Students' Essays

Bullying in Preschool Children

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Abstract

The present article aims to shed light on exploring the issue of bullying in preschool children, with a special focus on early forms of anti-social and aggressive behaviour and suggestions about the role of the school, based on the presentation of prevention and intervention programmes in preschool education settings. The most typical forms of bullying in preschool education settings are physical aggressiveness, social exclusion and rumor spreading. Most studies indicate that physical aggressiveness is prevalent in boys, while relational and verbal aggressiveness is prevalent in girls. The role of preschool educators is crucial, as they need to learn to identify and manage early forms of aggressiveness. Therefore, their training is imperative, as they need to carefully evaluate each incident, while creating a positive learning environment and applying strategies for bullying prevention and intervention.

Keywords: aggressive behaviour, bullying, preschool children, school

Bullying has considerable consequences which affect children's physical and mental health and it leads to negative short-term and long-term problems (Matsunaga, 2009; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Vlachou, Andreou, Botsoglou, & Didaskalou, 2011) in victims, perpetrators, bystanders and the school context (Smith, Salmivalli, & Cowie, 2012). More importantly, bullies and victims are more likely to face academic and social problems and psychological difficulties, while bullying has been associated with aggression, violence and future delinquency and criminality (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). As the majority of research studies focus on middle childhood and adolescence, there has been little research regarding bullying in early childhood (Monks & Smith, 2006; Vlachou et al., 2011; Vlachou, Botsoglou, & Andreou, 2016).

Definition of Bullying

Although, a commonly accepted definition of bullying is still being argued, there is a general consensus over its criteria, which has been taken into consideration. These criteria include behaviours that cause intentional and repeated physical and/or psychological pain, the fact that the action is repeated over time, and the existence of aggressiveness and power imbalance in social, psychological or physical terms, which makes victims unable to

defend themselves (Andreou & Bonoti, 2010; Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Monks & Smith, 2006; Olweus, 1994; Swearer et al., 2010; Ttofi & Farrington, 2011; Vlachou et al., 2011).

One of the first and most widely used definitions was provided by Olweus (in Andreou & Bonoti, 2010; in Vlachou et al., 2011; in Vlachou et al., 2016), which contains all three criteria. According to Olweus (1994), "a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (p. 1173). It is explained that bullying involves "a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another", "by physical contact, by words, or in other ways, such as making faces or obscene gestures, and intentional exclusion from a group" (Olweus, 1994, p. 1173).

Guerin and Hennessy (2002), however, argue that not all criteria should be present; for example, an action, although it may not be intentional, may cause harmful consequences to the victim, if it is perceived as deliberate. Moreover, it has been claimed that the criterion of repetition is not necessary, as a single incident can negatively affect the victim, who might be dominated by the fear of experiencing the same action in the future (Monks & Smith, 2006).

To assess bullying behaviours in school-aged children, data are usually collected through observation, self-nominations, peer nominations, teacher ratings and parent ratings (Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015). Due to the cognitive and linguistic limitations of preschool children that affect their perception and understanding of the definition of bullying, observation (Vlachou et al., 2016), teacher ratings (Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015) and drawings (Andreou & Bonoti, 2010) seem to be the most appropriate methods of data collection in early education.

For a child, entering formal schooling, is accompanied by new experiences, such as participating in well-organized activities and becoming a member of a stable peer group (Vlachou et al., 2011), which may stimulate diverse behaviours. In early educational contexts, apart from the classroom, the playground offers multiple opportunities for social interactions during breaktime and playful activities (Vlachou et al., 2016). At the same time, preschool education constitutes the first context beyond family, in which children's behaviour can be for the first time assessed by adults and professionals, if their behaviour during peer interactions is socially inappropriate (Vlachou et al., 2011).

Early Forms of Aggressive Behaviour

According to some studies, the onset of aggressive behaviour can be documented as early as twelve months of age, whilst aggressiveness reaches maximum rates at the age of three or four, after which aggressive behaviour usually declines (Rose et al., 2014). However, prevalence of bullying varies, according to the definition and the method of data collection (Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015).

