

# Bullying in Schools: Psychological Implications and Counselling Interventions

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## Abstract

Bullying behaviour is no doubt becoming a common feature and a nightmare in schools both in and outside Nigeria. It is a worrisome practice in schools because it infringes on the child's right to human dignity, privacy, freedom and security. The physical, emotional and educational consequences of bullying behaviour can never be underestimated. This paper therefore endeavours to further bring into context the bullying behaviour in school, the characteristics of bullies and their victims and the psychosocial and psychological effects on the victims. Thereafter, intervention and specific counselling strategies were offered. With the hope that when fully adopted, educators and other stakeholders can begin to address the problems of bullying and may encourage a zero bullying tolerance within and outside the school community.

**Key words:** Bullying, gender, psychological implications, counselling interventions.

## 1. Introduction

Schools have always been recognised as an institution for the transfer of knowledge and culture to the future generation. It is a dynamic human system dedicated to the nurturing of mutual growth and understanding between children and adults.

The school is an institution designed for the teaching of students enrolled in it, and part of the purpose of the school is to develop the student through knowledge acquisition so that he/she may become a social being. By this, the student is expected to learn how to relate with fellow students, teachers and significant others in the school on the one hand, live in a harmonious way (by blending with societal values) in the society on the other hand. The school is also expected to be a place where students should feel safe and secure, and where they can count on being treated with respect. The reality, however, seems to be that only few students or pupils can harmoniously blend with their school mates without experiencing violence in the school.

Although the school had always remained one of the safest places, next to the home in a child's life, one wonders if this still holds sway in our present society given the ever increasing spate of violence in our schools. Violence in schools is an issue that has become more prominent in the last few years, as news articles about violent deeds within the school setting is now on the increase. Despite the increasing rate of violence in schools, the society still expects that the school should be a safe place for students. Thus, in order to maintain a peaceful and safe school environment, stakeholders in education have tended to concern themselves with the problem of violence and bullying in our schools.

Violence as defined by the World Health Organisation (2002, as cited in Federal Ministry of Education, 2007), is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group of community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation. In this definition, there is a very strong correlation between intentionality and committing of an act itself, irrespective of the outcome it produces. This definition also excludes may unintentional incident, such as road traffic injuries and burns (Federal Ministry of Education, 2007). Violence broadly speaking includes any condition or act that creates a climate in which the individual feels fear or intimidation in addition to being victims of assault, theft or vandalism. This, as a matter of fact, is becoming a growing problem in our schools.

In schools, the learners are the centre of focus. They are of utmost importance hence, adequate information about the pupils is necessary for any meaningful learning to take place. For teachers' effort not to be wasted and for learners to change along with the set goals, such factors that affect learning and teaching, which include child growth, age heredity, interest, home and social effects and violence in school including school bullying need to be addressed.

### 1.1 Concept of Bullying

From the psychological perspective, bullying as a behavioural characteristic can be conceptualised in a number of ways. It can also be taken to be a subset of aggressive behaviours. As with aggressive behaviour generally, bullying intentionally causes hurt to the recipient. This hurt can be physical and psychological. Bullying behaviour infringes on the child's right to human dignity, privacy, freedom and security. It has an influence on the victims' physical, emotional, social and educational well being (Wet, 2008). Bullies frequently target people who are different from themselves and they seek to exploit those differences. They select victims they think are

unlikely to retaliate such as persons who are overweight, wear glasses, or have obvious differences: big ears, noses, eyes or severe acne. Such victims are common subjects of ridicule in the hands of bullies (Olweus, 2004). However, these differences do not necessarily need to be physical, as students who learn at a different pace or are anxious or insecure may also be target of bullies.

Bullying can be described as repeated negative events, which occur over time and are directed at special individuals and which are carried out by one or several other people who are stronger than the victim. Negative events may be aggressive physical contact in form of fights and shoving, verbal threats and mockery, grimacing or cruel gesturing.

