

## The Effect of Empathy Level on Peer Bullying in Schools

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**Abstract:** Acts of violence have been increasing in recent years in the world and our country. Reflections of these events are seen in schools. Despite numerous studies about peer bullying in schools, the number of studies on the subject in our country remains few. According to the studies in the world, peer bullying is caused by many factors. Although there are no studies on the relation between peer bullying and empathy, it is seen that there is a considerable relation between these two. According to some studies, there is a positive correlation between bullying behavior and low empathy skills. Besides, it is determined that as empathy skills increase there is a decrease in bullying behavior. Empathy is an inborn skill which can be improved. While family has the prime role in improving empathy, children's social circle comprised of school, friends and relatives can contribute to this improvement. This study will evaluate the characteristics of children who display and be exposed to bullying behaviors and the reasons of these behaviors while discussing the relation between empathy and peer violence.

**Key words:** Bullying · Empathy · Aggressive · Empathy skill · School

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### INTRODUCTION

There is an increase of the frequency of bullying behaviors among peers in schools in recent years. Violence between peers in schools is a widespread phenomenon that worries psychologists, teachers and families in many countries around the world [1-5]. One of the most pervasive forms of school violence is bullying, which has been defined as a repeated aggressive behavior perpetrated by a bully, or a group of bullies, who systematically victimizes a weaker peer [6]. School bullying has received a great deal of attention in developmental psychopathology, educational and criminological studies over the past 20 years. The evidence indicates that school bullying has a variety of negative consequences for both bullies and victims [7, 8]. Recent systematic studies date back to the late 1970s. In 1978, Olweus published the English version of his book *Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys* (originally published in Swedish in 1973); this marked the beginning of a stream of research on bullying [9, 8]. Later on, the studies which had been carried out in England, Finland, Canada, Japan and the U.S.A. contributed to understanding the reasons lying under bullying behaviors.

Many acts of violence in schools show that peer bullying increase in the world too. Olweus [7] reports in his study, in which he examined 130.000 school children between the ages of 7 and 16, that 5-9 percent of students are exposed to bullying regularly. The results of a study in England shows that 75% of 4700 children between the ages of 11 and 16 are exposed to physical bullying [10]. Rigby [11], after studying on 25.000 schoolchildren, reported that one out of seven students is being bullied at least once a week in Australia. Smith [12], reported that 8% of the primary school and 10% of secondary school children confessed bullying other students one or more times a week in England. It is reported in Hazler [13]'s study that 75% of students are exposed to bullying in the U.S.A.

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One of the few studies on the subject in our country had been carried out by Piskin [14] reveal the types and the frequency of peer bullying in primary schools, 35% of students had been reported being bullied regularly and 6% of them had been reported as bullies.

Many definitions appeared as a result of studies on peer bullying. According to Olweus [7], peer bullying is the practice of regular and repetitive physical and/or emotional violence to a person by a group or an individual. According to the definition of a British researcher peer bullying is deliberate inflict of a person by another person or a group [15]. Hoover and Oliver [16], who had carried out the most extensive adolescent research in the U.S.A, define peer bullying as psychological and physical abuse inflicted on an individual by a student or a group of students. All the concepts standing out in the definitions reveal the characteristics of peer bullying. Accordingly, peer bullying is deliberate, continuous and repetitive behaviors that cause physical, social and emotional damage to the victim.

**Types of Peer Violence:** Recent studies on peer bullying reveal some different types of peer bullying. Although types of peer bullying are called differently in various studies, there are mainly three types of it and the most known type is “Physical and Oral Bullying”[6]. “Physical bullying” is the act or threat of inflicting physical damage. Behaviors like pushing, kicking, hitting, throwing at something are examples of physical violence. “Oral bullying” shows it self in forms of teasing, insulting, nicknaming and spreading that name [6,17].

Gini *et al.*, [17], point out another type of peer violence in their study. This type of bullying is called “relational bullying”. Relational bullying is insulting, discrediting or isolating the victim by abusing peer relations in order to fulfill self-interests. Isolating the person who does not accept or adapt individual demands from social activities or spreading rumors about that person can be given as an example for relational bullying. These three types of bullying are integrated to each other and reveal themselves together frequently in real life circumstances. Especially, relational bullying is experienced with the other types of bullying.

**Bullies and Victims:** During the studies of bullying behavior, victim is naturally examined within the development process of bullying behavior and most studies categorize children as bully, victim or bully-victim. Bully is called to the person inflicting violent behaviors over others while victim defines the person who is directly exposed to such a behavior. These two groups are nested and some children display both behaviors. These children are called bully-victims (Siegel 18).

