Situational and Interpersonal Correlates of Anxiety Associated with Peer Victimisation

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ABSTRACT: In Study One the nature of peer bullying among 353 Australian primary school children from years three to seven was studied with a view to understanding the anxiety generated by victimisation. Over one-third of the sample reported feeling unsafe from bullying at school and over half of the sample believed that the reason children did not ask for help from bullying was that they were too afraid. In Study Two 114 primary school students from a second school were assessed for social-evaluative anxiety associated with peer victimisation at school. The findings indicated that victimisation was associated with fear of negative evaluation amongst males and females and social avoidance amongst females.

KEY WORDS: Bullies; Victims; Anxiety; Social-Evaluative Anxiety.

The topic of children's peer relationships is now well established as a focus of considerable research interest. As Smith & Cowie have noted, from quite an early age peers are especially attractive to children. The same authors also observe that between the ages of two and four years there is a great increase in the social skills children demonstrate in interacting with peers. It is now clearly understood that peers have a particular part to play in children's social, emotional and cognitive development. For example, from a cognitive perspective Youniss has emphasised the important role of the inter-change between children and the conflicts that inevitably arise, as a means for encouraging moral development, perspective taking and negotiation skills. Of course, learning also occurs through social reinforcement as children imitate their peers during work and play. In view of the recognition of the significance of peers for a child's optimal develop-
ment the quality of the relationships children have with each other becomes important.

One productive line of research that has yielded a great deal of information regarding the nature of children's peer relationships has delineated status subgroups, namely, neglected, rejected, average, controversial and popular children. Another line of research which has achieved some prominence has focussed on bully/victim behaviour amongst school children.

In studies involving over 140,000 Norwegian students aged 8-16 years Olweus found that 9% reported being bullied while 7% reported bullying others “now and then” or “more often”. Smith in extensive British studies suggests that figures of one in five for being bullied and one in ten for bullying others are not atypical. In Australia, research involving 4229 students from co-educational primary and secondary schools indicates that at least one in seven students report being bullied by peers (physically or psychologically) at least “once a week” or “more often”.

Identifiable as a sub-type of children's aggressive behaviour, bullying is characterised by an imbalance of strength, a deliberate intention to hurt the other and repetitive negative acts. As reported by Slee the incidence of bullying is greatest in the early years of primary school and peaks again in years 8 and 9 of secondary school. In general, boys are bullied more than girls, especially physically, while girls are more likely to report being hurt by being verbally abused or by being deliberately excluded from groups.

In Australia a series of studies have established what children the world over have always known, namely that bullying is a physically harmful, psychologically damaging and socially isolating aspect of their peer relationships. Children's understanding of how bullying affects the quality of their peer relationships is illustrated in the following drawing completed by a year 5 primary school child.

Being bullied involves participating, albeit unwillingly, in a personally distressing social relationship. One might expect that there would be some anxiety associated with such an aversive and threatening social situation. One indicator of the anxiety experienced by victims subject to the kind of abuse reflected in the above drawing, is reflected in their repeated absenteeism from school. In a study of primary school children, it was found that 10% of victims reported actually staying away from school to avoid bullying while 29% had thought of doing so. The focus of the present study is the anxiety experienced by children caught in the bully/victim cycle of violence.