

Amie E. Grills
Melissa Holt
Gerald Reid
Chelsey Bowman

Advances in Psychotherapy –
Evidence-Based Practice

Bullying and Peer Victimization



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About the Authors

Amie E. Grills, PhD, is a professor at Boston University’s Wheelock College of Education & Human Development. She is a licensed clinical psychologist and researcher whose work has examined the roles of peer (e.g., bullying), familial (e.g., parental stress), and academic (e.g., achievement) variables on the development of youth internalizing difficulties. She also conducts research on risk and resiliency factors among individuals exposed to traumatic events.

Melissa Holt, PhD, is an associate professor at Boston University’s Wheelock College of Education & Human Development, and a licensed psychologist. Dr. Holt’s research focuses on adolescents’ experiences with victimization and identity-based harassment. She has evaluated the overlap among violence exposures, factors that promote resilience among youth exposed to violence, disparities in victimization and its correlates, and the efficacy of school-based prevention programs.

Gerald Reid, PhD, is a licensed psychologist in private practice in Boston, MA, as well as a part-time faculty member at Boston University’s Wheelock College of Education. Dr. Reid has conducted research on the topic of bullying in schools. In his practice, Dr. Reid treats patients who have undergone mental health challenges related to interpersonal stressors, such as bullying.

Chelsey Bowman, PhD, is a postdoctoral psychology fellow at Children’s National Hospital in Washington, DC. Dr. Bowman’s research interests include understanding the impact of a range of victimization forms, including bullying, on the health and wellbeing of youth and college students. Clinically, Dr. Bowman provides evidence-based treatments to youth and their families for chronic and acute medical and psychiatric conditions.

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Amie E. Grills

Wheelock College of Education & Human Development,
Boston University, MA

Melissa Holt

Wheelock College of Education & Human Development,
Boston University, MA

Gerald Reid

Wheelock College of Education & Human Development,
Boston University, MA

Chelsey Bowman

Children's National Hospital, Washington, DC

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Phone +49 551 99950 0, Fax +49 551 99950 111; E-mail publishing@hogrefe.com

SALES & DISTRIBUTION

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30 Amberwood Parkway, Ashland, OH 44805
Phone (800) 228 3749, Fax (419) 281 6883; E-mail customersupport@hogrefe.com

UK: Hogrefe Publishing, c/o Marston Book Services Ltd., 160 Eastern Ave.,
Milton Park, Abingdon, OX14 4SB
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EUROPE: Hogrefe Publishing, Merkelstr. 3, 37085 Göttingen, Germany
Phone +49 551 99950 0, Fax +49 551 99950 111; E-mail publishing@hogrefe.com

OTHER OFFICES

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1

Description

Maria is a 12-year-old girl who just started seventh grade at a new middle school. She is vibrant, creative, and caring. She tries hard to make friends over the first few weeks of school, but no one invites her to sit with them at lunch or to hang out after school. One day a group of girls ask her to sit with them at lunch and Maria is thrilled! They tell her that they know a boy who likes her. Maria is excited by the news of a potential crush and even more excited to be sitting with a group of potential friends. The ringleader of the girls encourages Maria to message the boy on Instagram and even gives Maria the boy's Instagram account name. At night, Maria excitedly messages the boy's account and to her surprise he immediately responds. Over the next few weeks, she begins messaging him every night. He encourages her to share her secrets and dares her to do things that Maria does not feel quite right doing, but does anyway for fear of losing her new friends. At school, this boy never seems to notice or acknowledge her, but online he says this makes their relationship even more special. A few weeks later, Maria walks into English class and feels like everyone is whispering about her. She tries to focus on the teacher, but she hears two students giggling and saying her name. Between classes, Maria returns to her locker and finds that it has been vandalized. Someone has taped a piece of paper that says "Maria is a slut" in large red letters. Scared, crying, and feeling helpless, Maria rips the sign off her locker and runs to the bathroom. Hiding in a stall, she hears two of the girls she sits with at lunch discussing the day's drama. They are giggling at the fact that they convinced Maria that a boy had a crush on her when in fact they created a fake Instagram account and pretended to be the boy. Maria realizes that the girls she thought were her friends, were actually the ones talking to her on Instagram. Worse, they were sending screenshots of the messages to the whole grade.

