Bullying and harassment are pervasive problems in schools, with interventions to counter bullying now regarded as a matter of high priority by educational authorities. This article considers the impact of bullying on victim and bully. It also explores the role of peers as bystanders in school bullying. Australian research is described, examining peer perceptions and responses, together with factors associated with bystander behavior. The authors' research suggests that teaching peers to cope may go some way to combating bullying in school by effecting change at the peer group level. Features of a universal coping program are given and common elements of successful antibullying interventions are highlighted. It is clear that peers play a central role in school bullying and teaching young people strategies to cope may be a positive step toward promoting peaceful schools.

The right to be educated without suffering from victimization has resonated with the wider public, especially after the tragic school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999, and Santana High School in Santee, California, in early 2001. Research on the 37 school shootings that took place in North America between 1974 and 2000, including Columbine, found that 71% of the attackers felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others prior to the incident. A number of the young attackers were frequently bullied and harassed by their peers, with one young attacker being described as “the kid everyone teased” (Secret Service & the U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Bullying and harassment are pervasive problems in schools. Researchers estimate that 1.6 mil-
lion school-aged young people in the United States are bullied at least once a week (Olweus & Limber, 1999). In Australia, it is estimated that one in six young people experience victimization at school (Rigby, 1997). Reports of being bullied are among the main reasons for young Australians to call the national Kids Help Line (2002).

In Australia, as elsewhere, school bullying is now widely regarded as a distinct form of aggressive behavior and not simply the outcome of individual differences (Rigby, 1997). In recent years, the social context in which bullying occurs has become increasingly salient in the literature, particularly the role of peers in reinforcing bullying episodes. In this article we examine the likelihood of peer responses to bullying. We discuss factors related to supporting victims of bullying and ways of teaching peers to cope so that they can contribute to a safe and peaceful learning environment.

The Nature of School Bullying

Bullying in schools is frequently defined in terms of power, intent to harm, and frequency (Rigby, 1996). For those who bully there is power, either physical or through peer group status. For the bullied young person, the acts are deliberate, causing physical, psychological, and emotional harm. Bullying is not random, and victims live with the fear of further attacks. Bullying in schools is not limited to physical assaults, but also includes verbal abuse, harassment, threats, and intimidation—with verbal bullying the most common form of aggression experienced by school-aged young people (Patton et al., 1998). Reported victimization is typically directed at the young person due to ethnicity, resistance to conform to pressure from peers, physical differences, high achievement, being new to the school, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background (Kids Help Line, 2002).

The Impact

There are harmful effects on victims and perpetrators of bullying. Victimization impacts significantly on young peoples’ ability to learn, as well as their school attendance (Rigby, 1998). Findings confirm that victimization is clearly connected to low self-esteem, proneness to depression, maladjustment, low levels of well-being, and suicidal ideation (Besag, 1989; Craig, 1998; Rigby, 1998). Young people who are bullied tend to be withdrawn and anxious, and are typically characterized by tenseness, fears, and worries (Neary & Joseph, 1994). Those who are frequently harassed experience higher levels of distress and tend to feel more ashamed than their same age peers. They are also more inclined to retaliate when angered or provoked (Lodge, 2004).

Perpetrators of bullying are at high risk of maladjustment. Bullying other students is recognized as a risk factor for antisocial and criminal behavior (National Crime Prevention, 1999). Bullies are less likely to complete school, more likely to use drugs and alcohol, and more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl, 1993). There is evidence from longitudinal studies that aggressive and dominating behaviors are likely to continue over time (Pepler & Rubin, 1991; Tremblay, McCord, & Boileau, 1992). Findings from a Swedish study revealed that 60% of boys who were identified as bullies at age 13 to 16 had at least one criminal conviction by the age of 24 (Olweus, 1994). In Australia, boys who bullied others were more inclined to endorse domestic violence (Rigby, Whish, & Black, 1994). This evidence has been recognized in Australia, with early intervention for domestic violence focusing primarily on the prevention of school violence (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003).