**Characteristics of Children Displaying Bullying Behaviors:** Bullies are generally tend to be aggressive, angry and coercive. They are individuals with negative attitudes towards their peers while having positive attitudes towards bullying who are academically unsuccessful, insecure and tend to solve their problems by using force [17,18]. Besides, it is proposed that these children have defects in social learning and social problem solving process [17]. Bullies have the risk of turning into crime and alcoholism [8]. Most studies agree that boys bully more than girls [6, 19]. Mixed findings have been reported for gender differences in victimization rates. While some researchers find that boys are victimized more than girls [20, 6,3], others report no significant sex difference for victims of school bullying [20, 6, 21, 14, 22]. Kaukiainen *et al.* [23] found that of all groups involved in bullying, male bullies were most likely to be diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder; the most common disorders among bullies were attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression and oppositional-defiant or conduct disorder. However, it appears that the bully “profile” may vary by type of bullying: female bullies who engage in relational bullying may be academically and emotionally higher functioning than male bullies who engage in physical bullying.

Bullies were traditionally thought to be unpopular people having low-self esteem and low social skills. Research has found this belief to be inaccurate in some cases. Many bullies, especially girls who use relational bullying techniques, have high self-concept and social cognition necessary for the complex and coercive social manipulation that they engage in [23]. In fact, Most of researches found a positive association between relational bullying of others and academic achievement. An inverse relationship has been found between academic self-efficacy and other forms of bullying [17]. However,

Sutton *et al.* [24] argued that at least some bullies are socially competent and have superior ‘‘theory of mind’’ skills. These children have good levels of social intelligence and are well able to understand others’ mental states, even though their theory of mind seems to be purely instrumental and used in a Machiavellian way for personal advantages [25].

In the studies of ınkr and Karaman-Kepeneki [26], behaviors like pushing, nicknaming, teasing and saying things with sexual content are the most frequent types of bullying behavior.

**Characteristics of the Victims:** When victims are evaluated, there are some differentiations according to the gender of victims. Some studies show males are exposed more intensive bullying behaviors than females, while some studies reveal that gender is not a differentiating characteristic in terms of the victims of bullying behaviors [20, 6, 3, 14, 22].

Adverse effects of bullying behaviors on individuals had been revealed in numerous studies. Continuous exposure to bullying behavior causes problems like sleeping disorders, truancy and decrease in problem solving abilities. Victims experiencing continuous and oral bullying are determined to be suffering from anxiety, low self-respect, depression and academic problems [8, 27]. In more serious assess, some victims had attempted suicide due to depression and displayed behaviors to express the violence they suffer [8]. Also, victims of bullying behaviors are observed to be using ineffective coping strategies. They are reported using strategies like ignorance, oral and physical aggression and truancy more frequently while few of them use effective strategies like seeking emotional support, instrumental and emotional intervention and so on [28]. As a result of peer bullying, persistence of psychiatric problems are generally seen between the ages of 8 and 15 [23].

In the TBA Status Determination Study of Adolescent and Psychological Problems: Some Projections in Terms of Violence carried out by uhadaroglu *et al.* [29], adolescents with low socio-economic status are exposed to peer bullying most (85%), while the ones with high socio-economic status are exposed to peer bullying the least. Adolescents exposed to peer violence the least are girls with high socio-economic status (56%), while the most bullied ones are boys from low socio-economic status (92%). [29]

Kapıkıran and Fiyakalı [21], in their study on peer pressure in high schools, revealed that the ones exposed to peer pressure have the hasty problem solving approach which is not an effective one.

ınkr and Kepeneki’s [26] study on peer bullying in high schools in our country, the most frequent bullying type is reported to be physical bullying.

**The Effect of Empathy Level on Peer Bullying:** Empathy is seen one of the basic elements of helping relation. Empathy is generally defined as sharing another person’s emotional state [30]. According to another definition, empathy is the process of putting oneself in the place of another person, seeing events from that person’s point of view and understanding the feelings and ideas of that person correctly and expressing this situation [31].

