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## **Bullying and violence in schools: An international perspective and findings in Greece**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In a twentieth century climate of increasing concern for rights of individuals and groups, whether due to race, sex, disability, religion or sexual orientation, the right to be educated without suffering from victimization has resonated with professionals and the public, and the issue is often picked up by the media. This has interacted in a synergistic fashion with the growth of research. The topic of «bullying» has mushroomed in academic journals and conferences. If we take the modern study of bullying as dating from Olweus' first (1978) book *Aggression in the schools: Bullies and whipping boys*, then we now have 25 years of research history. An edited review (Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano, & Slee, 1999) documents the work being done in many countries across the globe. The problem of school violence has been a focus of concern in Greece too, for researchers, teachers, parents and all those concerned with the education and well-being of children. However, bullying as a specific type of aggressive behaviour has received little attention in Greece until recently. In this article we overview recent international research on the nature of school bullying, commenting briefly on the situation in Greece; describe a European project on bullying and an associated cartoon methodology; review interventions against bullying and present results of a study in Greece linking parental attitudes to physical punishment to children's attitudes to bullying and their bullying behaviour in school.

*Key words:* Bully, Victim, Aggression, Violence, School, Intervention.

### **Definition and scope of «bullying»**

«Bullying» is now widely defined as a «systematic abuse of power» (Rigby, 2002), and more specifically as intentional aggressive behaviour that is repeated against a victim who cannot readily defend himself or herself (Olweus, 1999). As such, bullying can happen in many contexts. This review will focus on bullying involving children, mainly in school. Research on

workplace bullying (Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999) and on prison bullying (Ireland, 2000) mainly involves adults, though some of the prison bullying research has focused on young offender institutions. Bullying in the home environment, which often involves children and generally goes by the name of «abuse»; will not be reviewed here, except insofar as it relates to school bullying. But our empirical study reported later does make links between these two areas.

In the 1980s aggression and bullying were primarily seen as direct physical or verbal attacks. Through the 1990s, via the work of Bjorkqvist, Crick, Underwood and others, the scope has been broadened to include indirect aggression (via a third party), relational aggression (to damage someone's peer relationships) and social aggression (to damage self-esteem and/or social status) (see Underwood, 2002). Although males engage in more physical aggression and bullying, the difference is minor for verbal bullying and is sometimes reversed for indirect bullying. Other methods of bullying are also appearing via new technologies, including threatening text messages, harassment in Internet chat rooms and bullying by e-mail.

Forms of bullying are rather similar in western countries, often by older pupils from higher years, mostly physical and verbal, and often involving pupils who were not previously friends. By contrast, «ijime» in Japan is usually within the year group and class of the pupil and often takes the form of a systematic social exclusion by classmates, including former friends (Kanetsuna & Smith, 2002). In Korea «wang-ta» refers to social exclusion by all classmates and «jun-ta» to exclusion by a whole school.

### **Methods of study**

Large-scale surveys of bullying in schools usually rely on pupil self-report data, using the Olweus questionnaire or similar instruments. Research at a class level usually uses peer nomination procedures. Some studies use teacher reports. These are generally considered less reliable than self or peer reports, as teachers are often not told of bullying. However, at younger ages (nursery and infant school), where child reports may be less reliable, teacher reports may be relatively more useful (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2002). Finally, observational methods can give more «objective» information, although its collection and analysis is generally very time-

consuming. Pepler and colleagues have developed a system for observing playground behaviour (including bullying) using long-range filming and radio microphones (Pepler, Craig, & Roberts, 1998).

Agreement between methods is far from perfect. Pellegrini and Bartini (2000) have argued that, wherever possible, future studies should use multi-method approaches to the constructs of bully and victim, in order to take account of this.

### **Roles in bullying**

Besides the traditional roles of bully, victim and non-involved, a number of studies have examined the situation of bully-victims or provocative or aggressive victims - children showing characteristics of both bully and victim. Several studies suggest that these children show larger associations with measures of psychological disorder than either «pure bullies» or «pure victims» (Duncan, 1999; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000).

The work of Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman and Kaukiainen (1996) has been influential in looking at the group dynamics of bullying. Their *Participant Role Questionnaire* gives peer nominations of *ringleaders* (organizing a group of bullies and initiating the bullying), *followers* (who join in the bullying once it is started), *reinforcers* (who do not actively join in, but reinforce more passively by watching and laughing or encouraging the bullying), *outsiders* (who are completely non-involved) and *defenders* (who help the victim, get help or tell the bullies to stop), as well as *victims*. Salmivalli's work was with adolescents in Finland; Sutton and Smith (1999) used a similar procedure with 8-11 year olds in England and Monks, Smith and Swettenham (2003) used a modified cartoon task version with 4-5 year olds, finding that at this age it was only the bully (or aggressor), victim and defender roles that could be elicited reliably.

