

New bottle: old wine! School bullying among primary school pupils and the emergence of cyberbullying

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Introduction

Involvement in 'traditional' (face-to-face) bully/victim problems at school has been linked to impaired health and well-being, a reduction in educational attainment, long-term relationship and intimacy issues, and potential involvement in anti-social and criminal activity. 'Traditional' bullying can take many different forms including physical aggression such as hitting, kicking and shoving as well as relational/indirect bullying which may be in the form of social exclusion or isolation from a peer group.

Previous research carried out by Collins, McAleavy and Adamson (2002) for the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI) indicated that 40 per cent of primary school pupils and 30 per cent of post-primary school pupils had been bullied in the previous two months, with 5 per cent of the primary pupils and 2 per cent of the post-primary pupils having suffered for several years. A quarter (25%) of the primary pupils and 29 per cent of the post-primary pupils reported taking part in bullying others. Livesey et al.'s (2007) follow-up study for DENI found that 17 per cent of primary school pupils and 8 per cent of post-primary school pupils reported being bullied 'sometimes or more often'. Five percent



of primary school pupils and 3 per cent of post-primary school pupils reported that they had been involved in bullying others 'sometimes or more often'.

This Research Update adds to this important knowledge on bullying in primary schools by presenting data collected as part of the first two Kids' Life and Times (KLT) surveys (2008 and 2009). All of the children were in the final year of primary school (Primary 7) and completed the survey online in school. The questions about bullying allowed for comparison with previous research from Northern Ireland as well as international



research in the area. The children taking part in KLT also completed the 27-item KIDSCREEN (The KIDSCREEN Group Europe, 2006), which is a health-related quality of life measure exploring physical well-being, psychological well-being, feelings about autonomy and parents, peers and social support, and school environment.

Extent and type of bullying

As Table 1 shows, approximately half of the children taking part in the KLT surveys

Table 1: Do pupils in your school get bullied by other pupils?

	%	
	2008	2009
A lot	5	6
A little	46	42
Not at all	24	25
Don't know	25	27

reported that pupils at their school were bullied by other pupils either 'a little' or 'a lot' (2008: 51%; 2009: 48%). Whilst just over one-fifth of the children had experienced physical bullying 'a little' or 'a lot' in both surveys, over one-third had experienced relational/indirect forms of peer victimization 'a little' or 'a lot' (2008: 39%; 2009: 36% - see Figure 1). As an emerging form of bullying among this age group of children, just over one-tenth of the KLT respondents reported that they had experienced cyberbullying either on the internet or by mobile phone (2008: 10%; 2009: 13%).

Bullying others

In relation to bullying others by 'traditional' means, as Table 2 shows, just under one-tenth of the children taking part in the 2008 and 2009 KLT surveys admitted physical bullying and just over one-tenth admitted bullying their peers by more relational/indirect methods. In 2008, 3 per cent of children said they had cyber-bullied other children (this question was not asked in 2009). Overall, approximately one in five (18%) children taking part in the KLT surveys said they had been involved in bullying other children in some way, either in person (physical/relational) or by mobile phone/internet.

Victims and bullies: health and well-being

Across both surveys, being involved in bully/victim problems, as either a victim or as a bully, was associated with impaired health and well-being. Victims were found to have poorer physical well-being,

Figure 1: Did you get bullied at school in the last 2 months?

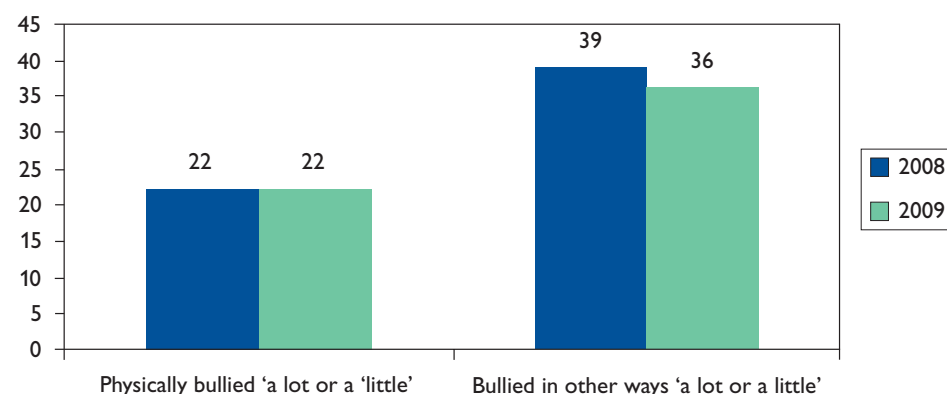


Table 2: Have you bullied other children at school in the last two months?