Physical, psychological and verbal aggressiveness, social isolation and social exclusion are forms of bullying (Monks & Smith, 2006). Direct forms of aggression include overt and undisguised conflicts, while indirect forms include behaviours intended to cause harm in such a way that they seem unintentional (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Physical and verbal aggressiveness belong to the first category, while relational aggressiveness may be direct or indirect (Vlachou, 2011). Bullying includes rejection, exclusion from activities, calling nasty names or spreading rumors (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), insults, threatening and obscene gestures (Perren, 2000).

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The most prevalent forms of bullying in preschool children are verbal and physical aggressiveness, social exclusion and rumor spreading (Vlachou, 2011; Vlachou et al., 2011). The physical form is more frequent in younger ages (Domènech- Llaberia et al., 2008; Perren, 2000), since the verbal form requires more developed social, cognitive and linguistic skills, which are observed at older ages (Perren, 2000). This explains the reason why verbal aggressiveness is considered to be more sophisticated (Vlachou et al., 2011).

Physical aggression is prominent in preschool children aged two to three (Rose et al., 2014). Aggression exhibited by boys aged two to three is higher than that exhibited by older boys at the age of three to four, while for girls, physical aggression is almost absent at the age of three to four (Rose et al., 2014). At the age of three to four, both boys and girls are equally likely to become victims, while boys at the ages of two to three and three to four are more likely to be aggressors (Rose et al., 2014).

However, research findings about gender differences are contradictory, as some studies demonstrate that preschool girls exhibit higher levels of aggressiveness (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999), while other studies document no statistically significant differences between boys and girls (Keenan & Shaw, 1997; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Silverthorn & Frick 1999).

The majority of the studies indicate that girls manifest more relational aggressiveness (Craig et al., 2000; Perren, 2000) and verbal aggressiveness (Green, Cillessen, Rechis, Patterson, & Hughes, 2008; Perren, 2000), while physical aggressiveness is prevalent in boys (Craig et al., 2000; Green et al., 2008; Perren, 2000). It should be highlighted that these behaviours are more intense among peers of the same gender (Vlachou et al., 2011).

A number of researchers (Crick et al., 2006; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001; Monks, Ruiz, & Val, 2002) object to the discussion about bullying in preschool children, as they argue that bullying includes the criteria of conscious intention and emotional awareness, which have not been developed sufficiently in preschool children. However, research demonstrates that preschool children have the ability to perceive motives and understand others' intentions (Baird & Moses, 2001).

At the age of three, children can distinguish between deliberate or unintentional actions, while at the age of five, children can understand that an action is motivated by diverse intentions (Joseph, 1998; Joseph & Tager-Flusberg, 1999). From the age of five, children start developing the sense of moral responsibility, distinguishing between ethically accepted and unaccepted motives (Baird & Moses, 2001). In addition, research findings indicate that, from the age of three or four, the main components of moral and emotional awareness, empathy and compliance to rules start developing (Vlachou et al., 2016).

It has been demonstrated that preschool children's motor, behavioural and emotional problems and their family characteristics are associated with involvement in bullying at later ages (Jansen, Veenstra, Ormel, Verhulst & Reijneveld, 2011). More specifically, it has been shown that good motor functioning, aggressiveness and low family socioeconomic status affect involvement in bullying in early adolescence (Jansen et al., 2011).

Victims' family relations are characterized by low quality, while little encouragement by parents and teachers adds to the problem (Duncan, 1999). In addition, family contexts with poor cohesion and high levels of conflict are linked to bullying and children with negative attitude towards school tend to exhibit bullying behavious (Cassidy, 2009).

In contrast, children from intact families are more likely to have no involvement in bullying during early adolescence (Jansen et al., 2011). Sensitive, caring, safe home environments and warm family relations function as protective factors, as children's adjustment is fostered and their emotional and social well-being is promoted (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010).