Pepler et al. (1998), on the basis of playground observations, argue that bullying is often watched by a number of children who are not reinforcers in the Salmivalli sense (they may not be laughing and encouraging the bullies), but their non-intervention is in itself a form of complicity and reinforcement of the bullying behaviour. Olweus (2000) has proposed a curvilinear scale of roles in terms of attitudes to bullying, from the bullying roles through to reinforcers, bystanders who do not disapprove of the bullying, bystanders who do not like the bullying but are afraid to challenge it and, finally, defenders who are prepared to challenge the bullying. These outsider - defender distinctions are important in considering the development of peer support systems, which aim to move children along this scale and increase the number of defenders.

### **Correlates of bully and victim status**

There is a considerable body of work reporting correlates or associations of bully or victim status with other characteristics. As is always the case in correlational studies, it is difficult to disentangle causal status. The following are generally assumed to have some causal influence, but this is not proven.

There is general agreement that bullying children share many characteristics with generally more aggressive children, including hot temperament; home background with less affection, more violence and low parental monitoring; and a view of relationships which positively values aggression and bullying as a means of achieving power and influence in a tough peer group environment (Olweus, 1999). There is less agreement in some other areas. Crick and Dodge (1999) believe that bullies have low social skills and do not know how to deal with ambiguous or conflict situations in «appropriate» or «adaptive» ways. However, Kaukiainen, Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, Österman, Salmivalli,

Forsblom and Ahlborn (1999) found that children high in indirect aggression are also high in social intelligence. Furthermore, Sutton, Smith and Swettenham (1999a) reported that ringleader bullies came out highest on theory of mind and emotion understanding tasks (though not on empathy). These authors argue that, contrary to the Crick and Dodge view, aggressive and bullying behaviour can sometimes be adaptive for the individual doing it (depending on social context and outcomes) and that some bullying children –ringleaders especially– can use good social-cognitive skills to operate effectively (organizing a gang, choosing a time and place to attack the victim when negative consequences for the attackers are unlikely, choosing a way to attack the victim that causes obvious distress but can be «justified» to others in terms of the victim «deserving» it).

Another area of dispute is whether bullies have low self-esteem. Some researchers have evidence that they do (O'Moore, 2000); others that they do not (Olweus, 1999). Discrepant findings may be due to differing samples (including whether bully-victims are included in the bullies) and different methodologies; also, bullies may score average on self-esteem tests but actually have a «defensive egotism» (thinking highly of themselves but being very sensitive to any criticism, Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999).

There has been a large volume of research on victim status, and with greater consensus. Possible risk factors for being a victim are shyness and internalizing problems, as well as having a disability or (in some circumstances) being different in terms of appearance or ethnicity or (in secondary schools) sexual orientation. Work in the USA has implicated number and quality of friends that a child has and degree of acceptance or rejection by the peer group as factors that interact with personality (Hodges & Perry, 1999). There is good evidence for substantially increased risk of victimization for children with disabilities (Nabuzoka, 2000). They

may have particular characteristics which make them an easy target. In mainstream settings they are often less well integrated socially and lack the protection against bullying which friendship gives. Those with behavioural problems may act out in an aggressive way and become provocative victims.

There is some evidence that victims may come from over-protective or enmeshed families. In addition, there has been recent work on sibling bullying. In a U.S. sample Duncan (1999) found that those children who bullied or were bullied by their siblings at home were more likely to be involved in bully/victim problems at school. This association was particularly strong for bully-victims. Similar associations between sibling and peer bullying and victimization were reported in an Israeli sample by Wolke and Samara (in press).

### **Effects of victimization**

Victims of bullying often experience anxiety and depression, low self-esteem, physical and psychosomatic complaints. In extreme cases, they may commit suicide (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999). Hawker and Boulton (2000), carrying out a meta-analysis of many studies, found that victimization was most strongly related to depression, moderately associated with social and global self-esteem and less strongly associated with anxiety. As with the earlier findings on probable causal factors, there are also issues of cause and effect in interpreting these findings. It could be that victimization causes these negative effects or it could be that being depressed and having low self-esteem help make a pupil more susceptible to being bullied. Longitudinal studies suggest both processes may be at work (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Retrospective studies with adults suggest the probable impact of severe victimization in childhood, and that some effects can be long-term (Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999).