Bullying occurs when a person wilfully and repeatedly exercise power over another with hostile or malicious intents. A wide range of physical or verbal behaviour of an aggressive or anti-social nature are encompassed in the term bullying. These include humiliating, harassing and mobbing (Hagan & Sprague 1998). Bullying may also assume less direct forms ("Psychological bullying") such as gossiping, spreading rumours, shunning or exclusion (Pepler & Craig, 1999).

Olweus (2004) defines a victim of bullying as when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and overtime, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons. These negative actions are understood as being intentionally inflicted on someone to cause injury, fear or distress. The goal of bullying is generally to cause distress in some manner and it usually takes place among children who are not friends (Garrity, 2010).

## 2. Prevalence of Bullying in School

According to Federal Ministry of Education (2007), since the last decade, several cases of violence against children such as torture, kidnapping, shooting, sexual harassment, rape, corporal punishment and so on have been reported in various newspapers, magazines and television station all over the world. However, there is lack of documentation of most of the violent acts. This lack of documentation and increasing violence rate against children were part of the reasons for the global in-depth study of violence against children by the UN Secretary-General as directed by the General Assembly Resolution 57/90 of 2002 to provide a global picture.

Specifically, bullying as a sub-set of school violence among school-age children occurs in many schools across the globe (Aluede, 2006). Despite lack of documentation of incidents of bullying across the globe, studies conducted in various countries have indicated that a growing percentage of student population is being bullied everyday across the globe and that the rates of bullying vary from country to country (Duncan, 1999). In Canada, self-report data indicate that 8% to 9% of elementary school children are bullied frequently (i.e., once or more a week) and about 2 to 5% of students bully others frequently. In addition, among adolescents, at the secondary school level, rate are somewhat higher, with 10 to 11% of students reporting that they are frequently victimized by peers, and another 8 to 11% reporting that they frequently bully others (Rocke-Henderson & Bananno, 2005).

In the United States of America, bullying behaviour occurs in many American schools and is perhaps one of the most under-reported safety problems (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). However, American schools harbour approximately 2.1 million bullies and 2.7 million are their victims (Fried, 1997). Specifically Rigby (2011) in his study found that 81% of their sample reported at least one act of bullying behaviour during the last month. Another study found that 82% of the respondents were bullied at some period in their academic lives. In addition, several studies from different parts of the US have reported 10-29 percent of the student surveyed were either bullied or victims (Kenny, 2005).

In the United Kingdom, bullying behaviour is also a pervasive problem. For instance, McEachern, (2005) study of 6,758 students in 24 schools in all areas of the city of Sheffield, UK revealed that 27% of the elementary and middle schools sampled reported being bullied sometimes during the term. In a similar vein, in another of his study of 7000 elementary and secondary school students in the UK, he observed that 29% of boys and 24% of girls in the elementary schools experienced some form of physical bullying. The study further revealed that approximately 41% of boys and 39% of girls experienced verbal bullying.

In the Scandinavian countries, research indicates that approximately 10% of children are frequently victims of bullying. Specifically, in Norway, 14% of the children are either bullies or victims. In Denmark, though little systematic research on bullying has been conducted, one significant study published in that country revealed that in comparison to 24 other countries, Denmark scored high (top three) on bullying behaviour and in the top half for students who reported being bullied (McEaschern, 2005).

In Africa, Zindi (1994) revealed in his study of bullying at boarding schools in Zimbabwe that 16% of the sampled students were bullied now and then, and 18% were bullied weekly or more often.

In Nigeria, even though cases of bullying had been reported in many schools, this deviant act is not always given any desirable attention. Furthermore, there are no available statistical facts to show the actual number of students that are bullied or victims in Nigerian schools. This lack of statistical facts and absence of well documented

evidence have made it difficult to appreciate the prevalence of bullying behaviour in Nigeria (Aluede & Fajoju, in press; Umoh, 2000).

Despite the absence of documented evidence of the prevalent rate of bullying in Nigeria, Egbochuku's (2007) study on some Nigerian students in Benin City revealed that almost four in every five participants (78%) reported being bullied and 85% of the children admitted to bullying others at least once. Using moderate criteria, the study further indicated that more than half of the students (62%) were bullied and 30% bullied others.

Ehindero (2010) also observed four types of peer victimization among secondary school students in Osun: physical victimization, social manipulation, verbal victimization and attack on property.

