

# Bystander behaviour of South Australian schoolchildren observing bullying and sexual coercion

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In recent years there has been a shift away from seeing bullying in schools as simply the outcome of individual differences, for example in physical strength and/or in personality. The movement has been towards seeing bullying largely in relation to the social or group context in which it occurs. (Pepler and Craig, 1995; O'Connell, Pepler and Craig, 1999). As a consequence, there has been increasing emphasis upon the social roles that bystanders of school bullying commonly adopt (Lean, 1998; Salmilvalli, 1999; Sutton and Smith, 1999; Rigby, 2002).

It has been reported in Canadian studies that bullying typically takes place in schools in the presence of student bystanders. Teachers are rarely present and are generally never told about what has happened. Although bystanders sometimes speak out to discourage the bullying, the most common response is to ignore what is going on – and the bullying simply continues. When a bystander actually does object, it has been reported that on 57% of occasions the bullying actually stops (Hawkins, Pepler and Craig, 2001)..

The question many schools are asking is how bullying in schools can be reduced through encouraging student bystanders to engage in pro-social and interventive behaviour to assist victims of peer victimisation. Can students learn to become more active bystanders, standing up for the victims of school bullying rather than merely standing by ?

Recent research on the question of student bystander behaviour has been conducted in South Australia by Associate Professors, Ken Rigby and Bruce Johnson. Their work is part of an international study, initiated at the University of South Australia, which is also being undertaken in Bangladesh, England, Israel, Italy and South Africa.

The research has thus far addressed these questions:

1. How often does bullying take place in South Australian schools in the presence of student bystanders ?
2. How do student bystanders react to the bullying ?
3. What factors appear to influence their behaviour ?
4. What reasons do students have for their actions ?

## **Method**

To acquire relevant data, students in 8 primary schools and 4 secondary schools in the metropolitan area of Adelaide in South Australia viewed a video depicting different kinds of bullying behaviour in the presence of bystanders and were asked to record anonymously on a questionnaire how often, in their judgment, each occurred at their school

The kinds of bullying depicted and viewed by all students (N =400) were these.

- Verbal aggression with one child insulting another
- Physical aggression with one child pushing another child down

Respondents could answer: hardly ever, less than once a week, once or twice a week, most days in the week, every day

A sub-sample of secondary students (N =200) viewed a further segment of the video in which a boy was shown to be sexually coercing a girl who was loudly protesting. Again students were asked to indicate how often they observed such behaviour at their school.

In relation to each of the bullying situations students were asked how likely it was that they would support the target of the aggression. They could indicate on their questionnaire: I certainly would, I probably would, I'm really unsure, I probably would not, I certainly would not.

Further, respondents were asked to decide which of the following alternative actions they would take as bystanders in each of the situations: ignore it, support the victim (directly) , support the bully, get a teacher

Finally they were asked to write a sentence saying why they had chosen one of these alternatives.

**Illustrations of the bullying situations can be viewed by clicking here. (The words were spoken by children who assisted in making the video)**

Note that in presenting the video to classes of students the term 'bullying' was not used. The situations and actions depicted were typical of bullying situations, that is, a person was behaving aggressively and seeking to dominate someone who appeared unable or unwilling to offer effective resistance. In subsequent discussions with students the aggression depicted was reliably identified as 'bullying.'

In addition, students were asked to answer the following:

1. Ten questions assessing attitudes to victims (Rigby and Slee,1991; Rigby, 1997) . High scores reflect positive attitudes to victims.
2. Questions about the extent to which respondents believed that certain nominated people expected them to support the victim. These people were: father, mother, friends and teachers. Expectations were assessed on a 5 point scale. High scores reflected strong expectations of giving support to the victim as opposed to supporting the bully.
3. Questions about how often they had been bullied and had bullied others at school during the current year. Two six-item scales were used to assess reported frequency. These items related to different kinds of bullying: hurtful teasing, unpleasant name

calling, hitting or kicking, exclusion from a group, spreading lies about someone, and threatening with harm.

