

# No More A Child's Play: School Bullying as Child Abuse

Dr.Piku Chowdhury

Assistant Professor, Satyapriya Roy College of Education, Kolkata

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### \*Corresponding Author

Email: [chowdhury.piku\[at\]yahoo.com](mailto:chowdhury.piku[at]yahoo.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Many years of research have demonstrated that bullying victimization has a significant impact on the health of children who are targeted. The harm caused by bullying can be seen psychologically, socially, physically, emotionally, and academically. Surprisingly, children who bully also have negative consequences, as do those who witness bullying of others. A policy maker in Great Britain offers an ecological viewpoint of the broad reach of destruction of school bullying: "Bullying not only scars the life of too many children, it also reflects a serious weakness in our educational system" (Oliver & Candappa, 2003).

## 1. Introduction

*With the keyboard as his weapon, the bully violated the sanctity of my home and murdered my child just as surely as if he had crawled through a broken window and choked the life from Jeff with his bare hands. It was not a death that was quick and merciful. It was carried out with lies, rumors, and calculated cruelty portioned out day by day.*

-Debbie Johnston, contributor to the book *Bullycide in America* (2007) and mother of Jeffrey Scott Johnston, a victim.

Every state has its own definitions of child. The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, CAPTA legislation defines child abuse and neglect as -

- Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or
- An act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm (2003, p. 44)

Again in India, "A study on Child Abuse: India 2007" , conducted by Ministry of Women and Child development (GOI) identified physical, sexual as well as emotional abuse to be integral part of child abuse and hence amenable to legal action. These definitions and surveys reveal that intentionality and harm are key factors in determining child abuse. Intentionality and harm are also present in our understanding and definition of bullying. Generally, the public defines bullying from a broad continuum of teasing, aggression, and even violence. Researchers, on the other hand, are specific that bullying is an unwanted behavior perpetrated by one or more people, that there is an imbalance of power in which the victim has difficulty defending himself or herself, and it is repetitive in nature. There is also intent to cause physical or psychological distress or both. Based on the research definitions of bullying, it has been found that bullying is a form of severe child abuse. The paper attempts to reassess the various facets of bullying in terms of the crime of child abuse.

## 2. The Impact of Bullying

Many years of research have demonstrated that bullying victimization has a significant impact on the health of children who are targeted. The harm caused by bullying can be seen psychologically, socially, physically, emotionally, and academically. Surprisingly, children who bully also have negative consequences, as do those who witness bullying of others. A policy maker in Great Britain offers an ecological viewpoint of the broad reach of destruction of school bullying: "Bullying not only scars the life of too many children, it also reflects a serious weakness in our educational system" (Oliver & Candappa, 2003). Certainly, individual characteristics contribute to both being a victim and being a bully, yet we do need to look beyond individual characteristics to consider the context in which the behavior takes place.

High rates of bullying behavior in schools affect the entire school climate. This translates into children not being able to concentrate on learning for a variety of reasons. Children who are potential victims are more fearful of others; children who bully are disrespectful, taking time away from the teacher to address their problematic behavior. Ultimately, children in the school feel insecure and report that they do not like school much. As bullying blossoms in the school, students keenly see that teachers are not responding to stop the bullying, and they view teachers as having no control over what happens. Victims are more likely to report wanting to avoid attending school and have higher school absenteeism rates (Dake, Price, & Telljohawn, 2003; Rigby, 1996). Students who are frequently bullied by their peers are more likely to report disliking school and receive the lowest grades. Most likely, those children who avoid attending school also miss some of the other benefits of being connected with their school, such as increased mental health, social skill development, problem-solving skills, and resiliency.

