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# Child Abuse & Neglect



## Bullying among school-age children in the greater Beirut area: Risk and protective factors<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the prevalence of bullying at schools in the Greater Beirut Area and the extent to which differences in children's sociodemographics, family and school environment, and coping strategies could account for variation in academic achievement, PTSD and emotional and behavioral disorders. Participants were 665 male and female children of mean age 13.8 years. Results indicated that a high proportion of children had been involved in bullying on a regular basis with victims having a higher prevalence ratio than bullies and bully/victims. Verbal bullying including spreading rumors was the most common type of victimization, followed by being rejected from a group. Being bullied about one's religion or sect comprised one of the most common bullying behaviors in schools. Students rarely tried to stop a student from being bullied and teachers were reported to have done relatively little or nothing to counteract bullying. Prevalence of bullying was more among boys than girls. School bullying was not associated with academic achievement or with having difficulties in reading and math. Children who were identified as bully/victim, victim, and bully suffered from PTSD compared to those who were not identified as being involved in bullying. The study showed that both bullies and victims are at-risk for short term and long-term adjustment difficulties including hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, conduct problems and peer problems. Child's gender and emotion-focused coping stood out as risk factors for the development of bullying behaviors whereas age, problem-focused coping, family environment, and school environment were significant protective factors.

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### Introduction

Bullying has become more visible as an area of professional concern in the school context (Cornell & Mehta, 2011; D'Esposito, Blake, & Riccio, 2011; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Peters & Bain, 2011; Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009), as a considerable number of students are victimized by bullies each year (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2009; Vernberg & Biggs, 2010). Being bullied is thus a common stressful life experience, affecting on average 13% of children and adolescents during a school year worldwide (Craig et al., 2009). Indeed, in a national survey of more than 15,000 sixth- through tenth-grade students, nearly one of every three students reported that they had experienced occasional or frequent involvement as a victim or perpetrator of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001). Despite the growing research interest in bullying among school-age children in Lebanon (Mirza, 2010; Nassar, 2007; Rabah, 2007), no study presently exists through which one can develop an empirical understanding of the conditions that lead to bullying in Lebanese schools. In addition, the definitions and standards for determining the existence and impact of bullying are inadequate in the literature, impeding such research. Accordingly,

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further investigation into the interplay of sociocultural factors and bullying in non-Western societies will help untangle the web of causal and protective factors that contribute to the various forms of bullying behavior in schools. This issue may bear some importance given that dimensions of peer relations may have different connotations depending on the culture (e.g., Schneider, 2000). Studies have revealed that large variations existed between countries not only in the prevalence of bullies and victims but also in the relation between social relations and both bullying and victimization (Eslea et al., 2003).

Bullying involves a power dynamic in which a perpetrator victimizes certain individuals whom s/he identifies as physically, psychologically, or socially weaker. It entails committing acts of aggression, intimidation, or coercion, which establish and continually reinforce this power asymmetry (Merrell et al., 2008). Bullying behavior is highly specific, and it should not be mistaken with random acts of violence. Bullying is characterized by an intent to harm, a power differential between the bully and the victim, and a recurrence of aggressive acts (Merrell et al., 2008; Olweus, 2003 as cited in Peters & Bain, 2011; Scholte, Engels, Overbeek, De Kemp, & Haselager, 2007). Further, bullying behavior can manifest in various ways, including physical aggression, verbal harassment or psychological intimidation, and relational aggression such as social rejection and defamation of character (Merrell et al., 2008).

Several studies have documented the adverse effects of bullying on children's and adolescents' developmental trajectories (Cardoos & Hinshaw, 2011; Merrell et al., 2008), finding elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and social-emotional problems (Cornell & Mehta, 2011; Lamarche et al., 2007); low self-esteem and feelings of social incompetence (Cardoos & Hinshaw, 2011); behavioral difficulties, impaired academic performance, school avoidance, and absenteeism (Cardoos & Hinshaw, 2011; Cornell & Mehta, 2011); and increased school dropout rates (Merrell et al., 2008) among victims of bullying. However, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to school bullying has rarely been investigated and has never been studied in national samples. Nevertheless, recent research findings support the idea that exposure to bullying is a potential risk factor for PTSD symptoms among students (Idsoe, Dyregrov, & Idsoe, 2012), and practitioners often report PTSD symptoms in victims of bullying (Scott & Stradling, 1992; Weaver, 2000).

Children vary in their vulnerability to bullying. Although theoretical perspectives on the causes and correlates of bullying are many and varied (Hunter, Durkin, Howe, & Bergin, 2010), researchers have seemed to focus on the human ecological model. Many researchers have proposed Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human ecology theory as a basis for a more comprehensive analysis of the complex conditions associated with bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2004; Newman, Horne, & Bartolomucci, 2000; Olweus, 1993; Swearer & Doll, 2001; Swearer & Espelage, 2004). Bronfenbrenner's model is a Lewin-type "circles of influence" approach that emphasizes the interrelatedness and complexity of social-ecological influences on the person being studied. Drawing heavily from this multifaceted ecobehavioral approach to the study of bullying, previous research has examined the risk and protective factors that are associated with bullying, which fall within and across different ecological levels, such as psychological characteristics of perpetrators, social and economic stressors, characteristics of the child, cultural orientations (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010; Unnever & Cornell, 2003), family environment, preparation for parenting (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000), cultural sanctioning (Baldry & Farrington, 1998), and coping styles (Hunter et al., 2010).

Although children who are victimized by peers are at risk for a range of adjustment difficulties, including emotional and behavioral problems (Arseneault et al., 2006), self-harm (Barker, Arseneault, Fontaine, & Maughan, 2008) and suicide ideations (Herba et al., 2008), some 'resilient' children function better than would be expected given their experience of victimization. The impact of school bullying on children may be determined by risk and protective factors that operate at the individual level and at broadly contextual levels. Such risk and protective factors associated with victims' developmental outcomes are considered to be influenced by personal, family, school, and community variables (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004; Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010; Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). Psychologists and school counselors thus need to identify risk and protective factors that are associated with bullying in order to establish standards for culturally sensitive models of assessment, prevention, and intervention.

Drawing on all these theoretical viewpoints, the objectives of this research are threefold: (1) to investigate the prevalence and various forms of bullying in Lebanese schools; (2) to provide a better understanding of bullying outcomes experienced by school-age children and adolescents, such as academic achievement, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and behavioral and emotional problems; and (3) to define and identify the various risk and protective factors that are associated with bullying, such as children's sociodemographics, family and school environment, and coping strategies, that will facilitate the development of prevention and treatment models.

## Method

### *Sample Selection and Procedure*

The design for the sample selection was based on three primary stratified variables: schools (public, private), grade level (7–9), and gender. Data from the Ministry of Education for the 2013 census were used to draw a random sample of 10 schools in the greater Beirut area, with an equal number of public and private schools. Of the ten schools that were selected for entry into the study, three of the private schools declined to participate, and as a result, three other private schools were selected as replacements. All children from the intermediate level (grade level 7–9) in each school were asked to participate in the study. Informed consent was obtained from 89% of the participants who were selected to participate in the study. The questionnaires were administered in group format by a trained psychologist during one full class period. The participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. They were told that their participation was voluntary

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