
Peer Aggression and Well-Being: A Multi-country study

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Résumé

All children have a right to be safe and free from peer aggression and harassment at school and online, whether or not it is classified as bullying.

A focus on bullying (defined as **repeated** negative behaviour intended to harm a person in an interpersonal relationship where there is an imbalance of power) implicitly suggests that other forms of peer aggression experienced by students at school are less important and less harmful. In fact, Olweus (1993) assumed that bullying was the most damaging part of the peer aggression spectrum. However, there is no data which confirms whether indeed this is the case (Ybarra, Espelage & Mitchell, 2014). There are suggestions that a focus on bullying rather than on general victimisation hampers efforts to support victims. For example, there was a case in the US where staff failed to respond to an incident (which led to the student committing suicide) because the staff were waiting for a repeat in victimisation in order to classify the case as bullying and instigate the school's bullying policy (Topo, 2013).

Bullying is not typically thought of in terms of the three criteria of intentional harm, repeated action, and power imbalance between victim and bully (Cuadrado-Gordillo, 2012). So when asked about bullying are students' responses in accord with our academic understanding of bullying or are they referring to different forms of peer aggression? Furthermore, are these different forms of peer aggression differentially harmful to mental health and well-being? These are questions that require further investigation if we are to understand bullying more fully and if we are to be confident about making comparisons of bullying prevalence rates between countries, or before and after anti-bullying interventions.

This multi-country study examined the prevalence of peer aggression at school and online, and its impact on well-being with over 5,000 middle-school students, from Italy, Greece, Spain, Korea, Indonesia, Taiwan, China and Australia. The study sought to identify, quantify and classify different forms of peer aggression in schools, as well as investigate the mental health and well-being of students experiencing different forms of peer aggression. Together with collaborators from nine countries, our aim is to improve our understanding of peer aggression so we may determine appropriate intervention strategies to reduce aggression between peers and enhance student mental health and well-being.

This research addresses a gap in the literature and will help to overcome the confusion

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related to bullying and peer aggression. The study addresses the following research questions:

What types of peer aggression do students experience at school?

How can different types of peer aggression be classified along the dimensions of intended harm, power imbalance and repetition?

What is the nature of the relationship between victim and aggressor?

What is the wellbeing of students experiencing different types of peer aggression?

What proportion are flourishing or languishing?

How resilient are they?

What is their global self-concept?

What is the well-being of students experiencing different forms of peer aggression?

A quantitative approach was used where a purpose built questionnaire was administered to students aged 11-16. Over 5,000 students from nine countries completed the Student Aggression and Victimization Questionnaire (Skrzypiec, 2015) by answering questions about the types of peer aggression they had experienced (e.g., teasing, exclusion, hitting, kicking, cyberbullying) and by describing their experiences according to the level of harm, power imbalance and repetition involved. These questions allowed bullying to be distinguished from other forms of peer aggression. To examine the links of peer aggression to well-being and to determine whether students were flourishing or languishing, participants were also asked to complete Keyes's (2006) Mental Health Continuum. Other known influences on student well-being were also measured. These included questions from Marsh's (1990) Global Self-concept Scale, which measures the amount of time youth feel good about themselves, and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC; Connor & Davidson 2003), which provides an indication of the state of resilience of students.

The findings indicate a need for interventions to reduce peer aggression to improve student well-being and address the otherwise accepted normalization of aggressive acts between peers. A reconsideration of the use of terminology such as "bullying" is recommended.

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Mots-Clés: well, being, peer aggression, bullying, flourishing, languishing, resilience