a parent that they were being bullied. (Note that in this study the pupils were not asked whether they had confided in a peer.) More recently, Smith and Shu's (2000) nationwide UK questionnaire survey of 10–14 year-old pupils' experiences of being bullied in 19 schools found that 30% of bullied children ($N = 282$) said that they had reported the bullying to no one, a proportion larger for boys and for older victims.

Why some children remain silent about their experiences of being bullied

While there is very little direct evidence as to why some children fail to make use of adult or peer support to help them deal with the experience of being bullied, researchers have put forward a number of explanations. Children may not always know that they are being bullied, for example, when they are socially excluded (O'Connell et al., 1999). Even when they are aware of being bullied, they may fear further retaliation from their tormentors (Cowie & Olafsson, 1999; Smith & Sharp, 1994); they may anticipate ridicule from peers (Rigby & Slee, 1991); or they may have no faith in the support systems in their school or at home (Cowie & Olafsson, 1999).

Craig and Pepler (1995) identified a discrepancy between children's stated interest in helping victims and their actual behaviour. In their study, global ratings of peer behaviours indicated that peers were coded as showing more respect to bullies than to victims. Salmivalli (1999) has also studied children's behaviour in bullying episodes. In light of her studies, she argues that bullying in school is often a group phenomenon in which children take on different roles such as assistants to the bully, reinforcers of the bully, or bystanders who are typically in the majority and who tend not to intervene. O'Connell et al. (1999) suggest that the relative lack of intervention on the part of bystanders may reinforce the bully's behaviour, and it may signal to victims an accurate lack of sympathy for their plight.

However, bullied children who tell someone (whether a parent, teacher, friend or peer supporter) about their problem said that it helped 'to have someone to talk to and who listens', that the process of talking 'gave them the strength to overcome the problem' and that they appreciated having 'someone who cared' (Naylor & Cowie, 1999). Cowie (2000) conducted a preliminary analysis of the responses of 103 pupils in Years 7 and 9 who had been bullied at some time in their school careers and who had told no one. She found that 36% were girls ($N = 37$) and 64% were boys ($N = 37$). There are also reports of gender differences in the coping strategies adopted by victims (Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998) with boys tending to fight back more often than girls do (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997).

The aim of the present study was to develop and extend Cowie's (2000) analysis by comparing the reported coping strategies of children who had been bullied during the current school year and, in particular, to investigate the differences between those who told someone and those who did not. The effects of gender and age on telling or not have also been explored.

Method

The data in the present study were collected through a questionnaire survey (Naylor & Cowie, 1999) of 51 UK secondary schools (48 comprehensive, 1 independent and 2 grammar) on the effectiveness of anti-bullying peer support systems. Typically, these systems are designed to improve the effectiveness of interpersonal relationships between pupils. They involve the selection and training of pupils to offer support and help to their peers who are being bullied. Schools that have such systems usually also have well-articulated anti-bullying and equal opportunities policies.

The schools were contacted through responses to advertisements placed in teachers' professional publications. Informed consent was sought from the responding schools and only those in which their peer support systems had been established for at least one year were selected for participation in the study. The questionnaires were administered by teachers, at their convenience, in lesson-time between December 1997 and February 1998. These teachers were asked to ensure that pupils completed the questionnaires independently of one another.

The questionnaire, written specifically for the purpose, sought pupils' responses to a wide-range of questions on their personal knowledge and experience of bullying and of their schools' peer support systems. It was completed by 1835 actual and potential users of the systems (467 boys and 466 girls in Year 7, aged 11–12 years, and 423 boys and 479 girls in Year 9, aged 13–14 years). Year 7 pupils were selected since this is the year when most pupils in the UK make the transition from primary to secondary school, and are more at risk of being bullied by stronger same-age peers or older pupils (Whitney & Smith, 1993). Year 9 pupils were also selected to take part in the study since they could reflect on two years' experience at secondary school, and could be expected to have a greater awareness and a more sophisticated knowledge and understanding of bullying and their schools' peer support systems than Year 7 pupils.