In a somewhat first ever nation-wide situational analysis survey of school violence in Nigeria conducted by the Federal Ministry of Education (2007), it was revealed that physical violence and psychological violence accounted for 85% and 50% respectively of the bulk of violence against children in schools. Across school location, physical violence was more prevalent in the rural (90%) than in the urban areas (80%). Across region, physical violence in schools is higher in the southern Nigeria (90%) than in the Northern region (79%). So is the case of psychological violence, which is 61% in Southern Nigeria and only 38.7% in Northern Nigeria. Furthermore, across gender, physical and psychological violence are almost evenly distributed among males and females in Nigerian schools.

### 3. Characteristics of Bullies and Victims

Among the characteristics of children at greatest risk of bullying and victimization, researchers have identified the following:

Those who bully tend to be hyperactive, disruptive, and impulsive and are generally aggressive toward their peers, teachers, parents and others. They tend to be assertive and easily provoked (Olweus, 1997). Contrary to popular belief, aggressive males who bully are not anxious and insecure under a tough exterior and they do not suffer from poor self esteem. Typically, males who bully have an aggressive personality combined with physical strength. (Olweus, 1997).

Bullies have little empathy for their victims and show little or no remorse (Craig, 1998) as yet, no empirical evidence to support a link between bullying and socioeconomic status or ethnicity but they may come from families where there is lack of attention and warmth toward the child, poor supervision, use of physical and verbal aggression (Olweus, 1997). Often they have been bullied themselves by adults and will continue bullying proving there are no consequences.

Those who are victims of bullying show higher levels of insecurity, anxiety, depression, loneliness, physical and mental symptoms and low self-esteem and male students who are bullied demonstrate anxious personality patterns and physical weakness. (Pepler, 2009).

Victims of bullying may have poor social skills; are socially isolated and rarely defend themselves or retaliate when confronted by students who bully them (Pepler, 2009). Boys and girls are equally likely to report being victimized, while most victims tend to be close to their parents who may be described as over-protective and tend to be physically weaker than their peers (Roland, 2002). It is observed that the same children are often bullied year after year and may take drastic action if the problem persists. (vengeance in the form of fighting back, extreme violent acts or suicide (Smith, 2011).

Bullying usually involves more than the bully and the victim: peers are present in 85 per cent of bullying episodes in classrooms and playgrounds (Craig, 1998). Peers are drawn into bullying by arousal and excitement of aggression; they are the audience for the theatre of bullying and provide the positive attention, imitation, deference and lack of opposition which reinforce the bully's dominance. Although 80-90 per cent of students indicate that watching bullying makes them feel uncomfortable, observations indicate that peers assume many roles: co-bullies, supports, audience and interveners (Pepler, 2009). It is observed that peers tend to give positive attention to the bully, rather than the victim; there is a risk for peers who align with the victim- they may become the next victim (Smith, 2011)

#### 3.1 Gender Differences in Bullying

Clear difference emerges in the bullying research among females and males. Commonly, boys bully other boys and girls; whereas girls are bullied mainly by other girls. (Sampson, 2002). When girls are bullies, they tend to use more indirect forms of bullying (van der Wal, 2008). Boys tend to use physical might and verbal threats. Girls use social and verbal threats, such as spreading rumours about one another and excluding one from the peer group (Hazler, and Oliver, 2007). Girl bullying also includes actions such as social isolation, ignoring, excluding, and backbiting (Sampson, 2002). Other actions by girl bullies include manipulating friendships and ostracizing peers (Bosworth, 2009). Adolescent girls, particularly, are prone to name calling, and gossiping (Vail, 2010).

Crick and Grotpeter (2008) have proposed the term relational aggression to cover actions committed by girls where social interactions are manipulated to cause harm to peer relationships. This would include threats of

expulsion from the peer group, purposely excluding someone from the peer group, and making harmful statements about a peer in order to cause peer rejection. They believe girls may use this form of peer abuse more than boys since it harms what concerns them most: their same gender peer relationships.

