

Sibling Bullying

A pilot study among university students

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Introduction

The following pilot report has been developed by ABC – National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) at Dublin City University arising from research conducted into the largely unrecognized phenomena of *sibling bullying*. Sibling bullying differs from normal family conflict. Like other forms of bullying it is a repeated, intentional, targeted, personal attack on someone who finds it hard to defend themselves. It can be verbal, physical, emotional, exclusion, and involve property. It is characterised by a real or perceived power difference between those who bully and those who are bullied. The primary motivation is to gain status, control and access to material or parental resources, achieved by dominating and disempowering a sibling. Often behaviours that would be easily recognised as bullying in other settings are interpreted within families as being merely sibling rivalry. However, sibling bullying goes beyond what is considered to be a normal dynamic between brothers and sisters.

ABC is a national research and resource facility at DCU. Researchers at ABC were the first in Ireland to undertake research on school bullying (1996), workplace bullying (1999), homophobic bullying (2004) and cyberbullying (2009). ABC leads the field of research, resource development, and training in bullying in Ireland and is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in bullying research.

The Centre's activities are funded by the Department of Education & Skills under the National Action Plan on Bullying (2013), the Irish Research Council, the EU's Erasmus+ Framework Program for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, the Health Services Executive (HSE), DCU Research and Innovation Unit, and the Fulbright Commission, Enterprise Ireland, the Ireland Canada University Foundation and DCU Research & Innovation Support Unit. The Centre is a strategic partner with the *Norwegian Centre for Learning Environment and Behavioural Research in Education*, the *Cyberbullying Research Centre* (USA) and Friends International Centre Against Bullying (Sweden).

Aims of the Study

The aims of this pilot study were twofold. Firstly, we set out to examine and compare prevalence rates of sibling bullying and peer bullying. Secondly, we examined whether people's perceptions of the same bullying behaviour differ when between siblings compared to between peers.

Methodology and Profile of Participants

All participants were university students (n=80) who were recruited through student social media sites and on-campus posters. The participants came from both rural and urban backgrounds and the majority of those who volunteered to participate were female. The age range of participants was from 18 to 56 years (median = 23) with 74% under 30.

The study relied on an adapted version of the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire (OBQ) as it is a well-established and internationally validated instrument for gathering data on bullying behavior. It was designed by Olweus (2007) for the purposes of undertaking research on bullying among young people in schools but can be easily adapted for use in other contexts. The word bullying was removed from the OBQ to avoid priming the participants. Participants answered the same questions relating to peer and sibling behaviors that relate to bullying, since the age of 12/13 up to the time of this pilot study, including how often bullying type behaviour was experienced (physical, name-calling, property, exclusion, cyber) with answers on a scale from 'never' to 'several times a week'. Other questions included age and gender of sibling involved, where they came in the family (i.e. eldest, middle, younger child etc.), parental role, how participants now got on with the sibling ('very well', 'fairly well', 'do not get on'), how the participant treated this particular sibling ('similar', 'greater'; or 'lesser' amount of aggression) and whether participants considered they were bullied. For the purpose of this study, behaviour was considered to be bullying if it was repeated two or three times a month or more, and not if experienced 'sometimes'.

Participants were also presented with one of two *vignettes* describing a hypothetical bullying scenario between two girls, either sisters or peers and asked 1) to rate the behaviour on a scale from 'not at all serious' to 'very serious, 2) whether they considered the behaviour bullying, answering on a 5-point scale from 'definitely not' to 'definitely yes'. Answers to the two vignettes were compared.

Findings

Prevalence Rates

Using the adapted OBQ, we found that sibling bullying is more prevalent than peer bullying as 45% of participants were deemed to have been bullied by a sibling at least 2-3 times per month at some stage since the age of twelve compared to 26% of those who reported behavior related to being bullied by a peer. 36% of participants who experienced behaviours that would be designated as sibling bullying reported that it occurred frequently (roughly once a week). Interestingly, participants did not recognize all bullying type behaviours as when asked an

additional question specifically about bullying, 31% of participants considered that they were bullied by a sibling.

