Psychological Effects of Bullying on Adolescents & Mitigation

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Bullying and its Psychological Implications

The word "Bullying" has a fascinating history in psychological literature. Originally appearing around the 1530s in the English language from the Dutch word "boel," it initially meant "lover" or "brother." Its connotation shifted dramatically over time, with current usage referring almost entirely to a behavior that hurts or frightens someone smaller or less powerful, with the 'bully' often forcing the victim person to do something they do not want to do. In psychological literature, the formal study of bullying emerged more prominently in the latter half of the 20th century. Dan Olweus, a Norwegian researcher, brought scholarly attention to the issue after he conducted a large-scale study that was initially spurred by the suicides of three boys, all victims of severe bullying (Clemson University, 2002).

The person who is being bullied may find it hard to defend themselves and may feel increasingly powerless against the person bullying them—a psychological effect. Bullying significantly impacts mental health and emotional state, including a range of symptoms such as stress, anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem. For 10 and 19-year-old individuals in the critical developmental stage of adolescence, these effects may be severely pronounced, resulting in depression, emotional outbursts, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, affecting academic and social development with varying outcomes. Mitigation here refers to strategies used to reduce the prevalence of bullying and minimize the effects of bullying on the target. This essay considers the psychological impact of bullying on adolescents, calling for enhanced precaution measures related to school regulation, counseling services, and community awareness to address and reduce any negative impact.

Establishing the Scope of Bullying

According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, one-third of the globe's youth is bullied, from as low as 7% in Tajikistan to 74% in Samoa. In the US, prevalence rates of having bullied others or having been bullied at school at least once in the last two months were physical at 20.8%, verbal at 53.6 %, social at

51.4%, and cyber at 13.6% (Wang et al., 2009). Males were more inclined toward physical or verbal aggression, while females were inclined toward relational aggression. 15.4% of students report being bullied by a student who was more powerful than them in some way, with 14.5% being bullied repeatedly and 12.7% being bullied repeatedly by a student who was more powerful than them (ASPA, 2024).

While in India, the statistics report that up to 85% of Indian children may be cyberbullied. A McAfee Corp report divulged that 85% percent of children in India have been a victim of cyberbullying, the highest in any of the countries surveyed. Nearly half, 45%, acknowledged cyberbullying a stranger, while at 48%, they confessed they cyberbullied someone they know. Other evidence estimates that at least 36% of Indian students are subject to harassment and bullying on school campuses, an alarmingly high prevalence, considering UNICEF's global average of at least 1 in 3 students aged 13-15 experiencing bullying (Nicholas, 2024).

Psychological Effects of Bullying on Adolescents

Bullying affects everyone—the victims, the perpetrators, and the ones who are witnesses to the process.

Immediate Psychological Effects:

Adolescents are more susceptible to the negative impacts of bullying due to their critical stage of emotional development. Their initial reactions to any such situation could be characterized by feelings of loss, anxiety, fury, and confusion because they have not fully developed their ability to cope with such occurrences. Emotional distress can lead to mood swings, anger outbursts, or severe withdrawal from social interactions (Rivers & Duncan, 2013). Adolescents may purposely avoid areas where bullying is most frequent, like schools, leading to a dramatic decrease in attendance, ultimately impacting their studies and social relationships (Cowie & Jennifer, 2008). The stress from bullying can manifest in physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, or general malaise. Adolescents may not always express or even fully understand their stress, which can lead them to complain about physical ailments as a way of expressing their emotional turmoil.

Long-Term Psychological Consequences & Impacts on Self-Esteem and Identity:

Bullying is extremely dangerous, and its long-term psychological consequences reach far into adulthood, as established by a recent study in JAMA Psychiatry. This investigation of over 1,400 children in North Carolina, surveyed at ages 9, 11, and 13, and followed up with between 19 and 26, advances prior work because it better captures the long-term effects of bullying (Smith et al., 2022). The children were categorized as victims, bullies, or both (Smith et al., 2022). Findings from this study indicate that children who were only victims of bullying are more vulnerable to complex mental health issues as adults, including mood disorders and anxiety issues such as generalized anxiety, panic disorder, and agoraphobia (Smith et al., 2022).