### **Coping strategies and peer support against**

### **bullying**

Pupils adopt a variety of coping strategies when bullied. The success of these varies, and is age- and gender-dependent, but non-assertive strategies, such as crying, are less successful than ignoring or seeking help (Kristensen & Smith, 2003). The success of seeking help will depend on the school context, and one important part of school context appears to be the existence of peer support systems, which can encourage the «seeking help» strategy whether from peer supporters, teachers or others.

There has been growing interest in peer support and mediation as an approach to bullying. These methods hold promise, but more evaluation research is needed. Cowie (2000) argues that evaluations so far suggest clear benefits for the peer supporters themselves and general improvement of school climate; but specific benefits for victims of bullying remain to be proven.

Evaluations of active listening/counseling-based approaches (Cowie, Naylor, Talamelli, Chauhan, & Smith, 2002) found that the majority of peer supporters reported benefits arising from the interpersonal skills and teamwork acquired in training. Users reported that peer supporters offered helpful interventions and most pupils and teachers believed that the service was having an impact on the school as a whole. However, problems may arise due to some hostility toward peer helpers from other pupils, difficulties in recruiting boys as peer supporters, issues of power sharing with staff and ensuring sufficient time and resources for proper implementation.

### **Studies on bullying in Greece**

A number of studies have been made recently on bullying and violence in Greek schools (see Houndoumedi, Pateraki, & Doanidou [2003] for a detailed review). Incidence figures vary by methodology and study details,

but appear broadly in line with other European surveys (Petropoulos et al., 2000; Boulton, Karellou, Laniti, Manoussou, & Lemoni, 2001). A range of different types of bullying has been documented, including physical, verbal, threatening, stealing money and belongings and social exclusion (Kalabaliki, 1995; Bese, 1998; Kalliotis, 2000). A common finding is that girls show lower levels of bullying and violence, especially for physical forms, compared to boys (Fakiolas & Armenakis, 1995; Gotovos, 1996; General Secretariat of Youth and National Youth Council for Hellas, 1999; Kalliotis, 2000; Boulton et al., 2001). Girls have more empathic attitudes towards victims (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001). Younger students report more victimization than older ones, with the exception of verbal aggression (Gotovos, 1996). The playground is a prevalent place for bullying (Kalliotis, 2000). Only a minority of those victimized tell parents and generally even fewer tell teachers (Kalliotis, 2000; Manoudaki, 2000; Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001). These features are all congruent with other European studies on bullying (Smith et al., 1999).

Studies on school violence in Greece have implicated low-achieving pupils especially (General Secretariat of Youth and National Youth Council for Hellas, 1999). Papastilianou (2000) links this to perceptions pupils may hold about unfair treatment in school and at home. Some studies have commented on the phenomenon of gang violence in teenagers and in Greek Likio (Gotovos, 1996; Manoudaki, 2000).

Some groups of pupils in Greece are especially at risk of victimization, including those with disabilities and those from minorities. The identity of the Greek school population has changed from almost monocultural to multicultural, as many children of economic immigrants have been attending Greek schools during the last decade. Many of these children have learning difficulties, especially concerning the Greek language, and feel frustrated with their learning progress. Furthermore, many of them

often find themselves withdrawn from or rejected by their Greek peers (Mitiilis, 1998). Violent episodes between Greek and non-Greek pupils have been reported (Houndoumadi et al., 2003). Greek parents have also expressed negative attitudes towards these children attending Greek schools and a climate of xenophobia has been developing in the Greek school area (Mastoras, 2001).

The children of the gipsy minority who also live in Greece are often not welcomed at schools by children, their parents or the head teachers (Vergidis, 1995) and may be almost segregated from their peers in the classroom. This situation prevails, despite the Greek Ministry of Education and Religion Affairs having developed an educational policy for the educational and social integration of these children in public schools.

### **A European project on bullying and a cartoon methodology**

From 1997 to 2001 the first author co-ordinated a Training and Mobility of Researchers program under the European Union Fourth Framework Funding. (This research was supported by the Training and Mobility of Researchers grant ERB-FMRX-CT97-0139, DG12, from the European Commission.) The topic was «The causes and nature of bullying and social exclusion in schools and ways of preventing them». The main teams involved were in England, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Germany. However, colleagues in Greece as well as other countries collaborated in the first aim. There were six objectives within the program:

- *The nature and definition of the phenomenon.* This is described below.
- *The use and integration of different methods of study.* Reviews on general survey questionnaires, use of cartoons, retrospective questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and qualitative approaches, observational methods, narrative approaches and theory of

mind, moral and emotional issues, methods of studying adult bullying. Reports are on the project website.