Peer Involvement in Bullying

Peers witness bullying episodes at school. Canadian studies report that peers (bystanders) are present in as many as 85% of school bullying episodes (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000). Through their behavior in these situations, peers can affect the outcome of the episodes. Peer bystanders can encourage and prolong the bullying by providing attention or actually joining in with the harassment (Craig & Pepler, 1995). In a study of playground bullying, peers were found to spend 54% of their time reinforcing bullies by passively
watching, 21% of their time actively modeling bullies, and 25% of their time intervening on behalf of victims (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). There are a variety of bystanding roles—behaviors that can be adopted by young people. Finnish research has identified these various participatory roles as supporting (cheering), joining in, passively watching, and occasionally intervening (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Seen from this point of view, encouraging antibullying behaviors in peers could hold the greatest potential for intervention. However, a greater understanding of peer processes in bullying, together with an understanding of how bystanders cope, is needed.

**The Concept of Coping**

Coping is the behavioral and cognitive efforts that individuals use to meet the demands of their everyday situations. It includes the thoughts, feelings, and actions they use in response to the environment. Though there are theoretically an infinite number of ways an individual can cope, the possible responses have been empirically grouped to capture the construct. We know, for instance, that there are productive ways of coping, such as focusing on solving the problem, working hard to achieve, and focusing on the positive side of things. In contrast, there are nonproductive ways of coping, such as keeping things to oneself, blaming oneself, ignoring the problem, and worrying.

There is a great deal that we know about coping. We know that students who use productive coping strategies have a greater sense of well-being and those who use nonproductive strategies are likely to feel less comfortable about themselves and their circumstances (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2002). For example, in most circumstances students who use self-blame are likely to have a lesser sense of well-being. Productive coping is also associated with academic achievement. Students who use productive strategies are likely to achieve better than would be expected on the basis of ability alone (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1999). We also know that strategies that utilize the support of others, such as social support, can be most helpful in some circumstances.

**Perceptions and Responses of Australian Bystanders**

Our research has examined peer perceptions and responses to school bullying using hypothetical vignettes depicting verbal harassment of a student. We were interested in how students thought they would respond as bystanders and how their relationship to the bully and victim influenced their likelihood to respond. We were also interested in information on friendship quality, social-emotional adjustment, and coping. Three hypothetical verbal bullying vignettes, which included a weight insult, a clothing insult, and a peer rejection insult, were used to obtain data. Self-report information was obtained using The Friendship Scale (Rubenstein & Rubin, 1987), The Weinberger Adjustment Inventory—Short Form (Weinberger, Feldman, Ford, & Chastain, 1987), and The Children's Coping Scale—Short Form (CCS–SF adapted from the Adolescent Coping Scale—Short Form, Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). Three hundred and seventy-nine students (185 girls and 194 boys), aged 10–13 years, from nine schools in metropolitan Melbourne, Australia, participated in the study. Fifty students also provided qualitative data about their own experiences of witnessing bullying. All parents gave informed consent, while students gave assent prior to their participation in the study.

**Peer Participation in Verbal Bullying at School**

Given that the responses to all three verbal bullying scenarios were quite similar, students’ estimates (on a 4-point scale) on the likelihood of participating were summed to provide a general indicator of the probability of such a response. Analyses from this study (see Lodge & Frydenberg, 2004) revealed that the combined likelihood of participating was significantly related to gender. Though most students indicated that they would either not get involved (passively watch) or would support the target of the bullying, girls were significantly more likely to provide support for the victim, boys to support the bully. There was also a tendency for more girls than boys to report that they would not get in-
involved. Although relatively few students indicated that they would join in with the bully, boys more commonly endorsed this response.

Factors Associated With Peer Participation

Our investigation revealed that there was a relationship between the likelihood of peers participating in verbal bullying and several characteristics associated with young people’s friendships, adjustment, and coping. These characteristics are summarized in Table 1. For example, characteristics related to providing support for the victim included friendship, use of a productive style of coping, self-esteem, altruistic actions and feelings, the ability to avoid retaliation when angered, and high emotional support from friends.