In the present study, the effects of gender and age on adolescent's willingness to tell someone about being bullied were considered through analysis of some of the previously unexplored data gathered by Naylor and Cowie (1999). The responses of bullied Year 7 and Year 9 boys and girls who told someone ($N = 279$) were separately compared with those who did not ($N = 45$) for the following questions:

- Please say what you think bullying is?
- To which of the following people, if any, have you reported being bullied: parent; teacher; friend; peer supporter?
- How have you coped with being bullied?

No limitation was placed on respondents regarding the number and types of bullying behaviour identified, the people to whom they had reported being bullied listed above or on the coping strategies that they had used. Regarding bullying behaviour and coping strategies, the responses were subsequently content analysed to derive categories. The coping strategies of 132 respondents (41 % of the total) were coded independently by two of the authors (HC and PN) whilst another pairing of the authors (PN and RdR) independently coded 80 (25 % of the total) respondents' definitions of bullying. Using Cohen's Kappa, there was 0.956 ($p < .0005$) and 0.932 ($p < .0005$) agreement respectively for each of these pairings of the raters' codings.

Results

Respondents' definitions of bullying

The respondents' definitions of bullying have been categorised as shown in Table 1, together with the percentages of the respondents who stated that each type of bully behaviour and effect on the victim typified bullying.

The effects of age (year group), gender and reporting or not on the respondents' definitions of bullying have been investigated by the Chi square test (χ^2) and with $p < .001$, no differences have been found. (Given the large number of computations, the possibility of committing Type 1 errors has been reduced by only accepting outcomes at this level).

Reported coping strategies

Twenty-three percent ($N = 213$) of Year 7 and 12 % ($N = 111$) of Year 9 reported having been bullied during the current school year. Table 2 shows that there is little difference in the bullying rates for Year 7 girls and boys. By Year 9, however, the reported bullying rate for girls is almost twice that for boys. Also, in comparison with Year 7, fewer Year 9 pupils, particularly boys, report having been bullied.

The reported coping strategies of the respondents were categorised as shown in Table 3. Other than telling someone about being bullied, the most commonly used coping strategy is 'ignoring or enduring it'. As Table 3 shows, the percentages of reported use of the other strategies are small.

Eighty-seven percent ($N = 186$) of those in Year 7 and 84 % ($N = 93$) of those in Year 9 said that they had reported the bullying to at least one other person. These

Table 1. Categories of respondents' definitions of bullying and percentages who considered each specific bully behaviour and effect on victims to be bullying

Bully's behaviour	Examples of responses	N = 324
Direct verbal abuse	Name calling; verbal nastiness.	65.4
Direct physical abuse	Hitting; punching; kicking; tripping.	67.3
'Picking on'	Tormenting; taunting; unkind teasing; racial abuse.	35.5
Taking belongings	Stealing/damaging things, including lesson time.	7.1
Threatening	Demanding money or sweets; forced against your will.	13.6
Excluding	Feel unwanted; not let you join them playing; spreading rumours.	7.4
More powerful	Older; bigger; stronger; more than one of them.	19.8
Effect on victim		
Hurting	(Non-specific).	18.5
Feelings about self	Bad; sad; lower self-esteem; make you insecure.	13.3

Table 2. Responses to the question 'Have you been bullied this school year?'