- *The causation of bullying problems in different societies, using recent theoretical perspectives.* Examples of this work include using a Working Relationships Questionnaire to study workplace bullying in England, Spain and Portugal (Jennifer, Cowie, & Ananiadou, 2003), developing a narrative task to assess theory of mind skills and use with pupils in Italy, Spain and Portugal identified by peer nomination as in different bully/victim roles (Smorti, Ortega, & Ortega-Rivera, 2002), gathering observational data using video-recordings in the classroom and in the playground in Italy, Spain, England and Portugal to obtain profiles of behaviour of children in different bully/victim roles and using a combined cartoon/narrative approach called SCAN Bullying with samples of children in Portugal Spain and Italy, to see how they perceive, understand, attribute feelings and respond to bullying situations (Almeida et al., 2001; Menesini et al., 2003).
- *The longer term consequences of school bullying and social exclusion in the workplace and adult life.* A study carried out in England found a small but significant consistency between school and workplace victimization, more marked for those who were bully/victims at school (Smith, Singer, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003). A study with samples of university students and school teachers in Germany, Spain and England used a Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire to assess long-term effects of being a victim at school on self-esteem and relationships (Schäfer et al., in press).
- *The collation of examples of successful interventions and their evaluation.* A report was produced on legal requirements about dealing with bullying -or related issues, such as pupil violence- in schools across the European Community (Ananiadou & Smith, 2002). A

detailed analysis of the larger school-based interventions against bullying was also made (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003; Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003). Also see below.

- *Planning and evaluation of short-term longitudinal intervention studies on a network-enriched basis.* Two particular projects evaluated here were the Seville Anti-Bullying Project in the Andalusia region of Spain (Ortega & Lera, 2000) and interventions in Italian schools, often featuring peer support systems as a major intervention (Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli, & Cowie, 2003).

#### ***The nature and definition of the phenomenon: A cartoon study***

The first objective of this project was to examine the terms used for «bullying» across different countries and languages. Different languages use different terms for «bullying». These may have substantially different shades of meaning. For example, in Italy terms like «prepotenze» have been used, although recently «il bullismo» has been adopted (Fonzi et al., 1997). To investigate these issues the network developed a cartoon methodology to look more deeply into different definitions of «bullying» and bully-related terms in different languages, with the aim of increasing the sensitivity of researchers to variations in meanings between terms when used in questionnaires, surveys and reports, and hence in interpreting cross-national comparisons.

Altogether colleagues from 14 countries (including Greece), representing 13 major languages, collaborated in a common study (Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefvooghe, 2002). A series of 25 stick cartoon pictures illustrating different social situations that might or might not be bullying was developed. The situations varied in terms of parameters such as physical and verbal aggression, telling nasty stories, social exclusion, number of aggressors, relative power, intent of the perpetrator, provocation of the victim, repetition and negative effect on the

victim. Racism, sexism and discrimination on the basis of disability or sexual orientation were included, plus a small number of pro-social cartoons as controls. Stick figures were used so as to avoid issues of clothing, which might vary by culture, and to avoid suggesting any particular ethnic group or skin colour. Each cartoon had a caption in the native language. One set of cartoons had captions with boys' names, a corresponding set captions with girls' names.

We decided to work with two age groups of children: 8-year olds and 14-year olds. This samples typical ages in primary and secondary education and enables us to look at age changes.

All research teams followed an agreed 3-step procedure:

1) List and select terms for bullying and social exclusion (terms were taken from common usage, press and academic reports and dictionaries).

2) Use focus groups with pupils to check on usage and broad understanding of terms (this was to ensure that terms used would be understood by pupils). Most teams ended up with 3 to 5 terms to use in step 3. Colleagues in Greece (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001) selected the Greek terms «μειώνω», «ταλαιπωρώ», «κάνω το μάγκα» («miono», «taleporo» and «kano to magha») for the cross-national comparison.

3) Show pupils the 25 cartoons in sequence and for each term in turn ask them to say whether each cartoon situation is an example of that term. For example, the first cartoon had the caption (in English, for girls) «Helen and Jo don't like each other and start to fight». Pupils would be asked «Is that an example of bullying?» or (later) «Is that an example of teasing/harassment/picking on/tormenting/intimidation?» (some terms were only used for 14 year olds). For full details of samples and methodology see Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefoghe (2002).

