This study uniquely examined some commonly held beliefs relating to bullying, victimization, and disliking in adolescence. Findings suggest that victims of bullying are not disliked by most peers, but rather strongly disliked by those who identify as a bully. Implications are discussed relating to interventions that may help victims of bullying.

Bullying is a distinct form of aggressive behavior where an individual repeatedly excludes, attacks, or humiliates another individual who cannot defend himself or herself. A victim is the target of this bullying. Both bullying and victimization peak in the adolescent years. Thus, intervention efforts have largely focused on trying to reduce bullying and the impact that it has on victims.

There is a long line of research suggesting that victims of bullying are not well liked (or rejected) by their peers. Explanations for this usually point to the fact that victims tend to be more socially withdrawn and anxious than their peers. However, the claim that most classmates dislike victims relies on the assumption that the dislike directed towards a victim is evenly distributed across their peers.

The Study

The goal of the study was to learn whether dislike directed toward victims is reported by most of their peers. Two common beliefs relating to bullying were examined: 1) Victims are rejected because most peers dislike them and 2) Victims are rejected because bullies dislike them at a higher level.

Participants included 359 boys and 340 girls enrolled in the 10th grade in 13 public schools in Finland. These adolescents completed measures on how often they bullied others, how often they had been bullied, their problem behavior, their school burnout, and their academic grades.

Additionally, the adolescents completed a measure of the total nominations received when others were asked to list schoolmates “with whom you least like to spend time.”

Study Terminology

Bullying

- Form of aggression where an individual repeatedly excludes, attacks, or humiliates another individual who has trouble defending himself or herself.

Victim

- The target of bullying identified by being asked “how often have you been bullied by other pupils this year?”

Rejection/Disliking

- The total nominations received when others were asked to list schoolmates “with whom you least like to spend time.”

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This published study can be purchased at: http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10802-013-9720-5
in which they were asked to nominate three same-
grade schoolmates with whom "you least like to spend
your time" (disliking). These nominations formed
the basis of these novel analyses, as the goal was to
understand how the characteristics of the nominator
were related to the characteristics of the nominee.
Analyses also accounted for differences that may be
present in the sample and variables.

Findings

Results indicated that victims were not disliked by
the majority of their peers. While being a victim was
associated with a higher likelihood of being disliked,
the nominations they received were disproportio-
nately a function of nominations originating from
bullies. Refer to Figure 1 for more information on
these findings. Further analyses also indicated that
these findings were not present due to the co-occur-
rence of friendlessness, victimization, and rejection;
similar patterns of results were found without friend-
lessness.

Findings also indicated that victims of bullying
have interpersonal or behavioral difficulties. Results
suggested that victims reported more problem behav-
iors (such as drinking, drug use, etc.) and higher levels
of school burnout than others. They also reported
fewer friends than their peers.

Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest an important
shift for parents, teachers, and professionals in the
current understanding of bullying in adolescence. For
parents and teachers, findings suggest that the prob-
lems of those who are victimized stem largely from
experiences with bullies, which may have the possi-
bility to be monitored. Victims do not seem to have
the same problems with the peer group as a whole,
which may be very difficult to monitor.

For clinicians and other professionals, implications
from these findings may suggest the need for further
communication to victims of bullying in ways that
boost self-worth, ease interpersonal concerns, and
increase motivation to maintain peer relationships.
Although not examined in this study, it is possible
that interventions aimed at pairing victims with other
children who have well-developed social skills may be
particularly effective.

These findings are compelling but are not without
limitations. Findings from this study examine associa-
tions between variables and not direct characteris-
tics of dyadic relationships, so the origins and other
processes are largely unknown. Future work should
also consider additional instruments that directly
assess these concepts and the mechanisms associ-
ated with them.

The findings from this study do not in any way
diminish the discomfort and pain that victims of
bullying experience may face. However, they may
offer an avenue of hope. The way forward and out of
the chasm created by being a victim of bullying may
be to learn that your peers do not universally dislike
you and to consider resisting the temptation to with-
draw from them.

Additional Information

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