Stories like the one above are all too common and reflect the pressing need to address bullying – the full story, including interventions, is provided in Chapter 5. Over the past decade there has been an explosion of media attention on youth bullying. News articles have focused on individual youth who have been bullied at school and/or online and have been driven to the depths of despair. Stories about youth who were perceived as "different" because of their accent, gender identity, skin color, sexual orientation, or interests, and who experienced verbal and physical assaults, online taunting, and other forms of harassment, frequently make headlines. Antibullying laws now exist in all US states, and lawsuits related to bullying have become increasingly common. While always devastating, the stories are rarely as simple as the media coverage. In fact, peer victimization and bullying among youth are typically quite

Theories and Models

This chapter provides theoretical and empirical perspectives that offer potential explanations for why bullying occurs. Within any relationship, there can be harm done within the context of a power differential. Differences in power can occur in almost any form, depending on context (Farrell et al., 2015). For instance, a mild-mannered young boy of small stature can feel weaker, or even scared, in comparison to a stronger, larger, and more hostile peer. A shy child with few friends may feel intimidated by a popular child who has a large social group. The contrast between a majority and minority group can also set the stage for power dynamics to emerge, as members of the minority group feel isolated or outnumbered. Even qualities of being smarter, wealthier, or more “talented” than others can constitute a power differential. Problems emerge when one’s sense of power contributes to malevolent behavior, which is the case with bullying.

Power dynamics are important to consider for any relational difficulties, including bullying

There are various pathways by which a child can ultimately become involved in bullying as a perpetrator or target. Meta-analyses find many predictors of becoming a perpetrator or target of bullying (e.g., Guo, 2016). Bullying occurs across demographics, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographic locations. Given the multitude and complexity of factors involved, it is not surprising that prescribed antibullying programs that are meant to eradicate bullying behaviors are only moderately effective (Jiménez-Barbero et al., 2016), suggesting the limitations of a one-size-fits-all way of understanding bullying. Rather, we suggest that individual pathways as well as broader contexts are important to consider in understanding youth involvement with bullying.

2.1 Social-Ecological Theory

Social ecological theory has provided a guiding framework for understanding bullying among individuals through this type of conceptualization, as it takes into consideration multiple factors that play a role in one’s life (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The theory posits that youth behaviors are influenced by individual characteristics as well as factors from a range of nested contextual systems with which the individual interacts. *Microsystems* are those that directly affect youths, such as schools, peer groups, and families, from which they learn behaviors and adopt attitudes and beliefs shared by their peers and families. *Mesosystems* comprise interrelations among these microsystems. For instance, a child’s continued involvement with a bullying

Diagnosis and Treatment Indicators

3.1 Assessment of Bullying Experiences

Evaluations of bullying experiences typically assess the extent to which individuals have engaged in bullying behaviors and/or have been targeted by bullying behaviors. Assessments also might evaluate information on the context of bullying (e.g., where bullying typically occurs) or school climate related to bullying (e.g., Williams & Guerra, 2007). A variety of assessment methods have been developed for evaluating bullying experiences (e.g., Hamburger et al., 2011). Some measures are designed to assess typically occurring bullying behaviors (e.g., Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), whereas others are focused on acts committed in a recent specific time period (e.g., past week or past month). Additionally, there are wide-spanning school climate surveys that include assessment of bullying experiences. Interviews are sometimes used to gather information about bullying experiences; however, survey measures have been the predominant assessment approach utilized by researchers, practitioners, and school personnel. Most of the psychometrically validated survey measures available were designed to be completed by the child or adolescent, although a handful of teacher or parent completed measures are also available (see Appendix 2), which are primarily designed for late childhood/early adolescent aged youth. Overall, the selection of measures used to evaluate bullying experiences will typically be informed by the specific areas needing evaluation, the timeframe under consideration, measurement type, and the target population being assessed.