The similarity or difference between the descriptions of any two cartoons (words used to

describe them) was first assessed by comparing their percentage profiles across all the terms used. Hierarchical cluster analyses showed distinct groups of cartoon situations. The solution for older children (14 years) showed 5 clusters: *non-aggressive* (some cartoons showing helpful or neutral behaviour), *physical aggression* (an even-handed dispute or a provoked retaliation), *physical bullying* (with power difference between the disputing parties in terms of size, strength, number and consistency), *verbal aggression* (direct and indirect, involving both direct taunting and name-calling and nasty gossiping) and *social exclusion* (refusal to let someone play with you or a group). The meaning of each language term could now be expressed in terms of percentage scores on each of these 5 clusters of cartoons instead of 25 percentage scores on each individual cartoon.

For example, the English term «bullying» scored high on *physical bullying* and *verbal aggression*, moderately high on *social exclusion*, low on *physical aggression* and very low on *non-aggressive* cartoons. The Geeek term «kano to magha» had the most similar profile to «bullying» (although being lower on *physical aggression* but higher on *physical bullying*), whereas both «miono» and «taleporo» scored high on all three aggressive clusters (so not distinguishing bullying from ordinary fighting). Some terms in other languages (such as Italian «prepotenza») also scored relatively highly on *physical aggression* as well as on *physical bullying*.

This data can help in interpreting cross-national comparisons. For example, apparently high rates of bullying in Italy may partly be explained by use of the term «prepotenze» in questionnaires when this term has a broader meaning than «bullying» (Smorti, Menesini, & Smith, 2003). Besides children, the technique has been used with adults (for example, to compare teacher and parent perceptions) (Menesini, Fonzi, & Smith, 2002).

### Large-scale intervention studies to tackle



## **bullying**

There have been over a dozen large-scale (multiple-school) intervention studies against bullying, carried out in various countries. These were often inspired by the Norwegian nationwide campaign and the development of the Olweus anti-bullying program, which reported a 50% reduction in bullying in the Bergen area. The Sheffield project in England followed some years later, and there has been similar work in the USA, Canada, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Finland, Ireland, Switzerland and Australia. Outcomes have been varied. Although the Olweus program continues to produce successful results in Norway, its replication in the USA, Germany and Belgium has had much more modest success (see Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003). The outcomes of the Sheffield project -reductions of around 5-20% in victimization rates-, while more modest than the results in Bergen, are also more typical of the range of findings from further studies (Smith & Ananiadou, 2003).

Various factors may account for these varying success rates (Smith et al., 2003; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, in press). The nature of the intervention work might seem the most obvious candidate; but to date no «magic ingredient» has been discovered. The total extent of anti-bullying work (of whatever kind) is a good predictor of outcomes. Arguably, the most important factor is the extent to which schools take ownership of the anti-bullying work, whatever form it takes, and push it forward effectively and persistently. This appears to correlate with outcomes more than the extent to which schools receive support from outside. The length of the intervention may also be a factor. A sustained period of intervention, together with mechanisms to ensure that anti-bullying work is maintained at some level after the initial intensive intervention phase are important. Bullying is an ongoing problem, so a «one-off» effort over a term or a year, without continuation, will have little or no lasting impact. In addition, work in primary schools is often more

successful than in secondary schools. In the latter, peer group attitudes against victims tend to harden, especially in boys (Olweus & Endresen, 1998).

The existing research also gives pointers as to how to improve intervention effectiveness in the future. More attention may need to be paid to girls bullying, and also to rumour-spreading and social exclusion (more typical of girls), which are not always recognized as bullying or so readily detected. At present anti-bullying materials often emphasize on the more obvious physical and direct verbal forms. Awareness of different roles may help. Peer support schemes can aim to turn «bystanders» into «defenders» (Cowie, 2000) and we need to be aware of the clever (though manipulative) social skills of many bullies. Also, since roles take time to get established, starting anti-bullying work early (including, for example, awareness raising and assertiveness training in infant and junior schools) may be important. There is also some debate about the extent to which anti-bullying work should focus on broader school climate issues and relationships in school rather than specifically on bullying (Roland & Galloway, 2002).

Teachers have good knowledge about some aspects of bullying, but do not feel fully equipped to tackle it (Nicolaidis, Toda, & Smith, 2002). In England and Wales a government pack «Don't Suffer in Silence», originally produced from the Sheffield project, was issued in a second edition in 2000. The pack summarizes how to develop a school policy on bullying and other methods, such as curriculum work, playground work, working with individual pupils, peer support schemes and working with parents. Nearly half the schools thought there had been a decrease in bullying since using the pack (with only 6% reporting an increase).

