



Pergamon

Child Abuse
& Neglect

Child Abuse & Neglect 27 (2003) 713–732

Bullying in schools and exposure to domestic violence[☆]

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Received 27 November 2001; received in revised form 19 December 2002; accepted 24 December 2002

Abstract

Objectives: The study aimed to investigate the relationship between bullying and victimization in school and exposure to interparental violence in a nonclinical sample of Italian youngsters.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted with a sample of 1059 Italian elementary and middle school students. Participants completed a self-report anonymous questionnaire measuring bullying and victimization and exposure to interparental violence. The questionnaire also included measures on parental child abuse and socio-demographic variables.

Results: Almost half of all boys and girls reported different types of bullying and victimization in the previous 3 months, with boys more involved than girls in bullying others. Exposure to interparental physical violence and direct bullying were significantly associated especially for girls: girls exposed to father's violence against the mother and those exposed to mother's violence against the father were among the most likely to bully directly others compared with girls who had not been exposed to any interparental violence. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses revealed that bullying and victimization were predicted by exposure to interparental violence, especially mother-to-father violence, over and above age, gender, and child abuse by the father.

Conclusions: Exposure to interparental violence is associated with bullying and victimization in school, even after controlling for direct child abuse. Violence within the family has detrimental effects on the child's behavior; schools, in this regard, can play a fundamental role in early detection of maladjustment. © 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Bullying; Victimization; Exposure to domestic violence; Family violence; School behavior

[☆]The research was supported by the Italian National Research Council (CNR) Grant No. 203.04.01 issued to the author.

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Introduction

Bullying in school is a serious problem affecting between 7 and 35% of children and adolescents in Europe, United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan (Smith et al., 1999). Bullying has been extensively defined as any form of physical or psychological behavior repeatedly inflicted by a more powerful and stronger student (or group of students) towards another one perceived as weaker (Farrington, 1993).

Causes of bullying are multiple and are related to the individual, but also to the socio-family environment. Violent homes are among the highest risk factor for the development of antisocial behavior; bullying, in this regard, has been found to be associated with violence within the family context (Farrington, 1993). Longitudinal studies on pathways to delinquency have shown that youngsters who develop a deviant career are more likely to have parents who are abusive towards their partners, compared to those not exposed to interparental violence (Steinberg, 2000).

Bowers, Smith, and Binney (1994) also found that in England children who bully others or who are victimized at school have parents who tend to be violent to each other and also to them; cohesive families are those found least likely to report disruptive behaviors among children (Farrington, 1991).

A significant strong association between maladjustment and exposure to domestic violence was found also by the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (Dauvergne & Johnson, 2001) that showed that according to the mothers' accounts, children witnessing violence perpetuated by their partners were nearly three times as likely to be involved in physical aggression at school (fighting, bullying, or threatening others) compared to those who did not witness violence (28.1% vs. 11.3%) and over twice as likely to be involved in indirect aggression (nonphysical forms of aggression, such as rallying friends against someone, spreading gossip, excluding someone from a group, or setting up another child for punishment).

The only Italian research conducted so far on the relationship between bullying and parental rearing practices was conducted by Baldry and Farrington (1998, 2000) who found that bullies have authoritarian conflicting parents; no studies, however, have examined the relationship between exposure to domestic violence and bullying and victimization at school separately for boys and girls.

There is now clear evidence on the relationship between family violence and the development of aggressive and antisocial behavior in children living in these families (Widom, 1989). Children exposed to domestic violence are at higher risk of developing short- and long-term (negative) consequences, compared to those who are not exposed (Herrera & McCloskey, 2001; Kolbo, Blakely, & Engleman, 1996). At school they tend to be more aggressive, or even commit delinquent acts or else they are at risk of becoming victims of further abuse at school. Sternberg et al. (1993) found that abused children and those who were abused and who witnessed family violence were more likely than children in the control group to exhibit externalizing behavior, such as aggression towards peers (see also the review by Edleson, 1999). Girls show more internalizing problems, such as depression and anxiety (O'Keefe, 1994, 1995); girls are less likely to develop conduct disorders compared to boys (Fantuzzo, Boruch, Beriama, Atkins, & Marcus, 1997), but girls become more submissive and possible targets of bullying at school (Kerig, 1999; Widom, 2000).

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