Kids who bully also have difficulties with school performance. Their problems center on educational attainment. It would be expected that victims of bullying would show more problems on educational attainment than the kids who bully others because they are more focused on peer relationship problems than concentrating on schoolwork. In fact, being a school bully has more impact on educational attainment than being a victim of bullying. Consider for a moment educational

attainment as a student's ability to earn a high school degree. When researchers (Brown & Taylor, 2008) looked at children (15,000 children) born in Great Britain in 1958 and followed them for 42 years, they were able to understand how bullying was related to dropping out of school, obtaining a high school degree, or obtaining a college degree. Bullying victimization has been related to lower self-esteem and higher rates of depression and anxiety. Victimized individuals also have more thoughts of suicide (Dake et al., 2003; Rivers & Noret, 2010). Suicide is certainly a rare event for young people, yet for those who are victimized at the hands of a bully, the risk for suicide increases. Using my data collected from a survey and interviews with 1,900 students (Graham & Losey, 2006), 149 of those students were identified as having a high risk for suicide. An alarming number of the students reported bullying along with suicidal ideation. In the middle school alone, 95 students who engaged in an assessment interview with counselors because they were identified as a suicide risk, 35% (n = 17) indicated that bullying behavior was a significant emotional stressor for them. It is important to note that these students were not asked specifically about bullying incidents. In cases of persistent bullying, children may consider suicide as a means of escaping from bullying. Children who are relentlessly bullied see no hope for resolving the problem. Their hopelessness is enhanced by irrational thinking, and death seems the only way of removing the despair and pain. Some young people view their problems as incredibly overwhelming, and they believe even those around them are so affected by the issue that escape for their loved ones would be helpful. In this respect, they see their life as a burden to those they love; for this reason, they believe that choosing suicide will relieve their loved ones, and they will stop being a burden

### 3. Physical and Emotional Stress

Victims of bullying experience higher rates of mental, emotional, and physical problems. Children who are being bullied have higher risk for headaches, sleeping problems, abdominal pain, anxiety, feeling unhappy, poor appetite, and bed-wetting. Children's depression rates are three to seven times higher when bullied (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2004). Bullying victimization increases health consequences, and researchers identify the highest disturbances in depression and sleep. Interestingly, sleep disruption has a high correlation with depression. Children who experience bullying victimization are also more likely to develop psychotic symptoms. This is particularly true when children experience ongoing, persistent bullying victimization. It has been found that as bullying becomes more chronic or severe, so does the occurrence of psychotic symptoms (Schreier et al., 2009). Michael Carneal, a teenager who attacked a school in Paducah, Kentucky, asserts Butch Losey (2011), maintained that he had psychotic symptoms and may have experienced schizophrenic-type symptoms (according to appeal documents) at the time of the shooting even though he was deemed competent to stand trial. Losey quotes Carneal as saying that he experienced bullying prior to the shooting and that it was possible that the bullying increased his psychotic symptoms. The consequences for victims of childhood bullying can go beyond even young adulthood. A Danish study of a cohort of men born in 1953 (Lund et al., 2008) suggests that adult men who recall being bullied at school have significantly increased

odds of being diagnosed with depression during midlife (ages 31–51) or of having severe depressive symptoms at the age of 51, even after adjustment for social class and parental mental illness. Bystanders are those individuals at school, whether students, teachers, or nonteaching staff, who fail to intervene when bullying is taking place in their presence. Although bystanders do not respond, they are certainly affected by the experience. Bystanders often feel afraid at school and feel powerless to stop the bullying. They may even feel guilty for not taking action or in some cases because they joined in with the bullying. All of this may gradually change school attitudes and norms to be less empathetic for the victims (Olweus et al., 2005) and make it more difficult to eradicate bullying victimization.

### 4. Bullying and Suicide

There is no foolproof way to predict who will attempt suicide or school violence, but there are factors that increase the likelihood of such an event. For victims of bullying, specific factors that increase the likelihood of someone attempting suicide or violence have been organized into the following five domains (Butch Losey, 2007):

- i. Persistence
- ii. Perceived Access
- iii. Perceived Ability to Escape
- iv. Fear and Anxiety
- v. Victim Characteristics