Current approaches describe dispositional empathy as a multidimensional construct that has both cognitive and affective/emotional components [32]. At first, Feshbach [33] stressed the multidimensional nature of empathy. In particular, both the cognitive and the emotional components of empathy coexist in her model, but the cognitive abilities (i.e., the ability to recognize others’ emotions and the role taking ability) are considered as prerequisites of empathy. In other words, according to Feshbach, being able to recognize the emotions of another individual and to take his/her own point of view is necessary, but not sufficient, to empathize with others’ feelings. For example, we could make the case of an individual who has good social cognitive abilities in terms of, but not limited to, PT or theory of mind [17, 25], but lacks the emotional ability to participate in others’ emotion. The relation between empathy and aggressive behavior has been extensively studied in childhood and adolescence [34]. Studies show that emotional empathy has positive correlation with pro-social (a positive social behavior which is described as considering especially others) concord. Mackinnon (in 17) found that pro-social children scored significantly higher than bullies on a measure of emotional empathy (The Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents, Bryant, 1982 in 17). However, subsequent analyses demonstrated that the observed difference on the measure of empathy between bullies and pro-social children mainly reflected the difference between males and females, with females bullying less and having much higher empathy (in 17).

Additional empirical support for the proposed relationship between low empathy and bullying derives from studies of the relationship between low empathy and various forms of antisocial behavior including criminal offending. The most important finding of this study was that the relationship between low empathy and offending was reduced considerably after controlling for intelligence and disappeared completely after controlling for socio-economic status. It was suggested that the relationship between low empathy and offending may not be causal or direct or may be caused by variables already known to influence offending. For example, low intelligence or low socio-economic status may cause low empathy, which in turn may cause offending; or low intelligence, low empathy and offending may all be caused by a poor ability to manipulate abstract concepts (a symptom of poor executive brain functioning) [35].

Recently, a meta-analysis by Jolliffe and Farrington [36] has summarized these results confirming the positive relation between antisocial behaviors and low levels of empathy. This association is stronger in adolescents and young adults. Furthermore, high levels of empathic responsiveness enhance pro-social behavior [32] and are positively related to a decrease in aggressive or other externalizing behaviors [23, 37,35]. Empathic responsiveness, in fact, usually induces individuals to moderate their aggressive behavior, in that highly empathic individuals are able to emotionally anticipate the negative outcomes produced by their own conduct toward another person.

Specifically, empathy can inhibit or reduce aggressive behavior through two different moderating mechanisms. The first is related to the “cognitive” component of empathy and acts through the individual’s role taking ability [32]: the more a person is able to appreciate other people’s perspective, the more he or she can understand and tolerate the position of others, thus making the adoption of aggressive behavior less likely [33]. More precisely, role-taking ability should allow a detached analysis of other people’s reasons and motivations, so that their actions can be better understood and accepted. The second mechanism, instead, deals with the “affective” components of empathy, through which aggressors can experience the victims’ pain and inhibit their own aggressive behavior to avoid the emotional stress caused by the situation or reduce the victims’ suffering [38]. Both cognitive [23] and emotional [37] components of empathy mitigate aggressive behavior and violence. Both cognitive and emotional components of empathy mitigate aggressive behavior and violence.

What bullies may lack, therefore, are empathic skills or, in other words, the ability to appreciate the emotional consequences of their behaviors on other people’s feelings and share and empathize with the feelings of others [34]. Other researchers also agree with the idea of bullies as individuals characterized by a kind of “cold cognition” who fail to understand others’ feelings [23] and have suggested that if a victim displays distress, this only serves to reinforce the bullies’ behavior [32].

A different methodology was employed by Warden and Mackinnon [39] who compared empathic responsiveness of peer-nominated bullies, victims and pro-social children and found that pro-social children were more empathic than bullies. However, when gender was covered out, the difference between bullies and pro-social children disappeared.

Studies with children of 6-7 years of age show that children with low empathic skills are more prone to aggression than those with high empathic skills [40] and children who are given empathy training displayed less bullying behaviors. Feshbach and Feshbach [41], after giving empathy training to primary school students, reported that children’s aggression decreased, while their self-respect and social competency strengthened [41]. Denham (in 42) indicated that, when children witness and share a person’s suffering they are motivated towards helping that person (in 42).