Since 1996 several successful legal actions have been taken by pupils or their parents against schools in which they were persistently bullied. In England and Wales since September 1999 it has been a legal requirement for schools

to have some anti-bullying policy. As yet there is no clear evidence that the quality or content of anti-bullying policies in themselves predicts victimization rates (Woods & Wolke, 2003), one challenge now is to ensure that school policies form a sound base for further action, informed by the continuing research on the issue.

### Interventions in Greece

Although a National School Policy concerning the phenomenon of bullying and victimization does not exist in Greece, actions and initiatives taken and funded mainly by the Ministry of Education for the prevention of racism and violence in schools do operate. School programs such as «Evelikti Zoni» focus mostly on activities and processes to develop pupils' cognitive skills through problem solving activities, as well as social skills through communicative and cooperative activities. A program called «School Life» aims to strengthen relationships among peers as well as between teachers and pupils. The program «Olympiaki Pedia» forwards the values of peaceful co-existence and mutual help. In 2000 a pamphlet concerning school violence and providing some guidelines for teachers, pupils and parents to deal effectively with it was issued by the Pedagogical Institute of Greece and distributed in schools (Παιδαγωγικό Ινστιτούτο Ελλάδας, 2000). There is no research evidence yet of its effectiveness. More in depth studies using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods would shed more light on the phenomenon of bullying in Greek schools and on the effectiveness of any programs and interventions.

As mentioned earlier, in Greece physical violence and aggression is mainly masculine, with a consistency across studies of greater involvement by boys. A recent article in a daily Greek newspaper (28th August 2003) claimed that of those children referred to Agia Sofia Paediatric Hospital for physical abuse by their

parents the number of boys is twice as big as the number of girls (Nesphige, 2003). It is worth wondering whether this has something to do with the masculine type of physical aggression and bullying which often appears in schools. In our final section we report on an original study linking parental physical punishment to pro-bullying attitudes and bullying behaviour of children in Greek schools.

### A study on Greek parent's physical punishment and their children's attitudes to and involvement in bullying at school

Pupils can experience physical aggression and bullying from other peers at school, sometimes –unfortunately– from teachers and other times –unfortunately– at home. Research linking sibling bullying at home and peer bullying at school was described earlier.

Studies in a range of Western societies show that many parents regularly punish their children physically. Nobes and Smith (1997; Nobes, Smith et al. 1999) in a two-parent family study in the UK with children aged 1 to 11 years defined four categories of physical punishment: *smacking/hitting* (including spanking, slapping and beating), *physical restraint* (including pushing, shaking, throwing and holding), *punishment by example* (including squeezing, biting and pinching, usually administered with the intention of demonstrating to the children the consequences of their actions) and *punishment by ingestion* (including washing the children's mouth with soap and water and forcefully getting them to eat food against their wishes).

They found that almost all parents had used hitting/smacking at some point, with 35% of children experiencing it weekly from one or other parent. 21% of both mothers and fathers had inflicted some severe physical punishment at some time. Within families there was similarity in the use of physical punishment by mothers and by fathers both in severity and in overall frequency of

use (and especially for hitting/smacking, the most frequent form). Children also experienced more severe punishment when the parents had a poor marital relationship compared to those whose parents' marriage relationship was stable.

In Northern Ireland Murphy-Cowan and Stringer (1999) found 91% of parents had smacked their child (aged 4 to 7 years) at some point and 4% did so frequently. Parents who reported receiving high levels of physical punishment from their parents tended to give the same to their children, although some middle class parents had consciously rejected the practice.

Such practices have a long history and are often justified (in the West) by reference to biblical injunctions and by the need to discipline a child into obedient behaviour (Greven, 1991). Others argue that violence that is inflicted by parents at home in the name of reform and discipline is a form of abuse and can be interpreted by the child as a natural behaviour in interpersonal relationships. Several countries –Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Austria, Cyprus, Latvia, Croatia, Israel and Germany– have legally abolished the use of corporal (physical) punishment of children by parents. In Greece it is still widely accepted, as in the UK, USA and many other countries. Surveys in the UK and the USA suggest that a majority of parents practice some physical punishment. However, in Sweden, where it was made illegal in 1979, the percentage of parents who reported hitting their children fell from 27.5% in 1980 to 1.1% in 2000.

Many studies have found correlations between the frequency and/or severity of parental physical punishment and childhood misbehaviour and aggression. However, there could be explanations for this other than that the smacking is causing the aggression. For example, child misbehaviour (from other causes) may elicit parental punishment. Well-controlled longitudinal studies have given more insight. Recent studies in the USA (e.g., Straus, Sugarman, & Giles-Sims, 1997) have attempted to investigate the causal relationship between corporal punishment and antisocial

behavior, taking account of race, socio-economic status, gender of child and relationship with parents, and still find a clear link between the two. Straus et al. (1997) suggest that if parents replaced corporal punishment with non-violent modes of discipline, they could reduce the risk of antisocial behavior among children.