	%			
	2008		2009	
	Physically	Other ways	Physically	Other ways
A lot	1	1	1	1
A little	7	12	8	12
Not at all	88	82	87	82
Don't know	5	5	4	5

Table 3: School policies on bullying

	% saying 'yes'	
	2008	2009
Does your school have a set of rules on bullying?	87	89
Have you ever talked about bullying in your class?	88	87
Is there someone at your school whose job is to deal with bullying?	70	71

poorer psychological well-being, reduced feelings of autonomy and relationships with parents, reduced feelings about peers and social support, and reduced feelings about the school environment than those who had not been bullied.

For bullies, there were similarly negative relationships between involvement in bully/victim problems and health and well-being, although not as pervasive. While there was no statistically significant relationship between being a bully and levels of physical well-being, being a bully was associated with impairments in psychological well-being, feelings of autonomy and relationships with parents, feelings about the school environment, and reduced feelings about peers and social support (2009 only).

Managing bully/victim problems

The development and implementation of anti-bullying policies, with direct input from pupils, is mandatory across all schools in Northern Ireland (DENI, 2003). Across both surveys, it was welcome to see that nearly 90 per cent (2008: 87%; 2009: 89%) of the children reported that their school had a set of rules on bullying. Furthermore, nearly 90 per cent reported that they had talked about bullying in class (2008: 88%; 2009: 87%). Also, approximately 70 per cent of children in both years reported that they could identify someone at school whose job it was to deal with bullying (Table 3).

Putting the findings in context

In comparing the results from the KLT surveys to previous research in Northern Ireland, whilst the results regarding involvement in 'traditional' bullying are lower than those reported by Collins et al. (2002), they are higher than those reported by Livesey et al. (2007). The results from both surveys are similar to those found in O'Moore et al's (1997) seminal nationwide study in the Republic of Ireland (31%). Indeed, the most recent Irish data, from the longitudinal Growing up in Ireland study found that 40 per cent of nine year olds had experienced bullying in the previous year (Williams et al., 2009).

The finding that approximately 18 per cent of the children who took part in the KLT surveys reported that they had been involved in bullying others in some way is higher than the recent finding from the Growing up in Ireland (<http://www.growingup.ie>) study, which reported that 13 per cent of nine year olds said they had 'picked on a child or an adult in the past year' (Williams et al., 2009, page 110), however, it is lower than that reported by O' Moore et al (26%: 1997).

Being a victim of bullying was associated with impaired levels of health and well-being as measured by the KIDSCREEN-27. Being a bully was also associated with some impairment, although not to the same extent. Unfortunately, such findings are consistent with both the local (e.g. McGuckin et al., 2010) and international (e.g. Hawker & Boulton, 2000) literature that demonstrates the insidious effects of involvement in bully/victim problems on health and well-being.

Management of bully/victim problems

Schools are doing a lot in terms of managing bully/victim problems. This finding is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, and in support of previous research from Northern Ireland, it is clearly evident that children notice the significant work that schools do in this area. Secondly, and more importantly, despite such a strong management culture, a significant number of children are still involved in such problems, with

the resultant negative effects that this has on health and well-being. The KLT surveys asked about experience of cyberbullying. As part of the 'always on' generation, cyberbullying represents a 'new wine in old bottles' scenario.

The KLT surveys provide the first set of robust data on cyberbullying among primary school pupils in Northern Ireland. With increasing international attention on this emerging form of peer aggression, it would be opportune for schools to re-evaluate and update policies and procedures relating to this form of bullying. Such help and support is increasingly becoming available through the results of EU funded research in the area (e.g. the CyberTraining Project: <http://www.cybertraining-project.org>; COST Action IS0801: <http://sites.google.com/site/costis0801>).

Indeed, it is not only schools that need to be aware of the impact of cyberbullying. All parents and adults with an interest in the safety and well-being of children should re-double efforts to understand the world of the 'net generation'. As a cautionary note about cyber-safety: if you don't understand it, you can't teach it!

Key Points

- Approximately half of the children taking part in the KLT surveys reported that pupils at their school were bullied by other pupils either 'a little' or 'a lot'.
- Just over one-fifth of the children had experienced physical bullying 'a little' or 'a lot'.
- In 2008, 39% said they had been bullied in other ways at school and the figure was similar in 2009 at 36%.
- As an emerging form of bullying among this age group of children, just over one-tenth of the KLT respondents reported that they had experienced cyberbullying either on the internet or by mobile phone (2008: 10%; 2009: 13%).
- Approximately one in five (18%) children taking part in the KLT surveys said they had been involved in bullying other children in some way, either in person (physical/relational) or by mobile phone/internet.
- The majority of children in 2008 and 2009 said their school had policies on bullying, someone to deal with bullying and that they had talked about bullying in class.
- Being involved in bully/victim problems, as either a victim or as a bully, was associated with impaired health and well-being.

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Kids' Life and Times is carried out annually and documents children's opinions on a wide range of social issues. In 2008, 3440 children completed the survey online in schools and, in 2009, 3657 children completed the survey online in schools.

The survey is a joint initiative of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what P7 pupils think about the issues that affect them. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/klt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3585 with any queries.

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