The fact that some parents are not aware of their child's being bullied indicates some potential vulnerabilities in the family structure, which constitutes a significant risk factor. There are various reasons why victims do not inform their parents, as bullied children avoid disclosing their situation. Therefore, there are some discrepancies between children's and parents' perceptions of bullying which deprive victims from valuable coping resources provided by family (Matsunaga, 2009).

Contextual influences, such as observing, receiving and reinforcing aggression, increase the likelihood of bullying (Huesmann & Eron, 1984, as cited in Craig et al., 2000). When children are present at frequent bullying incidents or when they are the recipients of these acts, children can imitate these behaviours. In addition, bullying is reinforcing when bullies triumph for their power or they do not experience any consequences. When observing, receiving and reinforcing aggression occur, children learn that aggressive or violent behaviour is accepted and start developing antisocial behaviours (Craig et al., 2000).

The Role of the School

Preschool bullies are driven by impulsiveness and spontaneity and act even at the presence of their teachers (Vlachou et al., 2016), whereas most bullying incidents in primary and secondary education take place during teacher's absence or in the playground, away from the teacher's supervision (Craig et al., 2000). The fact that bullying at preschool contexts can be observed by teachers enables their timely and prompt management, before such early forms of aggressiveness develop (Vlachou et al., 2016).

However, early childhood educators tend to underestimate the prevalence and severity of aggression in their classrooms. They may not respond at all or they often respond to aggressive behaviours through verbal reprimands, which might increase aggression in children who want to draw their teacher's attention towards them (Rose et al., 2014).

Since in preschool interactions there are frequent phrases which indicate insult or rejection, it is important that teachers are able to identify emerging bullying behaviours, as it is possible that in the future they become persistent and more children imitate these behaviours (Vlachou et al., 2016). It is imperative that high-risk behaviours are identified and addressed, so that they are managed effectively and in a timely manner (Jansen et al., 2011; Walker & Shinn, 2002).

Moreover, teachers should be aware that school-aged children's roles involved in bullying are hardly evident in preschool contexts. Only few cases of another peer being the defender, the encourager or the neutral bystander occur (Rose et al., 2014). Unlike school-aged children, preschool bullies are well integrated in the kindergarten group and they do not lack friends (Boulton, 1999). However, like older children, preschool bullies affiliate with other bullies, confirming studies which evidence that behaviourally similar children cluster together (Haselager, Hartup, van Lieshout, & Riksen-Walraven, 1998; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999). On the other

hand, victimized preschool children have fewer friends and, therefore, are more vulnerable to bullying (Vlachou et al., 2011).

It is suggested in literature (Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015; Rose et al., 2014; Vlachou et al., 2016) that raising awareness and training can help teachers identify and understand early forms of bullying and learn strategies for prevention and intervention. In addition, focusing on development of social skills and creating a positive school context should also be of primary concern for preschool teachers (Rose et al., 2014; Vlachou et al., 2016).

Raising students' awareness towards supporting the victimized children and cultivating "an ethos of peer support" (Craig et al., 2000, p. 33) can reduce bullying incidents. Going beyond the dyad of the bully and the victim to include parents in analyzing victims' coping processes is also suggested in literature (Matsunaga, 2009; Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015; Vlachou et al., 2011). It is important that teachers and school counsellors should involve families in order to help their victimized children (Matsunaga, 2009).

It is suggested that children's skill of emotion and behaviour management should be strengthened through family and teacher engagement. Parent education programmes that promote family-school relationships and teacher training in class management that enhance children's social competence reveal to be very promising (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

Prevention-Intervention

The effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions in schools has been assessed, demonstrating encouraging findings (Smith et al., 2012). A holistic view of bullying can help educators and counsellors investigate the interrelations among all factors that influence children's behavioral development, mainly the family, the school and peers, along with any important variables, such as gender and age (Matsunaga, 2009; Perren, 2000; Swearer et al., 2010).

