

## **An Examination of the Variables Which Affect Bully/Victim Relations**

Jaime A. Dechant and Julie L. Kaye

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Milton Dehn, Department of Psychology

### **ABSTRACT**

Bullying is a problem which affects families, educators, victims, and others throughout life in some form or another. Teacher opinion studies show that bullying is a long-term problem, involving about 5-10% of children being bullied and approximately 5% of children bullying others. To study bullying behavior, the researchers collected data from a comparative sample of 50 fifth and 31 eighth graders in two midwestern urban school districts. Data collection occurred between December 1997 and January 1998. The sample included 51 females and 29 males. Sixty-one percent of fifth graders and 77% of eighth graders feel that bullying is a problem in their school. According to 67% of fifth graders and 76% of eighth graders, bullying occurs most often at school. Female bullies' reports of verbal abuse and both male and female victims' reports of verbal abuse increase over time. There are more male victims than female victims who report being physically bullied by male bullies. On the other hand, male bullies admit to bullying other males verbally at a significantly higher rate than male bullies admit to bullying females verbally. Family structure did not play a significant role in predicting the development of a bully or a victim.

### **An Examination of the Variables Which Affect Bully Victim Relations**

According to a Phi Delta Kappa-Gallup Poll, school violence and school discipline are the American public's biggest concerns about schools (Smith & Sharp, 1994). Teacher opinion studies show that being bullied is a long-term problem. About 5-10% of children are being bullied and approximately 5% of children bully others (Smith & Sharp, 1994). Many teachers also feel that such disruptive behaviors have been increasing in number and severity in recent years (ICAT, 1996).

The act of bullying is defined as repeatedly being exposed over time to negative actions by one or more students. These negative actions can be described as intentionally inflicting, or attempting to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another (Olweus, 1993). Although often pictured as some form of physical abuse, bullying also may include some type of verbal or emotional abuse. In fact, verbal forms of bullying (including ridicule, teasing, harassment and practical jokes) are reported more frequently than physical forms of bullying (ICAT, 1996). Clearly, bullying behavior is a systematic, repeated, and deliberate abuse of power (Smith & Sharp, 1994).

There has been extensive research on bullying behavior in England, the Scandinavian countries and Japan. In Britain, approximately 12 suicides a year are linked to the aftermath of a bullied child (BBC Education, 1997). In Norway, Dr. Dan Olweus and others have researched, surveyed and written numerous articles and books regarding this subject. Although some research exists in the U.S., more attention needs to be focused on this problem.

Bullying is a problem which affects families, educators, victims, and others throughout life in some form or another (Furlong, Chung, Bates, & Morrison, 1995). Past research on bullying has shown that approximately 75% of adolescents have experienced some form of bullying in their past (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). Upon reflection of their individual experiences, most victims felt that being bullied caused them to have social, emotional, and/or academic problems. Victims of bullying are prone to low self-esteem and may eventually develop depression ("Depressed," 1997).

Researchers have generated some theories to better understand the development of the bully. "Evidence suggests that bullying is 'intergenerational' and that a bully at school is a victim at home". Factors that affect bullying include: an authoritarian parenting style, inconsistent parenting, a lack of problem-solving skills, and the projection of aggressive retaliation techniques on children (Batsche & Knoff, 1994). According to Nathaniel Floyd (1985), abuse plays a significant role in the lives of bullies.

Often, they have been victims of abuse as younger children. Bullies believe that using force solves problems and is acceptable. Bullies are less likely to be fearful in physical confrontations. Noreen Tehrani (1996) reported that weaker members of the family are vulnerable to harassment from siblings.

At Brown University, a study was conducted on the causation of fights. One of the main factors was bullying. Bullying behaviors were associated with higher levels of dominant parental discipline. The study also concluded that bullies had fewer adult role models and fewer positive peer influences. A good portion of the bullies lived in either stepfamily or single parent households ("Bullies Sec," 1996).

Victims also have certain characteristics which increase the likelihood of being bullied. Typically, children are bullied by older children. This, however, is not always the case. Often, children who are rejected by their peers are subject to being bullied. Another factor of victimization is size. Victims are usually smaller than the perpetrators. Although provocation may be a cause, this is not one of the main reasons children get bullied (Boulton & Underwood, 1992).

