



Bullying and Cyberbullying: Aspects and Dimensions

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SUMMARY: Bullying is a global, social phenomenon that has taken on alarming proportions, especially in recent decades, and seriously threatens the smooth psycho-emotional and social development of children and adolescents, as it is expressed in direct or indirect physical, sexual or verbal violence. This article seeks to approach the phenomenon, its characteristics and the causes of each aggressive behavior, with the aim of describing the effects on the functioning of children and consequently the family, school and the wider social environment.

KEY WORDS: bullying, consequences, intervention strategies, victimization.

INTRODUCTION

Episodes of violence between minors, inside and outside the school environment, have become a negative routine in the everyday life of children, parents and teachers. The frequency and intensity with which they occur are surprising and often disgusting, but they also cause a peculiar familiarity with violence or even an underestimation of it. Especially when threats and fear take place as invisible and not easily detectable conditions, as in situations such as cyberbullying, online harassment, taunting of victims in social networks, etc. This article attempts an analysis on the problem of traditional and physically present bullying, but also of modern, non-face-to-face bullying, which can be even more dangerous, since victims often face an invisible enemy. Regardless of the type and quantity of violence, however, the serious impact on children's health and mental well-being is incalculable. In recent years there has been a steady rise in violence among minors, either in physical presence or online and at a distance, with multiplying negative psychosomatic effects both towards those who perpetrate it and those who receive or witness it (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012; Olweus, 1996; Nishina & Bellmore, 2006; Pithouse & Crowley, 2007). According to international data, 1 in 7 children are subjected to some form of bullying (Olweus, 1994). In America¹, in a survey regarding cyberbullying, it appeared that 1 in 4 adolescents have experienced abuse, while 1 in 6 have themselves been in the role of the perpetrator. According to INHOPE² (2020) with data from the countries participating in the network on cyberbullying and sexual exploitation of minors, 76% of victims appearing in material deemed illegal are aged between 3 and 13 years old and 22%, 14 to 17 years old. It is girls who are reported to be the most at risk, with 93% of victims being girls and 5% boys.

Let's Analyze Bullying

Bullying is a broad phenomenon of childhood or even youth antisocial behavior, which is found in many societies and groups of people, regardless of their social, economic, professional, and educational level (Smith, 1994) and is often not easily identifiable. However, the various definitions used to describe the phenomenon converge on key elements that identify the characteristics of the problem around the world, regardless of the context in which it occurs (Lee, 2006; Rigby, 1998). First of all, bullying and/or victimization are differentiated from the expected aggression found at different developmental stages (Olweus, 1996). They are also differentiated from the concept of delinquency, which is more specific and refers to legal categories of characterized illegal actions.

¹ <http://cyberbullying.org/facts/>

²INHOPE - International Association of Internet Hotlines is a worldwide coordinated effort to combat the phenomenon of posting child sexual abuse material (CSAM) on the internet and has contributed dynamically to the detection of large-scale schemes internationally. It works closely with international crime prevention and suppression agencies such as INTERPOL and EUROPOL as well as key organisations in the Internet industry such as Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft. More than one million URLs, each of which may contain multiple images and/or videos of child sexual abuse, were entered into the ICCAM platform of INHOPE in 2020 under the umbrella of which 47 hotlines around the world operate, including SafeLine.gr, a member of FORTH's Hellenic Internet Safety Centre. Annual report 2020, Available in: <https://inhope.org/media/pages/the-facts/download-our-whitepapers/annual-report/bb4dd3cdc3-1628156678/inhope-annual-report-2020.pdf>



Therefore, a child is considered to suffer bullying or victimization when he or she is repeatedly exposed to negative acts by peers and/or other minors in various settings (Smith & Brain, 2000).