**Persistence:** Bullying by definition happens repeatedly and occurs over time. If internal and external resources fail for the victim and the bullying persists, it can take a heavy toll. Persistent bullying can be seen as cumulative trauma, and this trauma can last long beyond childhood, culminating in mental health issues in adulthood. Victims of persistent bullying have lower self-esteem and higher rates of depression, loneliness, and anxiety than do children who are not victimized. Maybe more surprising is that persistent bullying can also lead children to experience real physical ailments. When researchers compared victimized children with those who were not, bullied children were nearly three times as likely to have headaches, two times as likely to have problems sleeping and abdominal pain, and five times as likely to feel unhappy (Fekkes et al., 2004). Wilful exclusion or shunning is a severe form of emotional bullying. Shunning that persists for a long time can be seen as cumulative trauma. The negative effects of bullying build over time and can last well into adulthood. Children victimized by shunning can have a severe distortion or loss of identity. The cumulative trauma of shunning can lead children to believe that they will be permanently rejected by others and to see themselves as lacking the ability to successfully protect themselves in seemingly all situations (Van der Wal et al., 2003).

**Perceived Access:** For the person being bullied and harassed using social media, hope will diminish if they believe the harasser has a high level of access to their private and social world. Perceptions of elevated access and an inability to escape will require a level of coping strategies that young people may not possess.

**Perceived Ability to Escape:** When the options of escape fail, suicide becomes the viable option, and the victims explore it with ferocity.

**Fear and Anxiety:** Fear and anxiety can be considered both a contributing factor of bullying victimization and also a consequence. They contribute to victimization because when a child feels fearful and anxious, the fear can indicate to other students that the child is an easy target. From this perspective, the child is more likely to be victimized. They are a consequence because children who have been traumatized by bullying tend to feel embarrassed and inadequate to handle the situation. Without the understanding of how to stop the bullying through the use of personal skills or seeking help, their fear and anxiety increase as they consider the possibility that they will encounter another situation in which they cannot control. Fear and anxiety are significant factors that increase the likelihood that bullying victimization will occur in the future. Children will need to understand how to manage fear and anxiety during situations of bullying and understand how expressing feelings during bullying impact the outcome.

**Victim Characteristics:** Victims are chosen because of the individual characteristics they possess that somehow let others know that they are timid, reactionary, or unwilling to stand up for themselves. There are two main types of victims: the "passive" victim and the "provocative" victim. The passive victim is probably how most people view bullying victimization. Passive victims are quiet, cautious, and sensitive and have little self-confidence. The boys are usually physically weaker than their peers, and the girls are often those who physically mature earlier than their peers. Provocative victims, on the other hand, actually contribute to their own victimization. These five domains largely determine the suicidal tendencies in young adults being bullied.

## 5. Intent, Motivation, and Means of Suicide

Suicidal intent is the extent to which the suicidal person wishes to die. It is a strong predictive factor for repeated suicide attempts and completed suicide. Suicide intent has four features: (a) belief about the intent; (b) preparation before the attempt; (c) prevention of discovery; and (d) communication

(Bridge et al., 2006). Students who have the highest levels of intent are those who express a strong wish to die, they indicate evidence of planning, their timing indicates a strategy to avoid detection, and they communicate the intent of their suicide ahead of time. Motivation is the reason that a person chooses to commit suicide. For teens with the highest suicidal intent, their motivation is to die or to escape a psychologically painful situation permanently (Kienhorst, De Wilde, Diekstra, & Wolters, 1995). In the context of bullying, the level of the desire to escape is clearly relevant. It is logical to think that people who attempt suicide and live may not have the same strength of intent as someone who completes suicide. In actuality, there are many factors that influence the outcome of an attempt, such as the availability and acceptability of method and the attempters' knowledge of the likely lethality of a given method. An attempter may choose a method based on the availability of the lethal agent in the home, based on whether it hurts, or based on their belief of its lethality. Many people who attempt suicide have inflated expectations about the lethality of common methods (Harvard School of Public Health, 2010) and may choose a method misbelieving it to be lethal. Therefore, means is a critical factor for suicide risk independent of the attempter characteristics.

## 6. Conclusion

Pushing, pulling, name calling, rumour spreading, cyber harassment etc are no longer innocuous child's play if attempted by school kids and not to be undermined as acts committed playfully. Bullying in schools leads to long term damage and even to suicide in certain cases. Teachers and parents must be sensitized and made aware of the depth and gravity of the problem and they should be trained for timely identification and necessary intervention.

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