4. A single question to assess how often they had, as a bystander acted in support of a person being victimised at school (Response categories were: never (1) a few times (2) fairly often (3) and often (4))
5. Questions to assess how their perceived level of efficacy in dealing with problems. These were taken from the Perceived Self-efficacy Scale (Schwartzter 1993). High scores reflect high degrees of perceived self efficacy.

**Respondents** Children in this study were from state coeducational schools in the metropolitan Adelaide region in South Australia They consisted of 200 Primary School students (years 6 and 7) and 200 Secondary students (Years 8 and 9) Mean ages for primary students was 11.5 years; for secondary students,13.5 years. From each type of school,data were available for 100 boys and 100 girls. In accordance with ethical requirements, parental permission was required for each child to participate

### Results

We summarise here the the main findings. (It is anticipated that more detailed results will appear in refereed journals during 2004 and 2005)

#### Reported prevalence of bullying behaviour with bystanders present

Most respondents reported that they had personally witnessed each kind of bullying at school as part of a group of bystanders at least once: 95% reported they had witnessed verbal bullying, 68% physical bullying. Some 48% of the secondary school students reported having witnessed physical sexual coercion. Boys and girls provided broadly similar reports. The figures for those who reported each kind of bullying on a weekly basis are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentages of students reporting observing the behaviour at their school on a weekly basis.

	<u>Primary students</u>	<u>Secondary students</u>
<u>Verbal bullying</u>		
Boys	60	78
Girls	40	62
<u>Physical bullying</u>		
Boys	32	50
Girls	24	50
<u>Sexual coercion</u>		
Boys		34
Girls		40

For each subgroup, 100 students provided responses.

## How respondents thought they would respond as bystanders

In relation to the verbal and physical bullying, most students indicated that they would either ignore the bullying behaviour or directly support the victim. Primary school students were generally more likely to directly help the victim; secondary students to ignore the bullying. Although relatively few students indicated that they would support the bully, this response was more commonly made by secondary school students. Informing a teacher was more likely to be indicated by the younger, primary school students. There was also a tendency for more boys than girls to report that they would ignore the situation, and more girls than boys to get a teacher.

With regard to sexual coercion, most of the secondary students indicated that they would support the victimised girl, either directly or by telling a teacher. In total, this included 63% of boys and 83% of girls. Girls were notably more supportive. Detailed results are given in Table 2.

Table 2 How respondents indicated they would respond in the bystander situations (percentages responding)

		<u>Verbal Bullying Scenario</u>			
		<u>Ignore it</u>	<u>Support the victim</u>	<u>Support the bully</u>	<u>Get a teacher</u>
<u>Primary students</u>					
Boys		33	46	2	19
Girls		19	38	0	43
<u>Secondary students</u>					
Boys		52	28	13	7
Girls		34	39	12	15
		<u>Physical Bullying Scenario</u>			
<u>Primary students</u>					
Boys		34	48	5	13
Girls		19	38	0	43
<u>Secondary students</u>					
Boys		51	30	11	8
Girls		38	37	7	18
		<u>Sexual Coercion Scenario</u>			
<u>Secondary students</u>					
Boys		32	49	5	14
Girls		18	62	0	20

## **Factors related to supporting the victim of verbal and physical bullying**

Given that the responses to questions about verbal and physical bullying situations were quite similar, students' estimates (on a 5-point scale) of the likelihood of their supporting the victim were summed for the two measures to provide a general indicator of the probability of such a response. Correlations were computed between the likelihood of supporting the victim and the following: attitude to victims, perceived expectations of (a) mother (b) father (c) friends and (d) teacher; reported previous actions to support victims of bullying; having been personally bullied at school; having personally bullied others at school; type of school (primary =1; or secondary= 2); and sex ( male =1; female = 2).

Correlations for the total sample of students that were significant at the .01 level in order of magnitude were these: Expectations of friends, .38, Pro-Victim Attitude, .35, Expectations of father, .28, Having previously intervened, .27, attending secondary school - .24, Expectations of mother, .21, having bullied others, - .19, self-efficacy, .14, being female, .13.