Debate continues about these findings, and a review by Larzelere (2000) concluded that smacking could be an effective, harmless form of discipline, provided that it was not too severe, was kept under control, was not given in moments of anger, was limited to the 2 to 6 year age range and was used in conjunction with reasoning. However, critics point out that these are quite stringent limitations. For example, many parents in Nobes et al. (1999) sample were punishing 1 year olds and 7 and 11 year olds, and some of them do use severe physical punishment. If smacking often slides into inappropriate and severe chastisement, this could be seen as becoming abusive behaviour.

The literature on children who bully other pupils in school does suggest an association with homes where severe physical punishment is used and where children are taught to strike back physically as a way of handling problems. Bullying children often report a lack of parental warmth and involvement and seem to desire power and control in their relationships (Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998). However, there is no research of this kind on Greek children. Nor has such research examined relationships to attitudes to bullying, in addition to the actual experiences of being a bully (or victim).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The study was conducted in Athens. The sample comprised 279 parents and children drawn from 98 families: 95 mothers, 86 fathers, 53 daughters and 45 sons. Children's mean age

was 13 years 9 months, median 14 years (range 10-18 years). Most of them lived with both parents, a few were from single parent families (mother only). There were no siblings in the sample. All participants were approached in evening tutoring schools, where students go for help with their morning schools' homework.

Of the 20 schools approached 8 schools agreed to take part. They were in the center of Athens and in the suburbs. Students who agreed to take part were given envelopes with a letter for their parents' approval to participate in the study and questionnaires for the parents to complete separately. Participants were informed that taking part was voluntary and anonymous and that all data would be treated confidentially. Envelopes were provided, so that children could return the questionnaires completed by their parents to the school, sealed for anonymity. All questionnaires had a unique code number for each family. Students that returned their parents' questionnaires and consent were given their own questionnaires to complete during a break time in the school and they returned them in sealed envelopes.

## Measures

All questionnaires were translated from English to Greek and then again translated to English, in order to check for linguistic parallelism.

### *Questionnaires to parents:*

a) Overall use of physical punishment: Mothers and fathers were asked about their own use of physical punishment towards their child (that was given the questionnaire at school), using three items from the Parent Form of the Physical Punishment Questionnaire (Rohner, 1997) for frequency and severity of physical punishment and perceived fairness («How fair you think it is when you punish them physically»), on five-point scales.

b) Use of different types of physical punishment: Mothers and fathers were asked about

the frequency of use of the four types of physical punishment used by Nobes and Smith (1997, 1999): smacking/hitting, physical restraint, punishment by example and punishment by ingestion (definitions given earlier). Responses were on five-point scales: 0 = Never, 1 = Once a year, 2 = Once a month, 3 = Every week, and 4 = Every day.

c) Marital quality: Parents completed the Golombok, Rust Inventory of Marital State Questionnaire (GRIMS) (Rust, Bennun, Crowe, & Golombok, 1990). This has 28 items rated on a four-point scale, which sum to give an overall score of marital quality (the higher the scores, the more severe the relationship problem).

d) Age of parents in years and level of education (primary, secondary, further/college, university) were also recorded.

### *Questionnaires for children:*

a) Overall experience of physical punishment: The children were asked about their own experience of physical punishment from their mother and (separately) from their father, using the same three items from the Parent Form of the Physical Punishment Questionnaire (Rohner, 1997) for frequency and severity of physical punishment and perceived fairness («How fair you think it is when your mother/father punishes you physically»), on five-point scales.

b) Use of different types of physical punishment: The children were asked about the frequency with which they experienced the four types of physical punishment used by Nobes and Smith (1997; Nobes, Smith et al. 1999; see above) from their mother and (separately) from their father. Responses were on five-point scales, identical to the parent version.

c) Attitudes to bullying: Each child completed the Children's Attitude to Bullying Scale (CAB) (Eslea & Smith, 2000). This has 15 items, answered on a 3-point scale (rather than a 5 point scale in the original version, to minimize given length of the total questionnaire package). An overall attitude score (with higher scores indicating more tolerance of bullies, less sym-

pathy for victims and more skepticism about intervention) was calculated.

d) Bully or victim role: Children answered one item on the frequency with which they had been bullied at school this term (victim) and one item on the frequency with which they had bullied others at school this term (bully), with possible answers 0 = Never, 1 = Once or twice, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = About once a week, and 4 = Several times a week.

e) Children also gave their age and gender.