Overall, the interpersonal relationship between the victim–perpetrator and the bystander was an important factor in participants’ behavioral judgments when witnessing verbal bullying in school. Of note, the profiles of passive bystanders suggest that they do not feel affiliated with either the victim or bully and experience less emotional distress and apprehension (fear, guilt, helplessness) when witness to peer attacks. This has important implications for intervention work, as observational research confirms that young people who do nothing reinforce bullying by passively watching and not helping the victim (O’Connell et al., 1999). Passive observations by the majority inadvertently reinforce bullying and send a positive message to the bullies.

Coping actions were also related to bystander behavior. More notably, it would appear that those who use a productive style of coping are in a better position to provide support to victims of bullying by actively defending. However, it was also clear from the findings that witnessing verbal aggression evokes strong emotional responses from bystanders.

How Do Peers Feel About Bullying?

On the whole, bystanders expressed disgust and anger toward verbal harassment of peers. Girls were more likely to feel sad, upset, angry, and disgusted; boys were more likely to feel indifferent to witnessing verbal bullying. As bystanders, many young people reported conflicting feelings, including guilt, anger, confusion, lack of knowledge regarding what to do, and fear of becoming the next victim. In contrast, there were positive responses that indicated that young people felt good about having intervened. To illustrate the themes expressed, selections of responses are described in Table 2.

Table 1
Characteristics Related to the Likelihood of Peer Participation in Verbal Bullying

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors Related to Supporting the Bully (i.e., Laugh &amp; Cheer)</th>
<th>Factors Related to Joining in With the Bullying</th>
<th>Factors Related to Providing Support for the Victim (Defending)</th>
<th>Factors Related to Passively Watching (Not Get Involved)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is a friend of the bully</td>
<td>Has low self-esteem</td>
<td>Is a friend of the victim</td>
<td>Is a neutral acquaintance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has low self-esteem</td>
<td>Is low in emotional support from friends</td>
<td>Uses a productive style of coping</td>
<td>Is high in self-restraint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is low in emotional support from friends</td>
<td></td>
<td>Has self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is high in friendship stress/social dissatisfaction</td>
<td>Expresses fewer altruistic actions and feelings</td>
<td>Expresses more altruistic actions and feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is low in self-restraint</td>
<td>Is low in self-restraint</td>
<td>Is high in emotional support from friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use fewer productive coping strategies</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Our data illustrates the indeterminate nature of peer participation in bullying. Though young people expressed disgust and anger toward the harassment of peers and indicated support for the victim, they were also likely to not do anything (i.e., passively watch). There may be a variety of reasons why peers do not become involved. For example, participants in the study reflected concern over becoming the next victim—*I didn’t say anything because I thought that the teaser would start picking on me.* This would seem to be a very real risk for bystanders, as the use of hostile strategies could potentially elicit a counter attack. Lack of confidence to intervene without the support of others was also noted—*No one else stuck up for her. If someone else had stuck up for her, I would have stuck up for her as well.* This corresponds with our questionnaire data, which identified emotional support from friends as a factor related to the likelihood that peers would support the victim. Peers may also lack strategies to intervene effectively. Examples include unsuccessful attempts to intervene (*I tried talking to them and telling them to stop, but they wouldn’t*) and incidences of retaliation (*I will get back at the person who did it*). Taken together, it would appear that teaching young people strategies to use when they witness bullying would be a positive step in promoting peaceful interventions that effect change at the peer group level.

### Teaching Bystanders to Cope

We know that coping strategies can be taught (Frydenberg, 2004). Teaching bystanders to cope may be one way of promoting peer support against bullying, given that young people who employ a productive style of coping at school are less inclined to support the bully and are likely to be more available for the bullied student. Peer support and mediation approaches to bullying are being taken up by an increasing number of schools, with evidence that the existence of peer support systems can encourage the seeking-help strategy (Naylor, Cowie, & del Rey, 2001).