Time frames of interest, measurement type, and target population demographics should guide evaluation decisions

Although there is no diagnostic label for children who bully or are bullied, there is a section of the DSM-5 dedicated to other conditions that may be a focus of clinical attention, which includes V62.4 (Z60.4) social exclusion or rejection (APA, 2013). This section could be used as a diagnostic indicator of bullying victimization. Of course, any comorbidities/correlates of bullying or victimization (e.g., substance use, depression) may be diagnosed and coded as well.

3.1.1 Self-Report Survey Assessments of Bullying and Victimization Experiences

Several self-report, survey format questionnaires are available for assessing bullying experiences. Survey measures of victimization experiences are typically designed for youth aged 8 and older. These measures vary with regard to such aspects as length, item format (e.g., frequency or Likert scale), and

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Treatment

There are no targeted individual treatments specifically designed for those involved in bullying. Rather, bullying and its potential consequences may be addressed in therapy using a variety of frameworks (e.g., CBT). However, as detailed below there is a substantial body of research on school-based prevention programs aimed to reduce bullying. Please also see Appendix 1 for a list of useful websites, apps, and events.

School-based programs designed to address bullying are most common and effective to scale

4.1 Methods of Treatment

As described in subsequent sections, effective bullying prevention programs involve a whole school approach. These approaches may also include targeted supports for students engaged in bullying perpetration or who have been victimized by bullying, but the overarching goal of such programs is to create a school climate that does not tolerate bullying and in which teachers and students feel they have the skills and confidence to engage in bystander behaviors that reduce any bullying behaviors that do occur.

Bullying prevention programs using a whole school approach have been found to be most effective

4.2 Mechanisms of Action

A core assumption of the majority of bullying prevention programs is that for bullying behaviors within a school to change, all members of the school – from students to teachers to administrators – must have a clear understanding of what bullying behaviors are and a commitment to not tolerating or engaging in such behaviors. Thus, a key mechanism of action for bullying reduction is modifying norms around bullying, which in turn promotes a more positive school climate. There are also program-specific proposed mechanisms for action. The most widely used bullying prevention programs have clearly articulated theories of change, through which the mechanisms of action to reduce bullying are explicated. For instance, some programs address bullying through a broader social-emotional learning framework, whereas other programs (particularly those for adolescents) focus on building effective bystander skills among students. Below we provide information about bullying prevention program efficacy broadly, and then turn to specific programs and their approaches to addressing this issue.

Meta-analyses synthesize the effects of specific interventions or programs across all available studies that meet established quality criteria

4.3 Efficacy

Antibullying legislation now exists in numerous countries and all 50 states in the US, reflecting a positive step forward in addressing bullying. However, only about half of the states explicitly encourage bullying prevention within the legislation, and only 14 states mandate bullying prevention programs in public K–12 schools (Srabstein et al., 2008). Further, among states requiring the implementation of bullying prevention programs, legislation most often does not provide specific recommendations of programs or features of programs nor funding for schools to implement such programs (Srabstein et al., 2008). This makes it challenging for schools to identify optimal programs to implement, particularly if school staff are unaware of national registries that provide this information, such as Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development (<https://www.blueprintsprograms.com>), and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s Model Programs Guide (<https://www.ojjdp.gov/mpg>).

Notably, one source of information about programs historically was the National Registry for Evidence-Based Prevention Programs, but this was discontinued in 2018 (Green-Hennessey, 2018). We highlight the National Registry for Evidence-Based Prevention Programs here given some of the programs we describe below had been identified as effective for particular outcomes by them. Further, although there are a number of reviews and meta-analyses of bullying prevention programs, this information is not always effectively disseminated to schools, and therefore at the school-level there is limited knowledge about the state of bullying prevention research more broadly.

In this section, we summarize what is known about the efficacy of bullying prevention programs broadly, and then turn to descriptions of three programs that have demonstrated some evidence of effectiveness. We close with challenges related to effectively implementing evidence-based bullying prevention programs.