Studies have consistently shown that boys are more often the bullies. Boys bully boys more often than girls bully boys. Girls bully girls more frequently than boys bully girls. The incidence of boys bullying girls is higher than the incidence of girls bullying boys (Boulton & Underwood, 1992). The means of bullying differ between boys and girls. Boys use physical ways to overpower their victims, whereas girls tend to use verbal harassment or exclude the victim from the group (Roberts, 1988). However, there is contradictory evidence stating that girls between 12 and 16 use physical means of bullying because they are bigger than boys of the same age ("Girls Can," 1994).

Different age groups have been studied. According to research, bullying seems to be at its worst in grades seven through nine with grades four through six following directly. Over time, the types of bullying change. The rates of physical bullying decrease with age. However, sexual harassment incidences increase with age (Olweus, 1993).

The hypotheses of the current study were that older students will show fewer physical acts of bullying and more verbal acts of bullying than younger students. Also, males will more often display bullying behaviors physically, while females will more often display bullying behaviors verbally. Finally, family structure and relationships will relate to whether or not a child has a tendency to become a bully or a victim.

## METHOD

### Participants

A comparative sample of 50 fifth and 31 eighth graders from two midwestern urban school districts completed the researcher generated survey. Of these students, 51 were female, 29 were male and one did not specify gender. These students came from either single parent families or families where both parents were together. Most of the students surveyed had siblings.

### Procedure

The researchers started the collection of data in December of 1997 and concluded the collection of data in January of 1998. The survey was completed during school time with the informed consent of the school, the parents, and the students. Informed consent forms were sent home with fifth and eighth grade students in two midwestern school districts and were given to the parents to read and sign, allowing their child to participate in the study. The students who returned the signed informed consent forms were then given assent forms to read and sign. The researchers were present during the survey to introduce the survey and answer questions students had. To ensure confidentiality, no names of the students were used on the survey. When all data was collected, the data was analyzed using t-tests and the chi-square test was employed to test the variable of family structure.

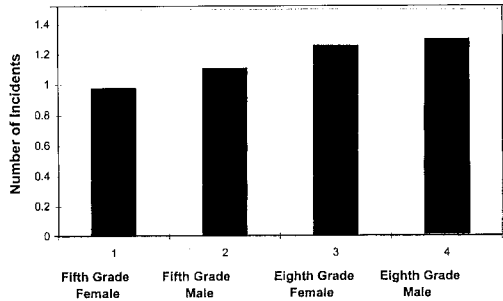
### Instrument

The survey was compiled by the researchers of this study. Questions relating to family structure, verbal and physical bullying and grade level, as well as demographic information were included in the survey. Several types of questions were employed in the survey: frequency, rating, yes/no and open-ended questions.

## RESULTS

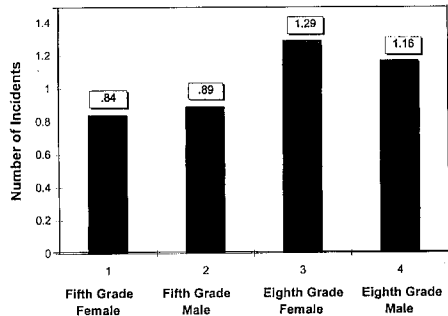
The study explored verbal and physical bullying, gender comparisons in bullying behavior, and family structure related to bullying. Sixty-one percent of fifth graders and 77% of eighth graders felt that bullying was a problem in their school. According to 67% of fifth graders and 76% of eighth graders, bullying occurred most

Graph 1  
Number of Incidents By Grade and Gender of Physical Bullying Reported by Bullies

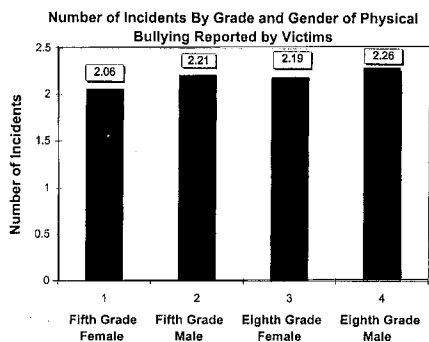


Graph 2

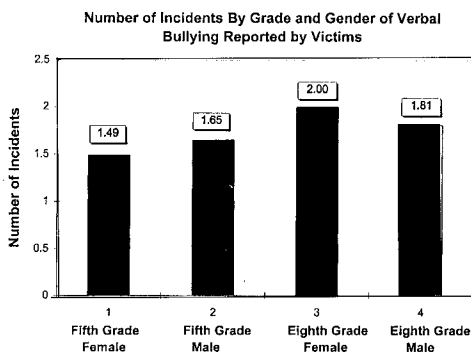
Number of Incidents By Grade and Gender of Verbal Bullying Reported by Bullies