For a conflict to be labeled negative and unequal, there must be a clear and expressed intent to injure, humiliate, force, and inflict pain. Abusers, usually repeatedly and in the context of unequal power-power relationships, proceed to hit, intimidate, bully, or humiliate other children and do not stop until and unless there is external intervention. As regards other dimensions of the phenomenon, it is usually much more common in boys than in girls, occurs in various settings, the most prevalent being school, while boys are more often the perpetrators for both sexes (Baldry & Farrington, 1999).

Bullying can take many forms. The main ones in which it manifests itself are physical, psychological, and social, but also sexual, cyber, racist, gender and homophobic (Yen et al., 2013). Specifically, the physical includes hitting, kicking, pushing, spitting and others; the verbal involves taunting, teasing, racist comments, verbal harassment, threats, obscene gestures; the relational involves exclusion from groups and clubs, rumours, gossip and finally the online involves the use of technology to achieve bullying through mobile phone, email, Facebook and others (Sklavou, 2020). The "evolution" of traditional bullying is Internet bullying/ online bullying or cyberbullying, which refers to any act of intimidation, psychological abuse, aggression, threats, humiliation, harassment, bullying or bullying behavior, which takes place via the Internet, mobile phones or other digital technologies and which is repeated over time, at regular or irregular intervals³.

Main causes

Many public debates and interventions on the issue of bullying and the risk to children, which are usually triggered by the publicity given to extreme and tragic incidents, start from a simplistic understanding of the problem and the victim-victim profile, with aggressive and dangerous people on one side and weak and helpless victims on the other. But the situation is very complex and is by no means limited to the school or to a single environment. The factors that can trigger the perpetration of targeted violence can be found in individual characteristics, the family, the school, the friendly environment, the broader social and/or cultural context, or even a component interaction of these. Thus, children may be victims in one setting and perpetrators in another, observers who later develop into perpetrators, etc. (Rigby, 1998).

The causes of the manifestation or acceptance of violence are therefore multifactorial and intertwined in terms of their creation and maintenance over time. In particular, they can be identified (Sklavou, 2020b):

- Intra-individual characteristics: characterological (shy, sensitive, impulsive, irritable), physical constitution (small, overweight, with pronounced features), developmental stage the child is going through (e.g., in adolescence aggressive and oppositional behaviors are strengthened), potential mental health problems the child is experiencing (irritability, conduct disorders, ADHD, neurological impairments).
- In the family: the evidence converges that perpetrators come from families in which violence in any form, but especially physical punishment, is systematically used as a pedagogical method (Olweus, 2007). Generally, in the families of perpetrators and victims there is a gap of caring, emotional contact, love, also poor communication and lack of protection and children learn to use violence as a means of solving their problems.
- In the school environment, in the classroom or more broadly (school or extracurricular activities). In addition to the tensions triggered by the school environment itself, and in particular by the content of lessons and performance, the role of the ecological environment and the teacher should not be overlooked. For example, schools in deprived areas are fertile ground for violence to develop (Rigby, 1996).
- At the levels of social violence: the acceptance and maintenance of violence and the way in which punishment and justice are administered, not necessarily exclusively within the legal system.
- In the meaning-making mechanism of violence: in a society and how this is disseminated through information and awareness-raising activities as a message to the wider community.
- Finally, we could not fail to look for possible causes in the broader situation and problematics around specific characteristics of modern societies, which concern the increase and consolidation of racist phenomena and behaviors, the decline of values and moral norms, the attempt to rise by any means and at any cost (an example in school is the academic performance of children).