Endersen and Olweus [43] conducted the first study available specifically examining empathy and bullying. They aimed to study gender and age differences in empathy and to explore the relations between empathy, bullying behavior and attitude towards bullying. Their sample was taken from a longitudinal study of 2286 students. Two self report measures developed by Olweus were administered: the Empathic Responsiveness Questionnaire (comprised of two scales of affective empathy: empathic concern and empathic distress) and two subscales of the Bully/Victim Questionnaire (attitude towards bullying and bullying others). Girls reported significantly more empathy than boys; in addition, both sexes reported more empathy for girls in distress than for boys in distress. Significant negative correlations were found between the “empathy” and “positive attitude towards bullying” ( $r=-.41$  for girls and  $-.40$  for boys); and “empathy” and “bullying others” ( $r= -.15$  for both sexes); gender differences were not significant. In other words, children who reported high

empathic concern did not have a positive attitude toward bullying and did not bully others. Further, a path analysis suggested that attitude towards bullying mediates that relationship between empathic concern and bullying behaviors. The correlation between the empathic distress subscale and the attitude and behavior scales was close to zero.

Espelage, Mebane and Adams [38] attempted to replicate Endersen and Olweus' [43] findings and examine victimization in addition to bullying others. Data were part of a longitudinal study on bullying; 268 children in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades participated. Significant gender differences were found for all measures, with girls scoring higher on the empathy measures. Gender differences were highest for the Caring Acts subscale and lowest for the Perspective-Taking subscale.

Borg [44] surveyed 6282 children in Malta in first through sixth grades. The questionnaire asked about the incidence, nature and reactions to bullying from the perspective of both the bully and the victim. Lists of emotions were provided and students were asked to endorse the emotions they felt after being bullied or bullying others. Self-declared victims of bullying reported feeling vengeful (38.3%), angry (37.1%) and self-pity (36.5%), indifferent (24.7%), or helpless (24%). Significantly more boys than girls felt vengeful; the opposite was true for self-pity. Although half of bullies reported feeling sorry after bullying (49.8%), they concurrently reported frequently feeling indifferent (40.6%) or satisfied (20.9%). Significantly more girls reported feeling sorry than boys (52.7% versus 47.8%). "Feeling sorry" likely entails a form of empathic-related responses like guilt or sympathy [44].

Empathy is important in arranging relations of friendship. Since empathic children are more prone to display pro-social (a positive social behavior which is described as considering especially others) behaviors like cooperation, helping etc. compared to the ones with low empathic skills, it is important in arranging relations of friendship [1]. It is more likely that children with pro-social behaviors have better social and emotional health while being in concord with their friends. On the opposite, children displaying low empathic skills bare social and emotional troubles and they are not liked by others [1]. The one with such low social skills is also denied by their peers, have more risk of leaving the school and they engage in criminal activities [1].

Contributing to the improvement of empathy skill, which is seen as an important tool in decreasing violence and bullying behavior among peer groups, is the most important step towards preventing such behaviors.

It is known that parents' empathic skills are very important in improvement of children's empathic skills. It is proposed that children coming from families with low empathic skills have low level of empathy [41]. Taking parents as role models affect children's capacity of reaction to others. Cummings, Zahn-Waxler and Yarrow (in 42) found that children raised with love in their homes are more affectionate to other people while the ones raised with anger and aggressive behaviors are more aggressive to others.

Studies claim that children have an inborn skill which can be developed as they establish empathy but this skill must be improved. [42]. Abused, hurt or maltreated children often react their peers' boredom, grief in an aggressive way [42].

## **CONCLUSION**

Peer bullying have different results in terms of the ones displaying such behavior, the ones exposed to and the ones that witness it. Empathic skills' effect on preventing peer bullying is confirmed with scientific findings. Attitude of students displaying bullying behavior, the ones exposed to and the ones that witness it in schools will change as they improve their empathic skills. Students who begin to realize that the person they bully hurts, they will be prone to display such behaviors less frequently.

In this sense, suggestions about improving empathic skills can be sorted as follows;

- Considering the fact that empathy skill begins and develops within the family, training programs for families to adopt adequate disciplining methods should be erected.

- On the other hand, the role of school is also important in improving empathy. In terms of children's developmental phases, schoolchildren are in constant relation with peer groups in education system and this relation continues improving by this relation, even claims of some researchers who propose empathic improvement begins in this point should be considered. Accordingly, these training programs should be containing parents, children and educators and they should be included in the curriculum.
- Various and special programs should be developed for the students under risk.
- Empathy training programs should be designed considering different age groups.
- This training program should be given under psychological counseling and guidance services in primary schools to develop empathic skills of children.
- Children should carry out-group studies devoted to their families and educators and their development of empathy skills should be followed via such studies.

Naturally, schoolchildren's development of empathy skills will prevent the increasing tendency towards violence and parallel raising of peer bullying in schools while mitigating the tendency towards developing such antisocial behaviors.

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