Perceptions of Sibling V Peer Bullying

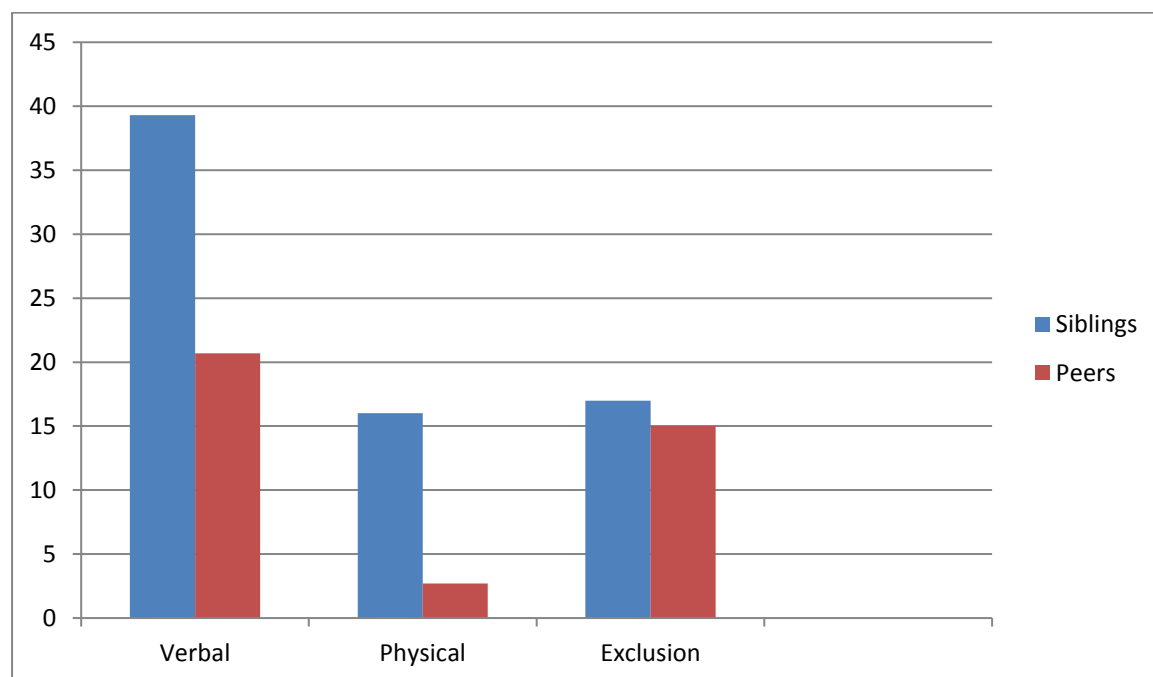
Using vignettes participants were asked to compare the same bullying related behaviors among siblings and among peers outside of a family context (e.g. school). Behaviors that would comply with sibling bullying were rated as less serious than similar behaviours carried out by peers although the behaviours in the two vignettes were identical. This suggests a biased perception of bullying and a tolerance of it in families.¹

Link between Sibling and Peer Bullying

There was a strong correlation between those who bullied siblings and those who bullied peers, and a moderate correlation between those who were bullied by a sibling and those who were bullied by a peer, indicating that being a bully or victim in one context increases the chance of being in that role in another context.²

Name-calling was the most common form of bullying between siblings with almost 40% of participants victimised by a sibling in this way, over half of whom were called names several times a week over several years.

Table 1: Percentage of types of bullying behaviours experienced



The majority (90%) of sibling bullying involved more than one type bullying behaviour.