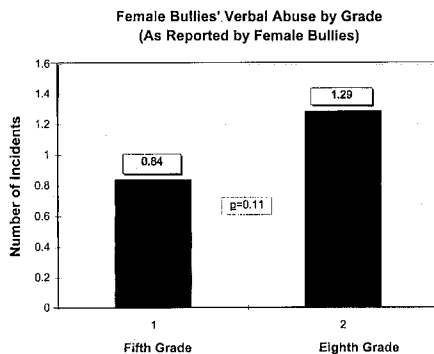
Graph 3



Graph 4



Graph 5



often at school. While 68% of eighth grade bullies reported abusing their victims at school, 38% of fifth grade bullies reported doing the same. A greater number of fifth grade bullies (54%) reported abusing their victims at home. Thirty-six percent of the respondents reported being picked on in the past month. Thirty-one percent of the respondents reported picking on others sometime during the past month.

The first hypothesis stated that physical bullying would decrease with age; whereas, verbal bullying would increase with age. The results did not support the decrease of physical bullying with age; however; the results supported the increase of verbal bullying with age (Graphs 1 and 2), (Table 1). Female bullies' report of verbal abuse increased from fifth to eighth grade ( $p = 0.11$ ), regardless of gender of the victim (Graph 5). In support of these results, another finding which approached significance ( $p = 0.17$ ) was that both male and female victims report that females verbally abuse them more in eighth grade than in fifth grade (Graphs 3 and 4).

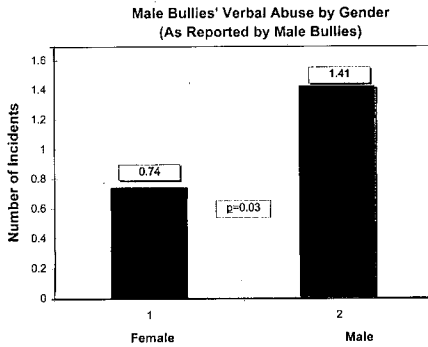
Table 1  
**Bully Report**

	Fifth Grade		Eighth Grade	
	Bullying of Females	Bullying of Males	Bullying of Females	Bullying of Males
Physical	M=.98 SD=1.67	M=1.11 SD=1.62	M=1.26 SD=1.91	M=1.29 SD=1.97
Verbal	M=.84 SD=1.19	M=.89 SD=1.15	M=1.29 SD=1.19	M=1.16 SD=1.29

Table 2  
**Victim Report**

	Fifth Grade		Eighth Grade	
	Bullied by Female	Bullied by Male	Bullied by Female	Bullied by Male
Physical	M=2.06 SD=2.71	M=2.21 SD=3.04	M=2.19 SD=2.07	M=2.26 SD=2.03
Verbal	M=1.49 SD=1.59	M=1.65 SD=1.59	M=2 SD=1.61	M=1.81 SD=1.19

Graph 6

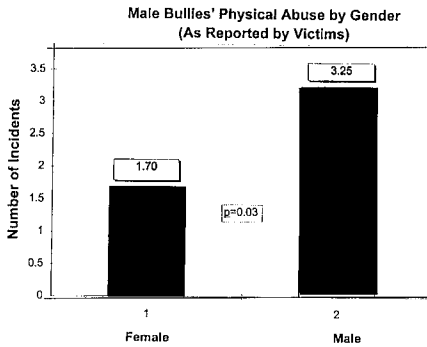


The second hypothesis stated that males would more often display bullying behaviors physically, while females would more often display bullying behaviors verbally. This hypothesis was well supported, especially when the victims were male. There were more male victims than female victims who reported being physically bullied by male bullies ( $p = 0.03$ ), (Graph 7). According to reports from bullies, males physically bullied other males more frequently than females (also approached significance,  $p = 0.15$ ). On the other

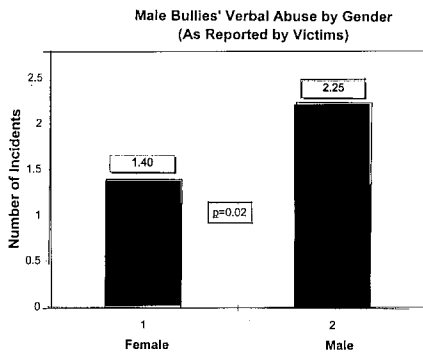
hand, male bullies admitted to bullying other males verbally at a significantly higher rate than male bullies admitted to bullying females verbally ( $p = 0.03$ ), (Graph 6). Male victims also reported being more verbally abused by males than female victims reported ( $p=0.02$ ), (Graph 8). Female bullies' report of verbal abuse increased from fifth to eighth grade, regardless of gender of victims ( $p = 0.11$ ), (Graph 5).

