

Bullies, Victims, and Disliking: The Feeling is Mutual¹

Christopher A. Hafen, Brett Laursen, Jari-Erik Nurmi, & Katariina Salemla-Aro

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 Explanations for this usually point to the fact that victims tend to be more socially withdrawn and anxious than their peers.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

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".

¹This research brief is based on the following published study: Hafen, C. A., Laursen, B., Nurmi, J. E., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2013). Bullies, victims, and antipathy: The feeling is mutual. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*. Advance online publication. doi: 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 disproportionately 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-occurrence of friendlessness, victimization, and rejection; similar patterns of results were found without friendlessness.

Findings also indicated that victims of bullying have interpersonal or behavioral difficulties. Results suggested that victims reported more problem behaviors (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 suggests an important shift for parents, teachers, and professionals in the current understanding of bullying in adolescence. For parents and teachers, findings suggest that the problems of those who are victimized stem largely from experiences with bullies, which may have the possibility 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 associations between variables and not direct characteristics 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 associated 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 withdraw from them.

Additional Information

Support for the FinEdu study from which this data originated was provided by the Academy of Finland (134931, 139168, 7213486) and the Jacobs Foundation.