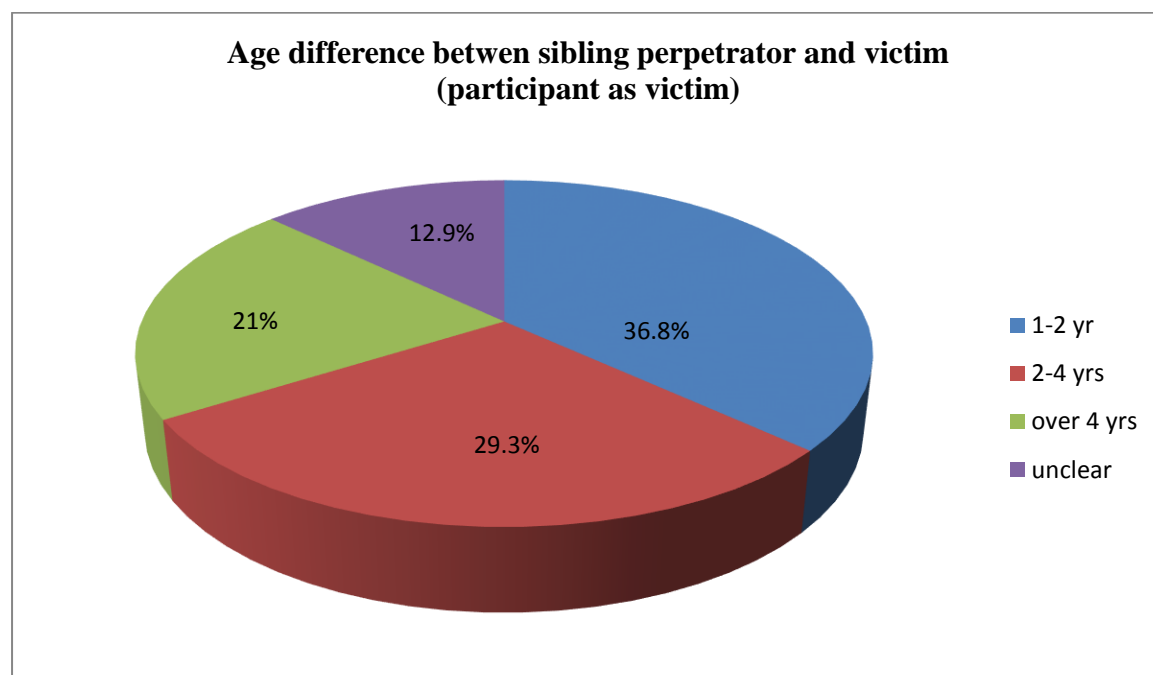
¹ An independent t-test showed that those (n=40) who rated the peer vignette rated the behaviour as significantly more serious (M=6.3, SD=0.76) than those (n=40) who rated the sibling vignette (M=5.88, SD=0.97) $p<0.05$

² Using the scores from the OBQ there was a strong correlation between scores as sibling bully and peer bully ($r=0.77$, $p<0.01$). There was a moderate correlation between Sibling Victim and Peer victims scores ($r=0.517$, $p<0.01$).

Parental Role

There was no gender or family position bias; participants were bullied by brothers and sisters, older and younger. Victims were oldest, youngest and middle children. A large percentage of bullying however occurred between siblings close in age (Table 2).

Table 2: Age difference between sibling perpetrator and victim



Participants reported that bullying typically took place without parents witnessing it. While 63% of those who experienced bullying behaviour by a sibling reported it to a parent, 50% of those who were bullied by a sibling said parents never/rarely intervened. Most worryingly a significant number of participants (18%) never reported being bullied by a sibling to anyone.

International studies have found that parental behaviour has the greatest impact on sibling bullying, more than demographics and other factors. These behaviours include marital difficulties, financial difficulties, harsh authoritarian parenting or chaotic uninvolved parenting (Wolke, Tippet and Dantchev, 2015). However, according to Wolke the behaviour that may have the greatest impact on sibling bullying appears to be parental differentiation, or favouritism (Tippet and Wolke, 2015). This is what can create a power imbalance that is required for bullying to occur.

One child may have more access to resources (i.e. parental love, attention, even material resources) and depending on their temperament/personality they can become a bully to maintain this position, or can be bullied by a sibling who wants to usurp their position. Sometimes the power imbalance is manifest in one sibling having a stronger drive than another sibling, or simply put, being 'meaner' and more manipulative which leaves a more

straight-forward child with no tools for defence. Sibling bullying can be about an attempt to correct a perceived power imbalance in a family, about gaining status in a hierarchical system, which essentially many families are.

Conclusions

The data from this study showed a correlation between being bullied by a peer and having been bullied by a sibling. This is a key finding as it highlights the need for whole school and community initiatives designed to tackle bullying to encompass the home-life of students as well as focusing on what happens in school.

The fact that the data revealed that so many of those who were bullied by a sibling said parents never/rarely intervened shows that education programmes need to raise awareness among parents about how to recognise bullying behaviour among their children as well as how to intervene.

This pilot study was the first of its' kind to focus on sibling bullying in Ireland as such it has revealed important information about the phenomenon of sibling bullying. However, other questions remain such as what would be the rate of bullying and victimisation among siblings and peers be in a larger national sample of children and adults; and what if any is the impact of sibling and peer bullying in terms of social, emotional and mental health. In the meantime, within the scope of this report we have sufficient information to justify schools extending their work to tackle bullying in school as an issue that may be related to sibling bullying.

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