The third hypothesis stated that family structure and relationships would relate to whether or not a child had a tendency to become a bully or a victim. This hypothesis was not supported by this research. Twenty-three percent of respondents had parents that were either divorced or separated. Of this percentage, nine percent were identified as bullies and six percent were identified as victims.

Graph 7



Graph 8



## DISCUSSION

This study suggests that bullying remains a problem over time. At the adolescent stage of development, perhaps the need to increase self-worth is accomplished by bullying others. Bullies need to feel power and dominate their victims, thus humiliating and degrading them. As a result, the victims suffer a lowered self-esteem.

Both male victims and male bullies report continued physical and verbal bullying from fifth to eighth grade. Verbal bullying, regardless of gender, was found to increase over time. One reason for this finding may be that verbal assaults can be made less noticeable and hidden from figures of authority. Males, regardless of age, are doing more verbal bullying than was originally suspected.

Family structure did not play a significant role in predicting the development of a bully or a victim. Since the percentage of parents in the study who are divorced or separated was very low, it may be difficult to determine whether or not family structure was a variable in whether or not a child becomes a victim or a bully.

Therefore, family structure was not well represented in this study.

In support of the first hypothesis, female bullies tend to increase their acts of verbal bullying from fifth to eighth grade. This may be due to the belief that females are not supposed to act out their feelings, but instead verbalize them. The female bullies cannot overpower their male victims physically, but they can still abuse them with words or nonverbal communication.

Male victims report being both physically and verbally abused by male bullies; however, male bullies admit to mainly verbal bullying. This may be because male bullies downplay their physical behavior, thinking it to be normal, everyday behavior. Victims may be more likely to be more accurate in their accounts of abuse.

If additional research is done in this area, a larger sample size would be ideal. More diversity among the children surveyed would also make the research more complete. The majority of the sample consisted of Caucasian, urban fifth and eighth graders. In the future, children of various ethnicities, backgrounds and ages should be surveyed. Students having these differences may provide a new perspective based on their varied backgrounds.

Since such a high percentage of both fifth graders and eighth graders (61% and 77%, respectively) feel that bullying is a problem in their schools, more attention should

be focused on prevention. Further research can lead to an understanding of the problem and implementation of programs which will educate others. Due to the increasing severity of both the frequency and the actual forms of bullying, schools should draft policies clearly outlining procedures which are acceptable. Victim counseling and training as well as counseling and training for bullies is needed. Workshops can educate numerous people on how to deal with these types of behaviors (Hollnagel, 1996).

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## APPENDIX A

Interpersonal Relationships Survey

Please Circle One Response

1. I am a: Boy Girl

2. Compared to my classmates, I am: smaller average bigger in size.

Please Print Your Answers

3. Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Father's Type of Work: \_\_\_\_\_ Mother's Type of Work: \_\_\_\_\_

5. If you have brothers, what are their ages? \_\_\_\_\_

6. If you have sisters, what are their ages? \_\_\_\_\_

Please Circle the Following Responses that Apply to You

7. Are your parents separated or divorced? Yes No  
 8. About how many close friends do you have? O 1 2 or 3 4 or More  
 9. About how many times a week do you do things with any friends outside of regular school hours? O 1 2 or 3 4 or More  
 10. Do you participate in any clubs or sports in school? Yes No  
 11. Do you participate in any clubs or sports outside of school? Yes No

Please Check All that Apply to You

- |  | Worse | Average | Better |
|--|-------|---------|--------|
| 12. Compared to others of your age, how well do you:   |       |         |        |
| 13. Get along with your brothers and sisters? I have none <small>(Circle if applies)</small> | _____ | _____   | _____  |
| 14. Get along with other kids?   | _____ | _____   | _____  |
| 15. Get along with your parents?   | _____ | _____   | _____  |
| 16. Do things by yourself?   | _____ | _____   | _____  |