Some researchers have suggested that there are biological differences in boys and girls, in that girls are biologically predisposed to value friendships; therefore, that is the arena in which they would express their emotions (Vail, 2010). Girls tend to be more exclusive in their friendships and more intimate than boys (Ditzhazy and Burton, 2011). Thus, when problems occur in the girl-to-girl relationships, break ups tend to be more intense than with boys. Girls tend to rely more heavily on peer feedback to form their self-worth, thus making adolescent girls especially more susceptible to one another's comments about their physical appearance, attractiveness or being part of a peer group (Casey-Cannon, and Gowen, 2011). Regardless of the form bullying takes, it is the physical and emotional intimidation inherent that create the environment of harassment and abuse (Ditzhazy and Burton, 2011).

Generally, boys engage in higher amounts of bullying behaviour than girls (Bosworth, 2009). In Kumpulainen (2008) study, males were more likely than females to stay involved in bullying over a 4-year period of time. It was found that females, who were involved at one point in time, were not involved four years later. Although the author is not certain as to what contributes to this trend, he speculates that teachers may be more likely to intervene when they observe female victims than when they see known bullies, being victimized themselves. He also found that females in rural areas were more likely to be caught up in bullying than females in the city.

### *3.2 Development/Maturation Process*

During adolescence, identified as a peak time for bullying, children's bodies change, but not all at the same rate. Change in puberty seem to be targets for bullying (Hazler, and Oliver 2007). Girls may find themselves the object of teasing for the transformations their bodies may take (i.e. developing curves, breasts, etc.). Girls who mature early (middle school) are frequently victims of harassment from others (Ditzhazy and Burton, 2011). Reasons for being bullied vary, but girls appear to be at a particular risk of being bullied because of their physical appearances. Hoover (2002) found that facial appearance and being over-weight were among the most common reasons females felt that they were bullied.

Beane (2008) identified sexual bullying (direct or indirect bullying based on sexual and body development issues such as sexual orientation) as a form of bullying prevalent among children and adolescents. Fried (2007) found that 17% of her sample of dance and movement therapists reported sexual abuse as a type of bullying of which they were victims. The majority reported sexual bullying occurring between 9-12 years of age. Only female respondents reported this type of bullying. Incidents included trying to pull the victim's pants down, being teased for wearing a bra, and having one's breast fondled by a boy. Grooper and Froschl (2010) found very few incidents of bullying and teasing to be gender explicit or sexual in nature among children between the ages of 5 through 8 years. However, examples of those they observed included a boy chasing a girl, rubbing up against her, and trying to grab her buttocks.

## **4. Psychosocial and Psychological Effects of Bullying**

Bullying is pervasive and potentially terribly harmful for bullies, victims, schools and communities. The consequences of bullying are far-reaching, ranging from lower attendance and student achievement to increased violence and juvenile crime. And not only does it harm both its intended victims and the perpetrators, it may affect the climate of schools, morale of teachers, and indirectly, the ability of all students to learn to the best of their abilities.

Studies have shown that those involved in prolonged and serious bullying of others experience a wide range of mental health, academic and social problems if they do not receive support (Pepler, 2009, Rowland 2002). Several longitudinal studies conducted over two decades have recognised bullying behaviour in elementary school as a precursor of violent behaviour, and show significant links between this behaviour and criminal activity in adult life. (Craig and Pepler, 1999, Olweus, 1997).

Victims often fear school and consider it an unhappy and unsafe place. Drop out rates and absenteeism are higher among victimized students (Beane, 2008). Repeated bullying leads to anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression-problems, that studies have concluded, endure for years (Olweus, 1997).

The impact of bullying extends well beyond the bully and the victims, to the peer group, school and community. Those who are not directly involved, but who regularly witness bullying at school, may suffer from a less secure learning environment, the fear that the bully may target them next, and the knowledge that teachers and other adults are either unable or unwilling to control bullies behaviour. Student surveys reveal that only a small percentage of students seem to believe that adults will help, observing that adult intervention is infrequent and ineffective and that telling adults will only bring more harassment. Parents are often unaware of the bullying problem. Students report that teachers seldom or never talk with their classes about bullying (Charach & Ziegler, 2005).