A further stepwise regression analysis in which all the above variables were entered indicated that four independent variables contributed significantly at the .01 level. According to the magnitude of standardised beta coefficients, these were (i) Expectations of friends (beta = .22) (ii) having previously intervened to support the victim (beta = .21) (iii) positive attitude to victims (beta = .20) (iv) being a primary school student (beta = .14). The multiple correlation derived from these predictors was .49,  $F= 27.18$ ,  $df= 4,340$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## **What children say about their readiness (or unreadiness) to help the victim**

Students gave varied reasons for their helping or not helping the victim. Here is a selection of responses expressed at one primary school to illustrate the views they expressed.

1. Helping because it seemed right to do so
  - Because it's the right thing to do
  - Because I don't want anyone to be hurt
  - Because I couldn't stand watching a person being bullied
  - Because I would hate to be in that situation so I'd try to help the person being bullied
  - Because I don't want to stand around doing nothing, letting the person suffer
  - Because the person being pushed doesn't deserve it and he or she will need morale (sic) support
  - I would support the person being pushed down because if I do it, some of my friends might do it, too.

At the same time, there were some children who were clearly concerned about what could happen to them if they intervened:

2. Not helping because of the risk of doing so

- I might get hurt if I joined in
- If I jumped in to help I could get hurt
- If I got involved they would start bullying me

3. Better to get help from a teachers

- I would tell a teacher because I could get pushed down as well
- I would tell a teacher or I would get beaten up
- It's much safer to tell a teacher. They just don't listen to kids.
- The teacher has more power to stop what is happening

From these examples it can be seen that teachers need to be sensitive not only to the aspirations of those who would like to act morally and effectively as bystanders discouraging the bullying, but also to the apprehension felt by some regarding the risks they may be taking if they do so.. The role of the teacher may become one of developing good judgment among students about when it is comparatively safe to speak up and when it may not be.

### **Some conclusions**

1. South Australian schools, students in the last two years of primary school and students in the first years of secondary schooling commonly observe bullying behaviour taking place, with verbal bullying occurring more often than physical bullying. This supports the view that bullying in schools is frequently a public spectacle.
2. Among secondary school students, sexually coercive behaviour is seen as occurring less commonly than verbal or physical bullying, but the estimate that 37% of such students seeing it happening weekly is clearly a source of concern.
3. Bullying in the presence of bystanders in schools is reported more often by secondary school students.
5. Most students report a readiness to support victims by intervening directly or indirectly (by telling a teacher), but many bystanders are inclined to ignore what is going on or, in a few cases, to give support to the aggressor. The tendency to report that they would ignore the bullying is more common among secondary students.
6. The likelihood that a student will take any action to directly discourage the bullying is related to (i) believing that such action is expected by friends (ii) past experience of having supported a victimised person (iii) how positively the bystander feels about victims (iv) being a primary school student rather than a secondary school student.

7. Generally girls appear to be more inclined to support victims of bullying and sexual coercion when a girl is being coerced by a boy.
8. Whilst many children seek to justify their expressed intentions as bystanders to support the victim on moral or ethical grounds, some children are clearly concerned about the risks involved in supporting victims and believe that in some situations at least it is preferable to inform a teacher.

### **Limitations of the study**

It must first be recognised that the results are based upon responses of students to questionnaire items. They do not necessarily indicate what students would actually do in actual bystander situations. One might expect some of them to become more acutely aware of the risk of intervening. Hence the reported figures probably overestimate the proportions of active supporters of the victim. In fact they are notably higher than those reported in field situations in which video cameras have been used (Pepler and Craig, 1995). Nevertheless it seems unlikely that not many (if any) bystanders would intervene if they did not have a prior inclination to do so. Finally, in this report we have provided only a small sample of the reasons students gave in explaining what they would do in the different situations. A more extensive examination of the qualitative data will subsequently be undertaken and reported upon.