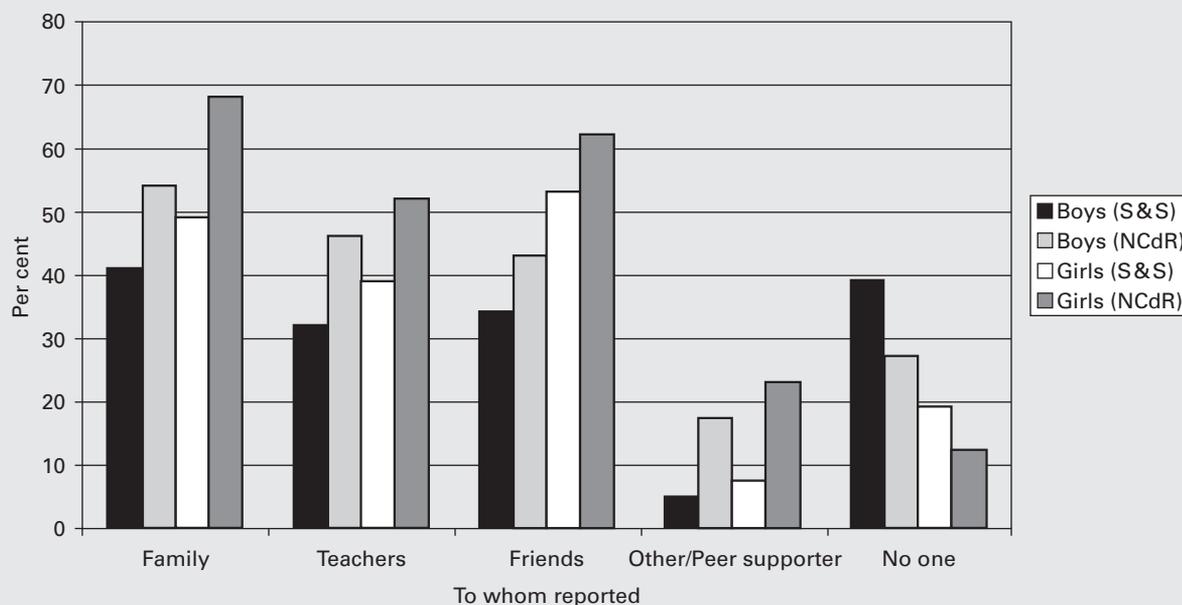
Year group (N in brackets)	N bullied	% bullied	Gender (N in brackets)	N bullied	% bullied
7 (933)	213	22.83	Girl (466)	106	22.74
			Boy (467)	107	22.91
9 (902)	111	12.31	Girl (479)	74	15.44
			Boy (423)	37	8.75

Table 3. Categories of coping strategies and percentages of reported use by respondents

Coping strategies	Examples of responses	N = 324
Ignore/endure it	I have tried to ignore it; I put up with it; I tried to forget it; bottle it up; do not listen; hoped it would stop; a good cry helps.	27.0
Physical/verbal retaliation	Hit them; threatened them with my big brother; tell them it hurts; ask them to stop; shouted back; threaten to tell.	6.8
Manipulate the social context (without telling)	Stayed close to other pupils; avoid the bullies; stay away from school.	4.6
Told someone (other than the bully)	An adult; a parent; a friend; a peer supporter.	86.1
Admit to not coping	I am not coping; I had difficulty; I got upset; My mum found me crying.	8.6
Planning revenge	I'm waiting until I have a chance to get my own back.	1.5
No reported reaction		1.5

Figure 1. Responses 'To whom did you report the bullying?':

A comparison of data from Smith and Shu (S & S) (2000) ($N = 276$) with those from the present study (NCdR) ($N = 324$)



pupils turned for help to a parent, teacher, friend or peer supporter. As Figure 1 shows, there are gender and age differences in the data for the present study in these pupils' reporting behaviour. These differences have been investigated by the Chi-square test (χ^2). For Year 7, boys are as likely as girls are to say that they have told someone (a teacher, parent, friend, or peer supporter) about being bullied ($\chi^2 = 3.34, p < .068$).

However, by Year 9, boys are much less likely than girls are to have told any of these people ($\chi^2 = 14.62,$

$p < .0005$). Considering only those pupils who told at least one person about being bullied, there are no significant differences for Year 7 boys compared with Year 7 girls. Considering age, Year 9 boys are more likely than Year 7 boys are ($\chi^2 = 5.45, p < .019$) to report that they have told no one. There is no significant difference for girls in this respect. For those pupils who did tell someone, there are no significant differences when girls in Year 7 are compared with those in Year 9 in whom they have told about being bullied. Similarly, there are no significant differences for boys. Forty-five bullied pupils (14%) said

that they had told no one, over two-thirds of whom were boys (18 boys, 9 girls in Year 7; 13 boys, 5 girls in Year 9).