The adolescent girls in the Casey-Cannon and Gowen (2011) study reported feeling sad, unhappy, hurt, or rejected as a reaction to peer victimization. Some of the girls reported that they felt bad about themselves based on comments that were made by bullies and some even reported losing relationships as a result of the victimization, Oleus (2004) found that girls who were victims of peer victimization had a fear of negative evaluation by their peers as well as a tendency to avoid social situations. Further, Pepler and Craig (1999) found that girls who were victims of what they termed “social aggression” felt sadder, more surprised, and worse about themselves than boys. These threats to friendship seemed to be more distressing for girls than boys as girls tended to think about them more.

Van der Wal (2008) found that bullying had a significant effect on depression and suicidal ideation in girls as compared to boys. In fact, the impact of being bullied on depression was higher in those who had suffered indirect bullying compared to those who were victims of direct bullying. This questions the belief that direct bullying is more harmful than indirect. Roland’s (2002) research supports this in that he found that females, both victims and bullies, had significantly higher scores on measures of depression and suicidal thoughts than their peers not involved in bullying. Specifically, girl bullies had significantly more suicidal thoughts than girl victims. He concludes that for bullies, home dysfunction may contribute to their depressive feelings; whereas for victims, being bullied is the reason they are depressed.

Emotional and social behaviour is not the only aspect of children’s lives affected by bullying. Academic performance seems to suffer also. Roberts and Coursol (1996) found that repeated bullying is associated with absenteeism and poor academic performance, and that pupils bullying can cause them to have difficulty concentrating on their academics.

#### *4.1 Assessment*

Bullying among pupils may sometimes be covert; consequently, it may be more difficult for outsiders to observe these behaviours. Sometimes, these actions are perceived by adults as typical children and adolescent behaviour and go undetected. In addition, Roland (2002) hypothesized that anxiety seems to put children at risk for being bullied more than depression. Thus, identifying children who are anxious and working on reducing their anxiety levels may assist them in avoiding being targets of bullying.

Counsellors can administer surveys to determine the extent of the problem in their schools. Weir (2001) suggested the following question that can be asked of students suspected of not doing well in school and who may be victims of bullying. They include: At recess, do you usually play by yourself or with other children? Have you ever been teased at school? What kinds of things are you teased about? Other questions may be: how do you feel when you are teased by others? What does it make you want to do? These questions can provide a good starting point for gaining an understanding of children’s victimization and reactions to such.

### **5. Intervention Strategies**

To reduce the incidence of bullying and prevent its occurrence, individual, groups and systematic interventions need to be implemented in schools. These interventions should be comprehensive in their scope and involve students, teachers, administrators, parents and the host community.

#### *5.1 Counselling strategies*

The association between bullying and psychosocial health differs between boys and girls, therefore practitioners must be cognizant of this when developing interventions (Van der Wal, 2008). And Since bullies tend to show little empathy for their targets (Ditzhazy and Burton, 2011), school psychologists and counsellors will need to provide interventions to improve students’ level of compassion and empathy. These include activities that foster sensitivity for the feelings of others. Role reversal techniques where students role play situations in which they place themselves in the position of others may help to increase empathic understanding.

For example, the counsellor or psychologist may ask the student bully, “Bimbo, I heard from Biola and others who witnessed it, that you made put down remarks to Biola about the way she was dressed, and then you pushed her into the wall. Is that right?”. Bimbo responds, “Yeah, I really dissed her. She thinks she is smarter than everybody else. She is an idiot and dressed like one.” Counsellor then advises Bimbo that pushing is not allowed, and asks Bimbo, “I wonder if you would play Biola and Biola you can be Bimbo and say and do exactly what she did?”. After the role reversal, the counsellor asks the girls how they felt to experience each other’s feelings. Further dialogue and communication would focus on exploring other ways to communicating that are not hurtful. Radd (2008) developed a process that integrates self-esteem activities with life skills development. The counsellor discusses with students the value of all people and their uniqueness. The counsellor then goes on to tell them that because all people are special, valuable, and unique, all people have a responsibility to help and not hurt others. The importance of this is related by choosing helpful and non-hurtful ways of behaving toward others. If you choose to hurt someone, then you are forgetting how special and valuable you are. The question that may be asked would be: “How do you act toward those that are special to you?”. A discussion about the

consequences of hurting others, specifically one's self-esteem (e.g. feeling bad about oneself) can then be initiated.

