

Bullying and the Transition to Adolescence



Terminology

Bullying: The intentional, persistent use of physical and/or emotional intimidation toward someone of a disadvantaged position.

Internalization: Adoption of new views and tendencies

Avoidant coping: Escaping situations where one would need to speak up



Bullying is apparent from childhood and throughout adolescence, and it is an issue of moral development. The moral self is present from early childhood as children can understand what their parents consider right and wrong, feel distressed from doing harm, and comply with requests.⁷

In adolescence, the moral identity emerges where moral qualities like honesty and fairness, are internalized and become important to one's self-concept. The moral identity may be the main predictor of prosocial actions, linking moral judgment to moral actions.¹⁰

The emergence of the moral identity can help individuals apply moral judgments and think beyond their group norms. Parental involvement is important to nurture the development of the moral identity and counter aggression.



Moral Disengagement

A set of cognitive distortions to justify immoral actions based on the context. It can influence older children and adolescents to engage in behaviors that they know are wrong. The maturity in moral reasoning can reduce the likelihood of encouraging victimization.¹



According to Bjärehed, moral disengagement can consist of...¹

1 Moral justifications

Finding small reasons or excuses to let the bully continue harming someone

2 Diffusion of responsibility

The idea that if simply being present when friends are teasing/harassing someone, the person who is not doing anything is free from blame

3 Displacement of responsibility

Thinking that struggles at home can cause/justify bullying behaviour



4 Victim attribution

Thinking that if someone acts/looks strange, they deserve to be teased

5 Belittling

Thinking and stating that people who get bullied or teased are not truly hurt by the actions

Bystanders

Bystanders can encourage bullies by cheering them on and assisting them, or they can defend the victims.¹¹ They may also be passive because of avoidant coping and a lack of confidence rather than a lack of moral motivation.¹¹



Bullies

Similar to other delinquent acts, bullying is harmful to both victims and perpetrators. Victims are likely to experience depressive symptoms and anxiety problems, while perpetrators are likely to experience problems with antisocial behavior and substance use disorders.¹²



Bullies



The bullying behaviors can be caused by problems with emotion expectancies and moral disengagement. Emotion expectancies may be influential in determining future moral actions if moral emotions, such as guilt, are anticipated⁸. Bullies may have developed moral disengagement from as early as grade four, so around 9 years of age.³

Changes

The link between moral disengagement and aggression is more apparent in adolescents than in children.⁶ This is because of gradual transformative change,³ namely the changes in moral standard from the evaluation of other people's reactions to one's conduct.



The level of moral disengagement does not generally make peer groups less appealing to children.³ However, high levels of moral disengagement from friends/peers can have a greater influence on the moral disengagement of an adolescent than a child. In adolescence, self-evaluative standards are set up by peers.³



Bullies may be more likely to develop victim sensitivity between 10 and 17 years of age, which can cause them to remain in a cycle of perceiving hostility from peers and reacting in the same manner². This victim sensitivity can foster anger, fear of retaliation, and feelings of betrayal, leading to antisocial or exploitative behaviors².





As children continue to learn through social interactions, they may internalize the idea that their aggression may cause harms to others. It can make them aware of the perception of other people.

Studies have also suggested that bullying and aggression are used to reach a social status, and continued to hold on to that new status.^{3 & 5} The link between popularity and bullying may be linked to the confidence and group support.



Intervention

Parental involvement can reduce the harms associated with bullying. The parent-child attachment can help internalize moral knowledge and help empathize.

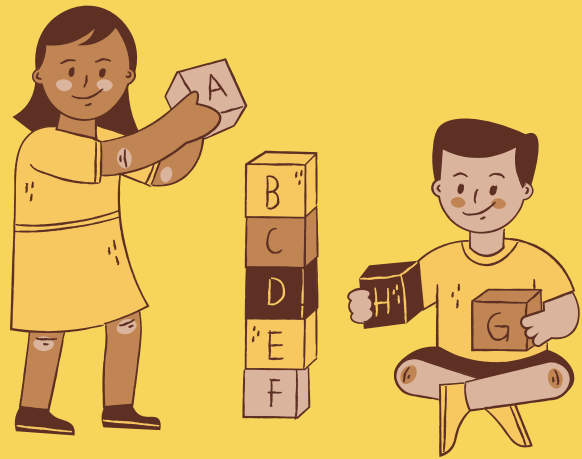


According to Chien-Jen Chiang⁴, maternal involvement has a stronger effect in lower delinquent behaviors in younger adolescents (12-15 years), whereas paternal involvement is stronger for older adolescents, and mostly in males.

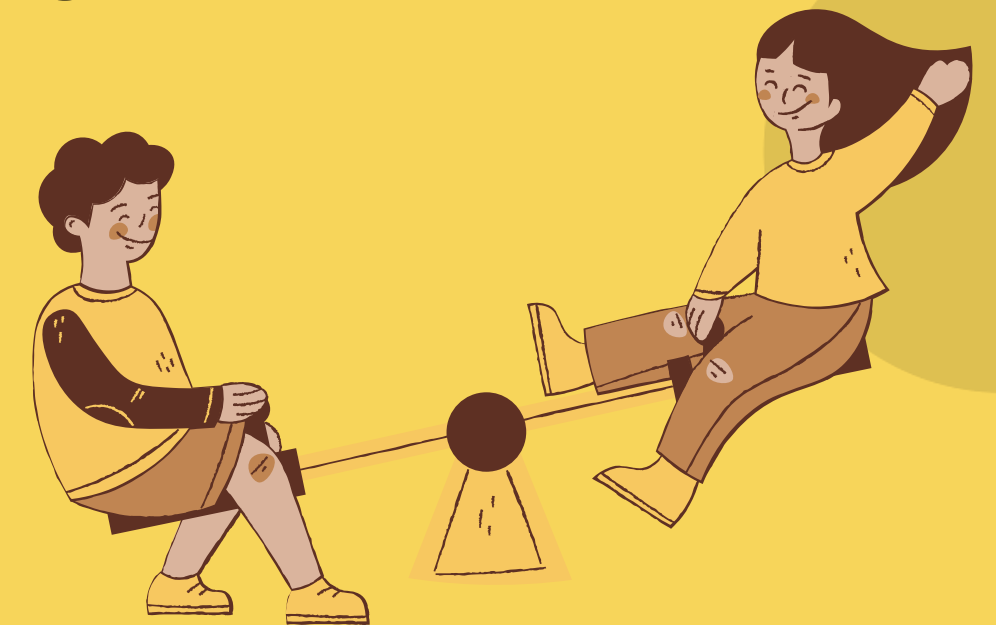


Parental induction (setting clear limits and rules, and discussing reasons for behavior) is required to encourage children to use self-reflection to feel empathy and guilt, rather than shame or threat⁹. Expressions of disapproval that remind adolescents that they are capable of better behavior are more effective than love withdrawal and threats of punishment⁹; and the inductive reasoning is positively related to adolescent moral identity.





Social self-efficacy (the confidence in one's own social abilities) can encourage children and adolescents to intervene to defend victims and to strengthen the association of moral judgments and moral actions.¹¹ It can be helpful to know one's children's friends well and encourage them to interact with supportive and inclusive groups. Healthy peer groups can help children strengthen their social self-efficacy and lower moral disengagement.



Sources

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