

A Survey of Bullying in Singapore Primary Schools

As part of a bullying-free initiative by the Singapore Children's Society, a survey of primary school students was conducted by the Society in 2007. The aim was to examine the prevalence of the various forms of bullying behaviours experienced by our children, the effects bullying had on them, the sources of support the victims turned to and their perceived effectiveness, and to compare the findings with those from an earlier survey of secondary school students also undertaken by the Society in 2006. A profile of these victims and their bullies, and of self-admitted bullies, was also created. The findings were examined in relation to gender, ethnicity, and educational levels.

Methods and sampling

The largely quantitative questionnaire was adapted from the previous questionnaire designed by the Singapore Children's Society for secondary school students. Some changes appropriate for younger respondents were made, such as the use of simpler English, and some items were pooled or deleted to shorten the interview. Pilot tests were conducted to ensure children could understand the questions and that the interview was not too long.

Students nationwide who attended a local primary school the year before were invited by trained interviewers to take part in this one-to-one interview at home, where they were asked to recall their bullying experiences in their previous school year. A total of 786 primary school students aged 6 to (exceptionally) 16 years old- with a mean age of 10.3 years- took part in this survey. The households were selected randomly from the Singapore Street Directory 2007 and respondents were stratified by gender, ethnicity, and educational level to reflect the Singapore's population distributions as reported by the Singapore Department of Statistics (2006) and the Ministry of Education (2006). Such stratification also avoided biases that could occur if sample selection was limited to certain schools or catchment areas.

The voluntary nature of the study was stressed to the respondents who were also informed they could withdraw participation at any point in the interview. Parental consent for each pupil was also obtained before the interview commenced. Each interview took no more than twenty minutes to complete and all interviews were conducted in English (the medium of instruction in Singapore schools).

To examine the prevalence of bullying and the common types of bullying behaviours faced by our primary school students, respondents were presented with a list of common physical, verbal, relational and cyber bullying behaviours and asked to rate how often they experienced each hurtful behaviour on an objective frequency scale. To find out the effects of bullying on these victims, respondents were asked, from a list of common physical, emotional and psychological reactions to bullying, if they had experienced any of those effects. The students were also asked if they informed anyone about their bullying experiences, who they approached, and how effective they found them to be. They were also asked to provide some demographic details of their bullies, if known, including gender, ethnicity and educational level. If the respondent was bullied by more than one person, he or she would be asked to describe the bully he or she was most affected by. Finally, they were also asked if they themselves engaged in any bullying behaviours.

Summary of key findings

Results showed that approximately 1 in 5 primary school students surveyed was a victim of bullying, defined as any action apparently intended to victimise and repeated at least twice every single month over a span of one school year. Bullies and their victims tended to be of the same gender, the same ethnic group, and in the same class at school. However, more bullies and victims were boys than girls, and there was greater tendency for boys to bully girls than for girls to bully boys. Students of any ethnicity were equally likely to be bullied. Similar proportions of children reported being bullied at each primary level.

A group of students who was involved in both bullying and being bullied was identified in the present study. These bully-victims made up almost two-thirds of the self-admitted bullies (67%) but they made up less than

one-fifth of the victims (16%). It is possible that these students could be victims who have certain characteristics that made them react to bullying with aggression, or they could be bullies possessing qualities that provoke other bullies, although it is not clear in the present study which group these bully-victims belong to. Nevertheless, many of them did claim to have bullied someone because they were provoked.

Name calling or the usage of vulgarities on the victims was most prevalent. Name calling is particularly a cause for concern because it is something adults may easily dismiss since it does not cause any obvious damage (i.e., physical) to the victims. The most common notion of bullying, physically bullying, was experienced by less than half the victims and cyber bullying was the least common form of bullying despite the overwhelming media attention it has been receiving in recent times. Girls in general also experienced more relational bullying, such as withdrawal of relationships and ostracism, than boys.

The feelings most frequently reported by the victims were of anger and sadness. Next most frequently reported was feeling 'OK' with approximately 2 in 5 victims reportedly feeling so despite being bullied, suggesting that our children were quite resilient. However, a majority of children who reported feeling 'OK' also reported feeling other effects of bullying, suggesting these children could have concealed their real feelings, which would be a caution for adults not to take replies of 'OK' at face value. School performance was also affected for some victims who had difficulty paying attention in class, and a few of them missed days in school altogether as a result of being bullied. A few bullied students also exhibited more destructive behaviours like damaging properties, hurting animals or other people, and even themselves.

Finally, children were more inclined to tell their parents, particularly their mothers, about being bullied, although their replies suggested that schools, particularly teachers, were effective more often when approached. However, as we do not know what guided individual children's choice of confidant, this finding does not necessarily imply that we should encourage children to go to their teachers and principals more. In fact, most of these support sources were able to make things better for the victims, and only seldom did they make things worse.

The results obtained in this study, together with the data collected from the earlier bullying survey on secondary school students provided a clearer picture of bullying in Singapore schools. A copy of the research monograph, *Bullying in Singapore Schools*, comparing findings from the two surveys can be obtained from our Research and Outreach Centre (tel: 6358 0911) or downloaded from the Society's website at <http://www.childrensociety.org.sg>.