The Other Side:

- 'Bullies' are not only likely to suffer from issues like anxiety and depression but also face social and behavioral challenges, manifesting as poor performance in school or work, problematic relationships, substance abuse, and increased aggression or antisocial behavior (Bogenberger, 2024).

- They are also at a higher risk of engaging in violent and risky behaviors as they grow older, like abusing alcohol and other drugs, getting involved in physical fights, and having issues with law enforcement.

- Destructive early patterns often extend into adult lives, resulting in difficulties maintaining healthy relationships and an increased likelihood of being abusive towards partners or their own children.

Identification of Bullying and Mitigation Strategies

The first step to mitigating bullying is to identify when it is occurring. It can be difficult for parents or people in authoritative roles to identify as it occurs out of their sight. Thus, peers are key, through education, to when and how to help if they see someone being bullied.

Mitigating Bullying in Schools:

Bullying in adolescents is most prevalent in educational institutions such as schools. Ways to prevent bullying in schools include:

- **Teaching kindness and empathy:** Students are less likely to bully others when approaching ideas and problems from multiple perspectives through enhanced social-emotional learning. Teachers can conduct exercises to help children better understand and appreciate their identity as well as others, teaching lessons in empathy and kindness.

- **Create opportunities for connection:** Fostering community in classrooms has the potential to lower bullying and foster a healing environment for affected students. When targeted students feel connected to their peers, they are better able to cope with being bullied. Teaching and empowering students to speak up against bullying can reduce future bullying by more than 50 percent.

- **Identify 'gateway behaviors':** Behaviors that signal the beginning patterns of bullying are called "gateway behaviors" and are often missed by educators. Examples include laughing cruelly or encouraging others to laugh, name-calling, ignoring or excluding, stalking, etc. Nevertheless, if recognized early on, there is a chance to prevent bullying behavior from developing.

- **Anti-Bullying Campaigns:** Schools can run awareness campaigns that educate students about the nature of bullying, its effects, and the importance of respecting diversity. These campaigns include posters, school assemblies, and even social media. It also means that creating counseling services at school will benefit the victims of bullying and students with bullying tendencies.

Community and Parental Involvement:

A child's community and its parents play important roles in preventing and addressing bullying:

- **Community Outreach Programs**: These multi-sectorial programs involve schools, the private sector, police, and counselors working together to eradicate bullying by conducting workshops, seminars, or engaging in community services.

- **Parental Guidance Initiatives**: Parents can be trained to recognize signs of bullying and to communicate these issues with children. Schools can facilitate parental workshops that teach strategies for reinforcing positive behavior and addressing negative behaviors early at home.

Conclusion

Bullying is a disturbing but ever-present issue, holding severe implications for adolescents. Communities should address it in a multidimensional manner, recognizing that it affects victims, perpetrators, and bystanders differently. This essay outlines the immense strife that bullying cuts across the lives of adolescents, not only instilling discomfort but also rewiring their futures for the worst. From heightened risks of mental health disorders like anxiety and depression to issues with social integration and academic performance, long-term consequences lead individuals to experience an erosion of self-worth and increased vulnerability (Cowie, 2008).

Such effects can only be managed through profound prevention measures, including educational reform, community participation, legal instruments, and individual and systemic changes. If all these prevention measures are synthesized, they will create a compassionate society where the developmental process of every adolescent is protected and valued. Responding to the issue is not limited to alleviation of the immediate pain but also undoing the immense harm to mental health and societal cohesiveness. In the words of various researchers, current interventions can help eradicate so many problems in the future, thereby making the world safer for more children (Copeland, 2022).

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