³Stopcyberbullying.org (2010). What is cyberbullying, exactly? Available in: http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/what_is_cyberbullying_exactly.html



Effects of bullying

Chronic student victimization is associated with serious psychological and psychiatric problems (depression, loneliness, anxiety, low self-esteem, and others), which persist and can lead to chronic isolation, severe learning deficits, marginalization, serious injuries and even loss of life for children. As a consequence, we often have: physical discomfort and/or trauma such as scratches, bruises, sprains, headaches, back pains, stomach aches, loss of appetite or bulimia and others (Roland, 2002). In addition to the psychological effects: reduced ability to concentrate, difficulties with memory and learning, lack of motivation to learn, school refusal, frequent absences, reduced school performance or sudden change in performance (Hazler, 1996). At the social level, victims often: follow the popular or bully group and endure ridicule for fear of worse punishment; cling to a friend, submissively, for fear of losing them and being alone; associate with children with a social skills deficit, such as themselves, who cannot protect them from violence; and continue to have difficulty making true friends, even when the violence stops. Thus, they are in a constant state of alertness and defensiveness, have anxiety, nervousness, irritability, cannot relax, become aggressive and rude in response to violence, defuse tension at home, display melancholy, sadness (Yen et al., 2013) and in extreme cases suicidal tendencies or self-harm (Koyanagi et al., 2019; Skapinakis et al., 2011). Victims usually feel social inferiority and inadequacy to handle difficult situations, have feelings of inferiority, negative thoughts about their friends and popularity, negative internal dialogue, and strong negative self-criticism.

Preventing and dealing with the problem

As has already been understood, the problem of bullying is complex and multifaceted, with many different stakeholders involved. It is not uncommon for the family in question to fail to take responsibility or to intensify the role of victim or perpetrator. This is particularly the case if there are high levels of violence in the family, if communication is distorted, if there is no emotional care or support for the child, and even more so in more serious problems such as domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and parental delinquency.

As far as the school is concerned, and before attempting to develop proposals around the issue of violence in the school environment as such, it would be a serious omission not to stress that today's teacher comes into contact with and is forced to manage complex situations and new problems that have nothing to do with those he/she faced earlier in his/her professional life (Sklavou, 2020a). Traditionally, school, as a basic institution of socialization, functioned with the purpose of encouraging and controlling students' self-control, teaching them to create mediating relationships, i.e. to resolve differences and conflicts based on a framework of established and accepted rules. Their freedom of expression within the school environment was required to be governed by acceptable objectives and to meet limits. The phenomena of bullying within its environment now pose new challenges for teachers, educators, and all education stakeholders, especially in the context of the modern multicultural environment, as ethnocultural diversity is considered the basis for the development of violent behaviors in school (Maniatis, 2010). In addition, the use of any form of violence is largely related to a country's culture, its ideology and the wider adoption of measures and policies.

Therefore, violence is not exclusively about schools, neither at the stage of its genesis nor in its perpetuation. On the contrary, and if the school is supported, according to Casas & Del Ray Ortega-Ruiz (2012), this environment and the cultivation of empathy are two key factors that have a positive effect and inhibit not only school bullying but also cyberbullying. It requires redefining the role of the school, vigilance, prevention, early identification and suppression of any inappropriate behaviors, information, and training of teachers to cope (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008), collaboration and support from other experts and solidarity with parents. Support programs for the student population should be systematically and consistently implemented, appropriate and usable literature should be available to cultivate empathy, conflict management and the prevention of mental health problems in children and adolescents (Ronen, 2006). Policies in educational structures should be organized and aimed around the development of a long-term process that involves the investigation and early intervention of problems, but also creates protective factors within the school. On this basis, it is essential to inform, train and guide teachers, but also to update their knowledge about the problem and how to deal with it effectively, and to link them with international networks to draw on good practices and materials.

In addition, both the family and the school need to be shielded with the support of agencies and specially trained health care professionals, with a permanent presence within schools and educational institutions, as well as with family-focused services. There is certainly much that can still be done, as the basic environments for preventing and dealing with all forms of violence, the family and the school, remain unprotected in the face of a huge psycho-social and economic problem, which every year mutates and



reappears with more resistant and more harmful manifestations, with incalculable costs and consequences in all areas of the development of minors.

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Cite this Article: Konstantina Sklavou (2024). *Bullying and Cyberbullying: Aspects and Dimensions*. *International Journal of Current Science Research and Review*, 7(2), 1399-1403