Research on the effectiveness of bullying prevention programs has yielded mixed, although promising, findings, as evidenced by systematic reviews and meta-analyses. In one of the first systematic reviews, Vreeman and Carroll (2007) found that effectiveness varied by program type; whole-school approaches were more effective than classroom-based curriculum programs, for instance. This was in contrast to earlier reviews (Ferguson et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2004) which concluded that, for the most part, programs did not result in self-reported declines in bullying victimization and perpetration. Other more recent systematic reviews have also demonstrated promising findings (Evans et al., 2014; Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Merrell et al., 2008). Based on the 30 programs reviewed by Farrington and Ttofi (2009), findings indicated that, on average, there were reductions of 17–23% for victimization and 20–30% for bullying perpetration. Notably, there were stronger effects in Europe than in the United States. Further, in their 2011 meta-analytic extension of this systematic review, there were significant program effects for victimization and perpetration (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Notably, effect sizes were stronger for evaluations of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (described in Section 4.4.1) than other programs. Evans and colleagues (2014) extended these findings in their systematic review, which included 32 evaluations of bullying interventions from 2009–2014. This review did not syn-

Case Vignette

Let's return to the case of Maria mentioned in the introduction. She is the 7th-grade girl who first experienced cyberbullying by her peers and then in-person peer victimization when her peers gossiped about her and posted a sign calling her a "slut." June, a school psychologist, has been tasked with handling the situation. At first, June feels overwhelmed at the thought as her only knowledge of the incident comes third hand. Patel, a 7th-grade science teacher had told June that he overheard two students whispering about a sign on Maria's locker. When June enters the 7th-grade hallway, she finds students mulling around and giggling. On the floor, she finds a crumpled-up sign that says, "Maria is a slut" in red ink. June assumes that the sign refers to Maria, the new 7th grader, and sets out to find her. June finally finds Maria sitting outside the girls' bathroom with her sweatshirt over her head. June reintroduces herself as she only met Maria briefly at the start of the year. Maria does not respond. June sits down next to Maria and tries to build some rapport before asking Maria about the sign, which June has tucked in her pocket. June tells Maria that she can see that she is upset and she would like to help her. Noting that it is lunch time, June invites Maria to join her in her office for lunch. Maria reluctantly agrees.

In an effort to increase Maria's comfort, June inquires about mundane topics, such as Maria's favorite lunch as they walk to June's office. Once Maria has eaten her lunch and is comfortably sitting in June's office, June begins to ask Maria some questions about the incident. Although June, an experienced psychologist, has suspicions about what occurred earlier in the day, she refrains from sharing these assumptions. Instead, she says, "Maria, I could see that you were really upset earlier and my job as the school's psychologist is to look after everyone's well-being. I would like to hear what happened and see if there are any ways that I can help you feel better or resolve the issue." Maria nods and says, "Okay, but will you promise not to tell anyone? My parents would be so angry if they found out about what happened." Maria's request, a common one among adolescents, gives June some pause. On the one hand, June needs to find out what happened today; on the other hand, she cannot promise that she will not tell anyone. June validates Maria's fear about her parents and notes that she cannot make that promise because her job requires her to look out for the well-being and safety of students, but she can promise that she will keep Maria informed about what steps June needs to take.

Comforted by June's honesty, Maria begins recounting the events of earlier in the day. She explains how Jessica and her friends had tricked Maria into thinking she was communicating with a boy in their grade, but actually it was Jessica, Sarah, and Jasmine using a fake Instagram account. Maria is unwilling to share what specifically she communicated over Instagram, but she does

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Appendix: Tools and Resources

The materials on the following pages may be reproduced by the purchaser for personal/clinical use.

The printable, letter-sized PDFs can be downloaded free of charge from the Hogrefe website after registration.

Appendix 1: Websites, Apps, Events

Appendix 2: Assessment Measures for Bullying Perpetration and Victimization

Appendix 3: Interview Questions