Peer Relations: Interventions to prevent and reduce bullying behaviour in Childhood and Adolescence

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Wellbeing Research Centre

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Executive Summary

The importance of peer relations is a thoroughly explored area within the field of child development, and there is a wealth of empirical literature which emphasises and explores the role that peer relation dynamics play on child wellbeing.

In addition, the **breakdown of peer relations, particularly bullying behaviours, is recognised within the child and adolescent scientific literature as being a threat to student wellbeing**, with both immediate as well as long term effects.

Unfortunately, bullying has been reported as a widespread, global phenomenon, occurring in schools across different contexts.

Through focusing on bullying as an example of a key barrier to positive peer relations, **schools are able to utilise the empirical evidence in order to make a real impact on the wellbeing of their students**.

This report presents to schools an overview of the relationship between bullying and wellbeing outcomes, and underpins how complex this relationship can be, stimulating schools to address the issue of bullying within their contexts, to contribute to a happier and healthier school community.

Bullying and Wellbeing

Peer relations are a key driver to student wellbeing, and as such, negative peer relations such as bullying can drive poor wellbeing outcomes.

Bullying is distinct from situational or sporadic negative social interactions, and can be defined as the repeated and intentional infliction of harm whereby there is an imbalance of power within a relationship.

Bullying perpetration can also take different forms of content and context, be it: **physical**, **verbal**, **relational**, or through the medium of technology/the internet (**cyberbullying**).

These forms of bullying can co-occur, and are not mutually exclusive, with evidence finding there to be a positive and moderately strong correlation between traditional bullying (physical/verbal/relational) and cyberbullying.

The phenomenon of bullying is a group phenomenon, and **involves individuals in different roles**, including those directly involved (**bullies**, **victims**, and **bully-victims**) and those indirectly involved (**bystanders**).
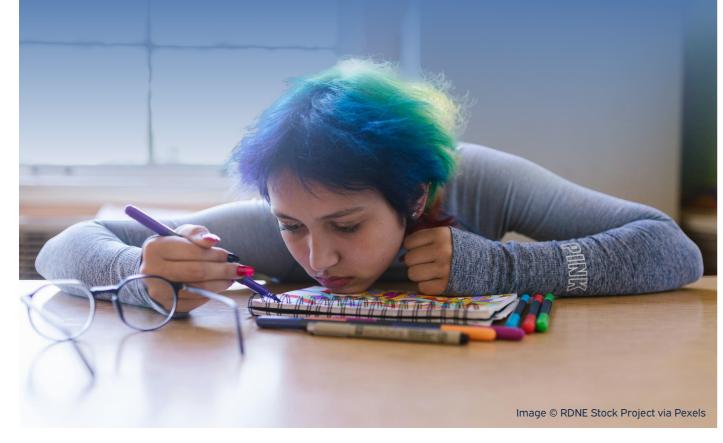
Bystanders are an often-overlooked role within bullying, despite the fact that most instances of bullying occur in the presence of other people. Bystanders are thus in a powerful position, as they could reinforce the bullying behaviour, not take any action (thus allowing the bullying to take place), or defend the victim.

The impacts of bullying on wellbeing and wellbeing-related outcomes are numerous and can have short-term and long-term impacts.

In the short-term, bullying can negatively influence student mental health, emotional outcomes such as feeling lonely and feeling low, classroom experience, and academic outcomes.

Long-term effects of bullying present a powerful argument for schools to address and limit bullying, as they show how bullying can have pervasive and negative impacts on adult outcomes. Examples of long-term effects of bullying include but are not limited to: poor mental health, lower wellbeing, poor social relationships, financial problems, and more likely to engage in risky lifestyle behaviours (such as drinking and smoking).

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Bullying Interventions

School climate, connectedness, and teacher attitudes significantly influence bullying. A supportive school environment with discipline, supervision, and respect can reduce bullying risks like isolation and disruptive behavior.

Teachers play a critical role by identifying, addressing, and promoting pro-social behaviors in classrooms, which indicates the direct impact schools can have on bullying.

Schools should also be aware of family influences on bullying. Adversity (e.g., violence, substance abuse) increases the risk, while parental communication, warmth, and cohesion provide protection. Additionally, sibling victimization can be a predictor of school bullying. **Cultural norms within the school setting can also influence bullying**, such as neighbourhood characteristics including socioeconomic conditions, community norms, as well as exposure to media violence.

Schools should consider their influence and interaction with these family and community factors, alongside understanding their role in reducing bullying within the confines of the school environment.

Schools are in a position whereby they can not only monitor bullying, but are able to actively prevent it, as well as provide support for those affected by bullying.

Many of the bullying interventions within the literature have been found to successfully reduce bullying perpetration, and mitigate negative consequences of bullying, including wellbeing effects and wellbeing-related outcomes such as anxiety and depression. By intervening, **schools can improve vital peer relations and social support that are essential to student wellbeing**. These interventions can also reduce the likelihood of future acts of bullying, and have sustainable positive effects on the lives of students.

Bullying interventions have been widely explored, and are often tested through Randomised Control Trials, allowing for intervention effects to be identified.

Interventions which aim to target bullying can vary in content, duration, and implementation methods, though many of the successful interventions include: a whole school approach, anti-bullying policies, working with victims, addressing classroom rules and management, curriculum materials, provision of information for parents, informal peer involvement, and mental health support.

Schools are recommended to adopt a multi-layered approach involving different stakeholders within and beyond the school community, address the school climate as a whole, educate staff and students on bullying and how to identify perpetration, as well as provision of adequate support to deal with incidents and aid those involved.

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It is important for schools to ensure that the content of the interventions and the methods through which the intervention is delivered are appropriate to the unique context of the school and students, as well as being engaging for the students, which will allow for greater engagement with the interventions.

Schools should also be mindful of the potential risks involved in bullying intervention implementation, such as the 'Healthy Context Paradox', where those still being bullied might experience exacerbated negative effects of bullying as general levels of bullying within a given school context has decreased.

Schools are encouraged to engage with the literature critically, and to be mindful of the variation in intervention effectiveness, with some bullying interventions yielding limited or even negative results.

In addition, much of the empirical evidence exploring bullying interventions comes from high-income countries, with limited data from low- and middle-income regions, highlighting the importance of tailoring strategies to local contexts. For example, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), initially developed in Norway, achieved more positive results in its home country than in the United States, underscoring the need for culturally adapted approaches.

Schools are also encouraged to keep up-to-date with the research into bullying, particularly with the rise of cyberbullying and its pervasiveness in society today. With increased use of digital technologies and social media, bullying has extended beyond schools into virtual spaces.

Moreover, bullying is not limited to students; teachers and staff can also be victims or perpetrators, further emphasizing the need for holistic, whole-school approaches.

Inclusive strategies must address bullying across all roles within the school community, ensuring preventive measures, interventions, and support systems cater to all community members effectively.

Further reading

Taylor, L. J., De Neve, J.-E., DeBorst, L., & Khanna, D. (2022). *Wellbeing in Education in Childhood and Adolescence (Report No. 1)*. International Baccalaureate Organization.

Taylor, L., Zhou, W., Boyle, L., Funk, S., & De Neve, J-E. (2024). *Wellbeing for Schoolteachers (Report No. 2)*. International Baccalaureate Organization.

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References

For a full list of references used in this report and access to additional supplementary materials, visit wellbeing.hmc.ox.ac.uk/schools.

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