One way of facilitating adaptive ways of coping is through universal school programs that tar-
get skill development for all young people. A program that has been evaluated in a number of school settings in and outside Australia is *The Best of Coping* (Frydenberg & Brandon, 2002). Developed for adolescents, the program provides a framework and language that allows young people to reflect on their current coping practices and make changes. Topics addressed include optimistic thinking, effective communication skills, effective problem solving, decision making, goal setting, and time management. There is also a session dedicated to looking at strategies that are not helpful and ways of finding alternative strategies.

Introducing programs into the school setting allows students to explore and develop an understanding of their own and alternative coping behaviors in a safe and supportive environment. Evaluations of the Best of Coping program reveal that there are benefits in teaching adolescents cognitive-based coping skills (Frydenberg et al., 2004). Relevant to this article, evaluation studies reveal that self-efficacy increases in students who participate in the universal coping program (Bugalski & Frydenberg, 2000; Cotta, Frydenberg, & Poole, 2001). Students with higher levels of self-efficacy would be expected to use a more productive style of coping and be more inclined to support the victim of bullying rather than the bully. An evaluation study with Australian adolescent girls found evidence for an increased usage of productive coping strategies postprogram, using hypothetical bullying scenarios (Tollit, 2002). In a similar vein, an evaluation study conducted in Northern Italy found that increases in problem solving skills postprogram were particularly useful for managing conflicts (Ferrari, Nota, Soresi, & Frydenberg, 2003).

**Antibullying Interventions**

Interventions to counter bullying in schools are now regarded as a matter of high priority by educational authorities. Intervention studies have been carried out around the world: United States, Norway, Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Finland, Ireland, Austria, Switzerland, and Australia. The success rates of these large-scale intervention studies vary considerably. Olweus (1994) reported up to 50% reductions in bullying in Norwegian schools using a nationwide campaign. However, more modest results were achieved when replicated in the United States, Germany, and Belgium (Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003). Other intervention projects report effect sizes that range from 15% (Smith & Sharp, 1994) to 30% reductions (Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994). Some report increases in bullying, possibly due to an increased awareness of bullying behavior (Souter & McKenzie, 2000). Various factors may account for differences in the success of antibullying interventions. A meta-evaluation commissioned by the Australian Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department (Rigby, 2002) highlights some of the common elements in successful interventions, which may be used to inform good practice.

1. Interventions were more successful when implemented in the early years of schooling than in secondary school.
2. Intervention was better than no intervention (i.e., greater increases in bullying were noted in control groups who did not receive antibullying initiatives).
3. Level of school commitment and staff involvement influenced the success of interventions.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, more attention is needed to understand peer group processes involved in school bullying. Our research illustrates the indeterminate nature of peer participation in verbal bullying. Though peers expressed feelings of disgust and anger at witnessing verbal harassment of others and also endorsed support for the victim, they were also inclined to not get involved by passively watching. There are likely to be several reasons for students not to become involved, including a fear of becoming the next victim, a lack of confidence to intervene, and not having effective strategies. Our data confirm that peers who used a productive
style of coping at school were more inclined to support the victim and less inclined to support the bully. It is suggested that teaching peers to cope may go some way in combating bullying in school by effecting change at the peer group level.

It is noted, however, that interventions targeting peer processes need to be promoted in the context of a whole-school, antibullying initiative. Actions need to occur at all levels of the school community (including students, staff, and parents) and across all school activities. This approach provides young people with the confidence that all members of their school community support these strategies. A systemic process is needed when intervening to counter bullying. Consideration should be given to relationships, roles, interactions, and communication within the system.

Though the task of devising more consistently effective antibullying interventions remains, it is clear that the chances of success are greater if interventions are carried out during the early years of schooling. Thus, there is a real need to develop and evaluate preventative programs that target bullying during these formative years, especially universal programs that include all students. Peers play a central role in the maintenance and course of school bullying. Teaching young people strategies to use when they witness bullying is a positive step toward promoting peaceful schools.

References