Comparison of the data from the present study with those from Smith and Shu (2000) (Figure 1) reveals some interesting patterns. Boy and girl victims in the present study were more likely to tell a member of their family, a teacher, a friend or somebody else/a peer supporter than they were in Smith and Shu's study. They were also significantly less likely to report that they had told no one (14% compared with 30%).

The reported coping strategies of the pupils who stated that they had been bullied but who had told no one (31 boys and 14 girls) about it, were compared with those (113 boys and 166 girls) who had told someone. With telling someone discounted as a reaction, the mean number of the remaining coping strategies of those who reported the bullying is .294 ($SD = .494$) whilst that for those who did not tell is .933 ($SD = .539$), a difference which is significant (two-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov $Z = 3.539$, $p < .0005$). In other words, only 30% of those victims who told someone used, on average, one other strategy ('ignore/endure it'; 'physical/verbal retaliation'; 'manipulate social situation'; 'plan revenge'). Whereas, for those who told no one, on average, each of them used one of these strategies.

The coping strategies of all of the pupils in the present study were also compared by year group and gender for those who told someone and those who told no one. These data have been investigated by the Chi-square test (χ^2). (Again, in order to reduce the possibility of committing Type 1 errors, only outcomes where $p < .001$ have been accepted.)

Ignore or endure it: The most commonly used strategy by those who told someone and by those who told no one, was 'ignoring or enduring it'. Also, Year 9 boys are more likely than those in Year 7 are to report using this strategy, although the difference is not significant. However, significant differences have been found in the more common use of this reaction by those who have told no one compared with those who have, for these groups: Year 7 girls ($\chi^2 = 13.97$, $p < .0005$); Year 7 boys ($\chi^2 = 21.07$, $p < .0005$); Year 9 boys ($\chi^2 = 16.55$, $p < .0005$).

Physical and verbal retaliation: Although this reaction is more frequently reported by Year 7 boys and Year 9 girls compared with their counterpart age/gender groups, these findings are not significant. In addition, there are no significant differences in the use of this reaction between any of the other comparison groups investigated.

Admission of not coping: Although a greater proportion of both groups of girls compared with their respective groups of boys admitted that they were not coping with being bullied, these findings are not significant. However, Year 7 boys who have told no one about being bullied compared with those who have, are more likely to have said that they are not coping, but this finding is not significant. In

contrast, none of the 13 Year 9 boys who have told no one about being bullied admitted that they were not coping.

Manipulating the social context: Proportionately more Year 7 boys than girls report having used this reaction. This is also true of Year 9 girls compared with those in Year 7. Of those pupils who told no one about being bullied, only a few Year 7 boys reported having used this strategy. However, there are no significant differences in the use of this strategy between any of the subgroups analysed.

Telling someone (other than the bully): Both year groups of girls are more likely than their corresponding boys are to tell someone about being bullied. This tendency has also been found for Year 7 compared with Year 9 boys. The only significant finding, however, is that Year 9 girls were more likely than Year 9 boys were to report having used this reaction ($\chi^2 = 14.62$, $p < .0005$).

Planning revenge: No significant differences in the use of this strategy have been found although proportionately more Year 9 girls report using it compared with those in Year 7.

No reaction stated: Other than saying that they were 'not coping', five Year 7 respondents (one girl, four boys) and none in Year 9 offer no strategy for combating being bullied. These findings are not significant.

Discussion

In the present study, 20% of the respondents chose to define bullying not only in terms of the bully's behaviour but also in terms of its effects on the victim. Maybe this commenting on the effects on victims, not reported elsewhere, is unsurprising given that all of these respondents were victims of bullying, which is not true of other studies. Further studies might investigate the differences between bullied and non-bullied children's definitions of bullying.

The most commonly mentioned type of bullying behaviour in this study was direct verbal (for example, name calling) and physical (for example, hitting and punching) abuse. As we might expect of children, few mentioned the more subtle and indirect forms of bullying such as social exclusion, a finding that lends support to the suggestion of O'Connell et al. (1999) that children may not always know that they are being bullied.