Please circle the Following Responses that Apply to You

17. Have you been picked on in the past? (For example, in first grade, second grade. etc.) Yes No  
 18. In the past month, have you been picked on by other kids? Yes No  
 19. Where do you get picked on? School Home Neighborhood  
 20. If you get picked on at school, where does it occur? Lunch room Playground Bathroom  
Halls Classroom Gym  
 21. How often does this occur? Once or Twice a Week Several Times a Week Daily

Mark "No" or "Yes" to each thing on the list

- |                                 | Boys do<br>this to me | Girls do<br>this to me |                                     | Boys do<br>this to me | Girls do<br>this to me |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 23. Tease me                    | _____                 | _____                  | 33. Pinch Me                        | _____                 | _____                  |
| 24. Call Me Names               | _____                 | _____                  | 34. Swear at Me                     | _____                 | _____                  |
| 25. Kick Me                     | _____                 | _____                  | 35. Give Me Funny<br>or Dirty Looks | _____                 | _____                  |
| 26. Hit Me                      | _____                 | _____                  | 36. Leave Me Out of<br>Groups       | _____                 | _____                  |
| 27. Bite Me                     | _____                 | _____                  | 37. Write Nasty<br>Notes to Me      | _____                 | _____                  |
| 28. Pull My Hair                | _____                 | _____                  | 38. Make Prank<br>Phone Calls to Me | _____                 | _____                  |
| 29. Push Me                     | _____                 | _____                  | 39. Spread Rumors<br>about Me       | _____                 | _____                  |
| 30. Threaten Me<br>With Words   | _____                 | _____                  | 40. Take Things<br>From Me          | _____                 | _____                  |
| 31. Threaten Me<br>With Actions | _____                 | _____                  | 41. Throw Objects<br>At Me          | _____                 | _____                  |
| 32. Spit on Me                  | _____                 | _____                  | 42. Make Nasty<br>Gestures At Me    | _____                 | _____                  |

Circle One Response

43. Have you seen others getting picked on? Yes No  
 44. How often do you see others getting picked on? Never Sometimes Often  
 45. Who are the kids getting picked on? Mostly Girls Mostly Boys Both



46. Who are the kids who are picking on others? Mostly Girls Mostly Boys Both  
 47. How do you feel when others get picked on? Mad Sad Glad  
 48. Have you picked on other kids in the past?(For example, first grade, second grade, etc.) Yes No  
 49. In the past month, have you picked on others? Yes No  
 50. Where do you pick on others? School Home Neighborhood  
 51. If you pick on kids in school, where does it occur? Lunch room Playground Bathroom  
 Halls Classroom Gym  
 52. How often does this occur? Once or Twice a Week Several Times a Week Daily

Mark "No" or "Yes" to each thing on the list

	I do this to boys	I do this to girls		I do this to boys	I do this to girls
53. Tease	_____	_____	63. Pinch	_____	_____
54. Call Names	_____	_____	64. Swear At	_____	_____
55. Kick	_____	_____	65. Give Me Funny or Dirty Looks	_____	_____
56. Hit	_____	_____	66. Leave Them Out of Groups	_____	_____
57. Bite	_____	_____	67. Write Nasty Notes	_____	_____
58. Pull Hair	_____	_____	68. Make Prank Phone Calls	_____	_____
59. Push	_____	_____	69. Spread Rumors	_____	_____
60. Threaten With Words	_____	_____	70. Take Their Things Away	_____	_____
61. Threaten With Actions	_____	_____	71. Throw Objects At Them	_____	_____
62. Spit	_____	_____	72. Make Nasty Gestures	_____	_____

Please Circle the Response that Applies to You

73. O = Not True    1 = Somewhat or Sometimes True    2 = Very True or Often True
- |  |   |
|--|---|
| O 1 2 I feel lonely.                   | O 1 2 I tell others not to like certain kids. |
| O 1 2 I cry a lot.                     | O 1 2 Other kids don't like to be with me.    |
| O 1 2 I am mean to others.             | O 1 2 Others are afraid of me.                |
| O 1 2 I try to get a lot of attention. | O 1 2 I destroy other peoples' things.        |
| O 1 2 I destroy my own things.         | O 1 2 I am shy.                               |
| O 1 2 I am afraid of others.           | O 1 2 I stand up for my rights.               |
| O 1 2 Others are mean to me.           | O 1 2 I am punished by my teachers.           |
| O 1 2 People like me.                  | O 1 2 I report other kids' bad behavior.      |

Please make any comments you may have to the following questions

74. Do you have any ideas on how to stop kids from picking on others?  
 75. Do you feel kids picking on others is a problem in your school? Please explain why you feel this way.