Although it is very difficult to evaluate the degree of effectiveness among available programmes, as most of them have similar aims and components, it can be concluded that early intervention can contribute to the reduction of bullying behaviours (Rigby, 2002). Considering that attempts to teach young children to protect themselves and manage their emotions and behaviours can be more successful than trying to stop bullying or change already developed attitudes and behaviours (Rigby, 2002), it is suggested that early intervention is imperative, so that emotional, behavioural and social issues are addressed in a timely manner (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

Webster-Stratton and Reid (2004) highlight the significance of reducing or preventing aggressiveness at school entry, when children's behavioural responses are still malleable. Helping children realize the nature and consequences of aggressive behaviours should start during early childhood (Monks & Smith, 2006), in order to limit peer victimization (Smith, Salmivalli, & Cowie, 2012). Early childhood is considered to be an appropriate period to implement intervention programmes, so that aggressive behaviours are not perpetuated (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

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Due to little information regarding the effectiveness of school-based prevention programmes, especially in early childhood (Samples, 2004; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004), Samples (2004) highlighted the most promising intervention programmes, based on research findings. According to this review, the *Bullying Prevention Program* developed by Olweus to reduce violence among children from early childhood to adolescence is the first programme that adopted a whole-school approach. Its effectiveness lies in the involvement of every member of the school community and the implementation of the programme at multiple levels, i.e. individual, classroom and school community. The programme has frequently been adapted in order to be used in diverse settings, according to particular needs.

Based on the above programme, the *Bully Proofing Your School Program* offers one series for preschool and elementary school children and one for middle school children (Samples, 2004). It is implemented in three phases, during which students, teachers and parents are engaged in multiple tasks. In a similar vein, the *Flemish Antibullying Intervention Project* consists of three modules that focus on a no-tolerance rule for aggressive behavior and bullying, the creation of a supportive context and the provision of support to children who are involved in bullying behaviours (Samples, 2004).

The *Lions-Quest*, consisting of five modules, requires parent and teacher involvement, as it aims at changing school culture (Samples, 2004). One of these modules, the *Working It Out Tools for Everyday Peacemakers Program*, was designed for children from kindergarten to the sixth grade, in order to develop and enhance children's skills in multiple areas (Samples, 2004). Similarly, the *Quit it!* programme was based on Olweus's model programme for children from kindergarten to third grade, in order to establish and maintain a safe school climate, while parents' involvement ensures the extension of the programme at home (Samples, 2004).

For children of similar ages (kindergarten to fifth grade), *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies* is organised in three units, which focus on self-control, emotional and interpersonal understanding and problem-solving skills (Samples, 2004). Another programme, the *Second Step*, designed for children from preschool to the ninth grade, aims at promoting prosocial behaviours and reducing aggressive behaviours (Samples, 2004). The programme was designed to help children develop empathy and skills for anger management and conflict resolution, problem solving and impulse control (Walker & Shinn, 2002).

Within the same context, the *Incredible Years Series* is an evidence-based set of programmes for the treatment and prevention of conduct problems and the promotion of emotional regulation and social competence in children from three to eight years of age (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

The classroom-based version of the *Incredible Years Dinosaur Social Skills and Problem-Solving Child Training Program*, as described and evaluated by Webster-Stratton and Reid (2004), teaches skills that help children from three to eight years of age manage their emotions and behaviours. Developmentally appropriate curricular activities are individualized according to every child's strengths and needs and can be adapted for children or classrooms with particular issues. Parents' engagement in the programme also contributes to the effectiveness of the programme.

With a special focus on teachers' contribution to the effectiveness of intervention programmes, the *Bernese Program against Victimization in Kindergarten and Elementary School* aims at enhancing teachers' skills in addressing bully/victim challenges (Alsaker, 2004; Alsaker & Valkanover, 2001). The evaluation of the programme

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revealed that teacher counseling is effective in reducing the number or intensity of bullying or victimization incidents (Alsaker & Valkanover, 2001).