### **Discussion of factors that relate to students reporting a readiness to help the victim**

The inclination to help appears to be multiply determined. The expectations of the peer group, especially ones friends, appear to be particularly important, evidently more so than the perceived expectations of parents, and this is true independently of whether the student attends primary or secondary school. Having intervened in the past turned out to be a good predictor of what students thought they would do in the future. The degree to which students had empathic feelings for victims also made an important contribution. Being in Primary school as opposed to being in secondary school contributed to a greater readiness to help the victim of peer aggression. Finally, it should be noted that the variables we have identified as significant predictors account for only about 25% of the variance in the expressed readiness to support the victim in a bystander situation. Other significant factors remain to be identified. The preliminary qualitative analysis of student responses suggests that these will include the appraisal of the risk involved in intervening directly in bully/victim situations and perceptions of the responsibilities of teachers.

### **Implications for schools**

From the point of view of promoting more positive bystander behaviour here are some suggestions.

- Recognise that peer pressure is a most important factor. Efforts to promote more positive or pro-social pressure are likely to be helpful, as Maines and Robinson (1992) have demonstrated in their work aimed at using group pressure to encourage positive behaviours among those who have actually bullied others.
- Note that once a child has acted as a positive bystander he or she is more likely to do so on subsequent occasions. Establishing this habit is important. This can be encouraged through practising the use of interventive skills in role play situations and reinforcing attempts to do so in real situations.
- Whatever can be done to promote empathic feelings towards victims is likely to have the effect of increasing the motivation to be helpful bystanders. Although there appear to be individual differences in empathic concern for others, some attempts to increase empathy among young children through classroom exercises have achieved significant outcomes ( Mc Mahon, Washburn, Felix, Yakin and Childrey, 2000)
- Success in encouraging pro-social bystander behaviour is easier to achieve among relatively young children, that is before moreunsympathetic attitudes towards victims have developed.
- The difficulty of promoting more pro-active bystander behaviour should not be underestimated. This research suggests that teacher's expectations of how students should act in bystander situations has little or no influence on student behaviour. This is particularly so for secondary students (see also Rigby and Bagshaw, 2003). Directly instructing students about how they should behave may in fact be counter-productive, especially with boys. Teacher influence needs to be more indirect and subtle.

### **What educators can do: practical suggestions:**

Here are some suggestions about what teachers can do to encourage children to act constructively when they observe bullying behaviour at school.

#### Work in classrooms

1. Open up a discussion of bystander behaviour with your class. It is useful to show them pictures of bystanders watching a child being bullied. See Rigby (2003) 'Stop the Bullying' Section 7, page 72). Alternatively, provide graphic descriptions. Get their opinions on how often they see such situations at their school, and what the bystanders do.
2. Ask them what they would do personally and why. Some teachers may prefer to obtain such information through an anonymous questionnaire.
3. Focus on the answers that are given from those who believe, or want to believe, that they would act boldly to discourage the bullying. Ask them why they would act that way. Positive statements from children can be very powerful, much more so than exhortation from teachers.

4. Attend also to those students who feel that they would not do anything. Their reasons usually reflect fearfulness and understandable caution. Acknowledge that there can indeed be grounds for being apprehensive.
5. Identify and discuss situations in which children and students agree that intervening may be dangerous and explain that it may sometimes be wise to get outside help for the person who is being bullied, for instance by informing a teacher.
6. Consider ways in which the risk of intervening can be minimised, eg., by making statements that show one's dislike of what is going on rather than getting physically involved in any fighting, and by encouraging other bystanders to voice their opposition to the bullying.
7. Get students to rehearse what they might say when they see bullying taking place and (if appropriate for the group) take part in role playing in simulated bystander situations.
8. Encourage students to report back to the class on their experiences when they subsequently respond as bystanders to bullying. Discuss outcomes, reinforce positive behaviour and explore difficulties and possible solutions with the children.

### **Involving the wider community**

Countering bullying requires not only a whole school approach, but also, as far as possible, a whole school community approach, especially the active involvement of the parents of the children. This can be facilitated by parent/teacher meetings and newsletters to parents in which the question of bystander behaviour as a means of discouraging bullying can be raised and discussed. Parents can play an important part in encouraging their children to be good bystanders. They may come to recognise that although there are potential risks involved (and these must be acknowledged and steps taken to minimise them) the consequences of increasing numbers of students expressing disapproval of bullying when they see it happening can be extremely positive for everybody, including their own children.

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