



## Types and experiences of bullying in adolescents with an autism spectrum disorder



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### ABSTRACT

Being victimized by one's peers is a major problem in adolescence, and research has suggested that individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) may experience higher rates of bullying than their typically-developing (TD) peers. However, it is currently unclear whether adolescents with ASD are victimized more by their peers simply because they are 'different'. This study was designed to examine percentage rates across different types of bullying behaviour in adolescents with an ASD ( $n = 24$ ), in comparison to a group of special-needs adolescents without an ASD ( $n = 22$ ), and a group of typically developing peers ( $n = 24$ ), to determine whether simply being 'different' leads to higher rates of victimization. We also examined the agreement between parental and self-reports of bullying behaviour experienced by these groups. Overall, more adolescents with ASD reported victimization than adolescents in the other two groups. In addition, those with ASD reported more social bullying in comparison to the other two groups and more physical bullying than the TD group. No difference was found between parental and self-reports for the bullying experienced by the adolescents with ASD or special needs; however, TD adolescents reported higher levels of victimization than their parents reported for them. Contributing factors for the victimization experienced by adolescents with an ASD are discussed.

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Bullying has been systematically researched since the mid-1970s and is recognized as a significant and highly prevalent problem in our society (e.g., Berger, 2007). There are associated short- and long-term effects for all involved: children who bully are at risk for delinquency (White & Loeber, 2008), substance abuse (Sourander et al., 2007), and conduct disorder (Pepler & Craig, 2000). Children who are victimized are at elevated risk for anxiety disorders (Sourander et al., 2007), sexual harassment (Gruber & Fineran, 2008), and have trouble concentrating at school (Pepler & Craig, 2000). There are also vulnerable populations, such as children with special needs, who are at heightened risk for involvement in bullying and victimization (Estell et al., 2009). Similar to normative populations, peer victimization in special-needs populations has been correlated with loneliness, anxiety, depression, somatic complaints, and mental health problems (Baumeister, Storch, & Geffken, 2008; Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012). To date, there is limited research on children with special needs and their involvement in bullying behaviour, although work emerging from school psychology and clinical psychology strongly

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suggest that children with special needs are at much greater risk of being involved in bullying behaviour than their typically developing (TD) peers (see review by Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2011). The majority of research in this area has typically concentrated on heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous, special-needs populations. As a result, it is not clear whether some types of special-needs populations differ in the frequency, severity, and/or types of bullying behaviours experienced.

## 1. Autism spectrum disorders and bullying behaviour

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) includes autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, and pervasive developmental disorders-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), conditions that can be distinguished from other childhood disorders by the presence of impairments in social interaction and communication, and repetitive or stereotyped behaviours (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000). There is growing evidence that children with ASD are at greater risk of victimization than their TD peers (Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Little, 2002; Montes & Halterman, 2007; Rowley et al., 2012; Sofronoff, Stone, & Dark, 2011; Symes & Humphrey, 2010; Van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010; Wainscot, Naylor, Sutcliffe, Tantam, & Williams, 2008); however, how their experiences of bullying behaviour may differ from their special-needs peers without ASD is not well understood. Although any child with special needs may be seen as 'different' by their typically developing peers and thus singled out for victimization, individuals with ASD have added risk factors due to their primary deficits in social interaction. The first goal of the current study was thus to compare a group of adolescent boys with ASD to a group of adolescents with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and/or a learning disorder (LD) and a group of typically developing (TD) adolescents, to determine if ASD adolescents differ from the latter two groups in the frequency and types of bullying behaviour experienced.

### 1.1. Types of bullying

There are various types of bullying, most often categorized as physical, verbal, relational, or cyber. Although each of these types is considered distinct, it is not uncommon for perpetrators to employ a combination, or all of these modes towards a single victim (Berger, 2007). Although limited, there is evidence to suggest that children and adolescents with ASD experience various types of victimization; however, the diverse methodologies used by researchers make it hard to determine whether children and adolescents with ASD are more vulnerable to some types of bullying than others. For example, Little (2002) surveyed 411 mothers of children aged 4–17 years, diagnosed with Asperger's disorder (AS) and/or a non-verbal learning disability (NVLD). Notably, 94% of the mothers reported that their child had been bullied in some way at least once in the past year. The two most frequent types of bullying reported were emotional bullying (75%) and physical bullying (73%) by peers and siblings. However, in contrast to other studies, it should be noted that Little's rates include both bullying by peers and bullying by siblings. Bullying between siblings has been shown to occur at least once a month in as many as 50% of all families (Wolke & Skew, 2012). As a result, the amount of peer-related bullying experienced by the children in Little's study is not clear.

Wainscot et al. (2008) used a structured interview to assess the perceptions of 30 high-functioning students with an ASD, in comparison to a group of TD peers, to examine whether or not the students perceived they had been bullied. Of the students with ASD, 90% reported that they were disliked by someone based on their impression of the other person ignoring them, teasing and calling them names (50%), shouting at them (6%), and/or physically abusing them (16.6%). In comparison to the TD students, Wainscot et al. reported that students with ASD experienced more victimization, yet there were no differences between the two groups across social, verbal, or physical types of bullying. One limitation of this study is that the focus was on disliking, not bullying; thus, no definition of bullying behaviour was presented to the students prior to the interview. As a result, it is not clear if students held a common understanding of what types of behaviours constitute bullying.

Using on-line data from parents, Cappadocia et al. (2012) examined the rates of physical, verbal, social, and cyber types of victimization experienced by children and adolescents with ASD. It was reported that 68% of youth in their sample had experienced more than one type of victimization in the past month. The most frequently occurring types (occurring twice or more per week) were verbal (28%) or social in nature (28%), followed by physical bullying (8%) and cyber-bullying (1%). Although Cappadocia et al.'s findings suggest that children and adolescents with ASD have an elevated risk of victimization, these researchers did not include a control group. As a result, it is unclear whether the children and adolescents with ASD might have differed from their TD peers in their experiences across the types of bullying behaviours.

### 1.2. Victimization and ASD

Characteristics of adolescents with ASD can clearly contribute to a profile of victimization for this population. For example, having a strong social network has been found to act as a buffer against being bullied in typically-developing children (see Malecki & Demaray, 2004). As many individuals with ASD report having few, if any, friends (Rowley et al., 2012; Wainscot et al., 2008), they are more likely to be vulnerable to victimization. For those who do report friendships, these friendships tend to be superficial, lacking in supportiveness and closeness (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2003; Rowley et al., 2012). Parental reports further corroborate the lack of friendships and diminished social networks experienced by children

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