It is essential that the programmes are thoroughly implemented, so that they are effective (Rigby, 2002; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). In line with this point, Baker, Kupersmidt, Voegler-Lee, Arnold, & Willoughby (2010) emphasize the significance of preschool teachers' willingness and ability to implement preventive intervention programmes in their classrooms. The researchers examined the factors that were related to teachers' linear decrease in participation over time in a classroom-based prevention programme for preschoolers. The 49 participants of the study were trained, mentored and encouraged by teacher consultants. According to the results of Baker et al.'s (2010) study, teachers' perception of their work environment, their job satisfaction and commitment were positively related to their participation in the programme, while their concerns about the intervention served as predictors of limited participation.

Webster-Stratton and Herman (2010) also draw attention to the importance of key strategies in order for intervention programmes to be delivered with fidelity. Standardized quality training and selecting group leaders and teachers, providing mentoring and consultation constantly, developing peer support networks and adherence to programme principles and protocols are among the key strategies that ensure successful delivery of the programmes. In addition, promoting leaders' accreditation, establishing supportive agency or school support for the group leaders and teachers, and monitoring and evaluating the programmes are essential for the effectiveness of the programmes.

Conclusion

Bullying in preschool children is not always easy to identify, as children of that age may exhibit aggressive behaviours due to limitations in cognitive and verbal development. However, it is important that preschool education teachers do not underestimate the severity or frequency of such behaviours and learn to distinguish between typical conflicts and emerging behaviours of preschool bullying.

Provided that preschool children do not hesitate to act aggressively even in the presence of their teachers, it is important that teachers identify bullying incidents and manage them in a timely manner. The most prevalent forms of bullying observed in preschool settings are verbal and physical aggressiveness, social exclusion and rumor spreading, while it is well documented that boys exhibit more physical aggressiveness (Green, Cillessen, Rechis, Patterson, & Hughes, 2008; Perren, 2000) and girls exhibit more relational (Craig et al., 2000; Perren, 2000) and verbal aggressiveness (Green et al., 2008; Perren, 2000).

Teachers' training is suggested in the literature (Craig et al., 2000; Jansen et al., 2011; Matsunaga, 2009; Perren, 2000; Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015; Rose et al., 2014; Swearer et al., 2010; Vlachou et al., 2016) as an imperative need, as identifying and understanding early forms of aggression is crucial for the reduction of bullying incidents. Learning ways to prevent bullying in preschool children and implement proper interventions is also suggested in the literature (Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015; Rose et al., 2014; Vlachou et al., 2016), while analyzing risk factors and involving parents can also contribute to anti-bullying programmes. It is also important that preschool education teachers focus on children's social skills development and on creating a safe and positive environment (Rose et al., 2014; Vlachou et al., 2016).

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The reduction of bullying behaviours can be achieved with early intervention (Rigby, 2002; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). As presented above, there are promising evidence-based intervention programmes that can be implemented in early education settings in order to prevent and manage incidents of bullying in pre-school children (Samples, 2004; Walker & Shinn, 2002; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). Enhancing children's social skills in order to manage their behaviours and emotions (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004), promoting prosocial behaviour (Walker & Shinn, 2002) and providing a supportive and safe school climate (Samples, 2004) can ensure the successful implementation of these programmes. In addition, developmentally appropriate activities (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004), approaches that lie in the engagement of the school community (Samples, 2004), and especially the parents (Samples, 2004) and teachers' counselling (Alsaker & Valkanover, 2001; Baker et al., 2010) mentoring and encouragement (Baker et al., 2010) can lead to the desired outcomes.

In conclusion, the main three approaches in preventing and reducing behavioural problems in preschool children (who have not been either screened, or assessed for other health conditions - hence neurotypical) and enhancing children's emotional and social competence are the following: (i) collaboration with preschool children's parents that strengthens family-school relations, (ii) teachers' training that empowers and motivates educators to implement consistent intervention programmes, and (iii) direct teaching of cognitive, emotional and social skills (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

The present article has focused on bullying in preschool education settings, in order to draw attention to early forms of aggressiveness that should not be underestimated by teachers. The article has summarized the main forms of bullying among preschool children, so that they can be more easily identified by early education teachers and, therefore, promptly managed. It has also revealed the importance of the role of the school in the prevention and intervention of bullying in early education and highlighted some promising intervention programmes.

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