Regarding the reported coping strategies, the results indicate that those victims who did not tell someone that they were being bullied, compared with those who did, tended to use more of the other possible coping strategies. The results also suggest some age and gender differences between those victims who told and those who did not tell that they were being bullied. Older girls were more likely to tell someone—either an adult or a peer—than older boys were. More than twice as many boys as girl victims reported that they had told no one about being bullied, a

tendency that becomes more pronounced with age. This may be related to difficulties that boys have in sharing feelings about personal issues, a phenomenon that is well documented in the literature (Cunningham et al., 1998; Österman et al., 1997). These difficulties may arise because of boys' socialisation and relationship experiences (for example, Hartup, 1983; Wong & Csikzentmihalyi, 1991), their perception of what it is to be masculine (Naylor & Cowie, 1999) and, probably, all of these factors in combination with their biology (Hinde, 1996). Unfortunately, the respondents in the present study were not asked to explain why they had not reported being bullied but this has been done in a two-year follow-up study of these children (to be reported) and so it may soon be possible to shed some light on this issue. For whatever reason, however, bullied boys are especially vulnerable, as often they seem to be prevented from seeking out the support that they need.

By age group, the reported coping strategies of the boys and girls in the present study who told no one that they were being bullied were similar. The majority of boys and girls reported that they ignored or endured their plight; only a small proportion of younger boys reported making any attempt to manipulate the social context as a way of trying to avoid being left alone with the bully(ies).

These results make an interesting comparison with Smith and Shu's (2000) findings in which it was found that the most common response to the question 'What did you do when someone bullied you?' was 'ignored them' (66%) followed by 'told them to stop' (26%). Only 17% asked friends for help. Girls were more likely to report crying or asking friends for help; older children reported more often that they responded by 'ignoring the bullies'. In the present study, fewer bullied pupils reported that they tried to ignore the bullying and fewer told no one about the bullying. It is also interesting to note that the incidence of bullied children who told no one was substantially less (14%) in the present study than it was in Smith and Shu's (2000) study (30%).

Thus, it seems that the presence of peer support systems encourages victims to report their plight to at least one person. Of course, it is not necessarily true that the differences between these findings can be solely attributed to the existence or not in schools of an anti-bullying peer support system. Rather, it is likely that there is a significant difference in the ethos of these two types of school. It seems that in schools where systems exist compared with schools in which they do not, pupils' and teachers' awareness of bullying is more sophisticated and there is a clearer message to everyone that it is acceptable to 'tell somebody' (anybody) about it.

In conclusion, the present study highlights the continuing difficulty in targeting bullied children who are reluctant to ask for help, even where the participants come from schools with well-established systems of support and active whole school anti-bullying policies. There is an

urgent need to identify these children and to find ways of enabling them to seek out the help that they need.

Implications

Finally, we suggest some implications of the findings of this study for professionals who work with children and adolescents. They are:

- In light of children's definitions of bullying, a child who claims to have been bullied should be listened to (a recommendation which is consistent with the Children Act [HMSO, 1989]) concerning the alleged bully's behaviour *and* the effects on him/her. The allegations should be sensitively investigated and the outcomes appropriately acted on. In some cases, this may even involve helping the child to reframe what he/she thinks bullying behaviour is.
- Schools should be encouraged regularly to monitor bullying rates and identify vulnerable children by, for example, using the 'My Life in School' questionnaire (Arora, 1994).
- Teachers should monitor children's friendship patterns and investigate why certain children do not have or seem not to have at least one friend – they are highly likely to be suffering from being bullied.
- In addition to all of the other anti-bullying curriculum work done in schools, including the exploration of the definition of bullying, teachers might help children consider the possible strategies that bullied children might use and help them assess their likely efficacy.
- All schools should be encouraged to establish peer support systems, possibly with the help of educational or school psychologists and other professionals.
- Medical health care professionals (for example, general practitioners and school nurses) should routinely check whether a child is being bullied if he/she is manifesting apparently physical symptoms of illness or is frequently absent from school.

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