### 5.2 Specific Counselling Techniques

Assertiveness training is a helpful skill for children to enable them to avoid being victims of bullies. Beane (2008) suggested teaching children "to say "Leave me alone" or "Buzz off" with confidence and anger and them to walk away with confidence". When children communicate a sense of self-confidence to bullies, they are less likely to be targeted. It has been shown that children who do this are less likely to be victims than those who say nothing to the bully (Olweus, 2004). Moving away from a position of passivity can help children avoid being victims. When victims respond in a manner that is not rewarding for the bully (i.e. assertive), they are less likely to be bullied again.

Bosworth (2009) found a strong relationship between general levels of anger and bullying, indicating a need for intervention in this area. Essentially, this means that those children who were angry and engaged in misconduct were the most likely to commit bullying. Anger management interventions such as the use of incomplete sentences, anger management games, and peer mediation can help students diffuse anger and also cope with its occurrence and after affects. Further, he reported that a lack of confidence in being able to use non-violent strategies such as talking out a disagreement were associated with higher levels of bullying.

Bullies may also be assisted in learning non-violent strategies to solve conflicts, thus helping them avoid future bullying. Interventions may include sufficient opportunities to build confidence in using these new behaviours. Repeated role-playing with feedback and correction can be helpful to learn these new skills. Children can also be helped with handling social situations in general so that they do not resort to bullying. Assisting children in managing emotions, such as anger, depression and impulsivity, in more constructive ways may assist them in abandoning their role as bullies.

Group can be of assistance when dealing with female bullying. Rigby (2011) discusses interventions such as female only groups, where girls have the opportunity to talk about issues out in the open, rather than acting covertly. Paquette and Underwood (2009) also found that girls were more likely than boys to talk about their victimization and tell someone about it, which may make them more amenable to a group counselling setting.

### 5.3 Prevention Programs

Bullying may be lessened through anti-bullying programs in schools that serve to raise awareness of the problem, target school culture, and work with pupils directly. Most schools may have policies about overt, physical aggression, but do not adequately address indirect forms of bullying. School counsellors can play a critical role in preventing bullying in their schools by providing interventions to both victims and bullies.

Espleage (2001) contends that bullying "might be a type of behavioural strategy to manage the emotions of anger, impulsivity, and depression". Thus, prevention programs should focus on these emotional indicators. He further suggested that an important component of prevention programs are the messages that school personnel and other significant adults in the child's life provide regarding violence and teasing.

There are some structural changes that can take place at schools to help reduce the incidence of bullying. More supervision and monitoring in school areas where bullying may likely occur can help to decrease its occurrence. These areas include the playground, the cafeteria, hallways, and classrooms prior to class time. Beane (2008) suggested implanting strategies to structure some of the more unstructured times at school, such as recess. For example, have the students plan an activity they will engage in during this time or provide a place for children who prefer quiet study.

In addition, there is evidence that suggests school personnel often do little to intervene in bullying. Charach and Ziegler (2005) Grooper and Froschl (2000) found that in 71% of the incidents of bullying, although teachers and other school personnel were present, they did not become involved in stopping the behaviour. However, both boys and girls in this study, wanted teachers to stop ignoring bullying and become involved. Helping teachers identify more subtle forms of bullying, such as those demonstrated by girls, may be necessary. Educating teachers about bullying and ways in which they can effectively intervene may assist in lowering the incidence of bullying. Parents, too, may need to be educated about identifying the signs of bullying in their children or being more open to asking their children directly about bullying experiences.

Community involvement is essential. School personnel should contact community leaders to discuss the prevention program at their school and solicit their support and involvement. Community-school partnerships can be formed to assist with funding that can help to provide resources for the program. Church, Mosque and community organizational leaders can be contacted to encourage them to reinforce a zero bullying tolerance beyond the school walls.

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