**Results**

The mean frequency of overall physical punishment reported by mothers was 1.34 (*SD* = 1.09), by fathers 0.83 (*SD* = 0.97), corresponding to around once a year, but with appreciable variation. Frequency of overall physical punishment reported by mothers correlated moderately with that reported by fathers ( $r = 0.38, p < .001$ ). Of the four types, means were highest for smacking (mothers 1.16, fathers 0.75). The full set of analyses on the nature of physical punishment reported by the parents will be presented elsewhere (Papasideri & Smith, in

preparation).

For children the mean score on the CAB was 15.4 (*SD* = 4.16) (out of possible maximum of 30). The mean score on reported bullying others was 1.01 (*SD* = 1.14) and of being a victim 0.90 (*SD* = 0.80), corresponding to about once or twice a term on average, but again with appreciable individual variation.

Correlations were carried out separately for mothers and fathers between the seven items on parental physical punishment (as reported by mother and by father) and the children's attitude to bullying score and frequency of being a victim or bully. Since the correlations are between parent and child report, shared method variance is avoided. Table 1 shows the correlations for mothers and Table 2 for fathers. Correlations are for boys and girls combined, with separate correlations for boys and girls shown in brackets.

Pro-bullying attitudes of children were significantly associated with the frequency of smacking from both mothers and fathers. For mothers this was also true of punishment by example and for fathers for overall frequency and severity of physical punishment and for frequency of physical restraint and ingestion. Correlations are higher for fathers – and indeed

**Table 1**

**Correlations between reports of physical punishment at home by mothers and children's attitude to bullying and the experience of being a victim or bully at school. Separate correlations for boys and girls shown in brackets**

Mother's ( <i>N</i> = 95) use of physical punishment	Child's attitude to bullying	Child as bully	Child as victim
Frequency	.19 (.42**, -.06)	.25* (.36*, .00)	.12 (.18, .06)
Severity	.17 (.44**, -.06)	.32*** (.48**, .06)	.15 (.21, .10)
Fairness	-.01 (.38*, -.40**)	.27** (.44**, .06)	.03 (.18, -.08)
Smacking	.24* (.42**, .08)	.17 (.21, .11)	.19 (.17, .20)
Restraint	.20 (.42**, -.01)	.09 (.25, -.21)	.02 (.22, -.13)
Example	.23* (.32*, -.01)	.24* (.26, -.02)	.05 (.05, -.01)
Ingestion	.13 (.25, -.01)	.06 (.12, -.10)	-.07 (-.06, -.09)

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 2**  
**Correlations between reports of physical punishment at home by fathers and children's attitude to bullying and the experience of being a victim or bully at school. Separate correlations for boys and girls shown in brackets**

Father's ( <i>N</i> = 86) use of physical punishment	Child's attitude to bullying	Child as bully	Child as victim
Frequency	.44*** (.53***, .26)	.23* (.27, .01)	-.02 (.15, -.20)
Severity	.30** (.43** , .15)	.10 (.16, -.04)	-.10 (.11, -.24)
Fairness	.10 (.17, .04)	.04 (.09, -.07)	-.06 (.00, -.10)
Smacking	.43*** (.48***, .28)	.26* (.24, .11)	.05 (.19, -.10)
Restraint	.36*** (.53***, .10)	.29** (.31, .16)	.10 (.20, .01)
Example	-.01 (-, .02)	-.01 (-, .04)	.01 (-, .03)
Ingestion	.34*** (.52***, .10)	.23* (.29, .05)	.20 (.36*, .10)

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

for frequency of overall physical punishment and of smacking are very highly significant and account for over 18% of total variance. Looking at boys and girls separately, these correlations were all higher and significant for boys and not significant for girls. One surprising finding was related to perceived fairness of physical punishment received from mother. For boys pro-bullying attitudes were related to perceived unfairness of punishment, whereas for girls pro-bullying attitudes were related to perceived fairness of punishment (both statistically significant, Table 1).

The child's report of being a bully at school was correlated with a majority of measures for both mothers (Table 1) and fathers (Table 2). For both parents overall frequency of physical punishment correlated with being a bully, as did severity, perceived fairness and frequency of punishment by example for mothers and frequency of smacking, physical restraint and punishment by ingestion for fathers. Correlations here were generally more modest, accounting for up to some 10% of the variance. Again, looking at boys and girls separately, these correlations were all higher for boys and significant for mother reports of

frequency, severity and fairness of punishment, whereas they were low and not significant for girls.

By contrast, there were no statistically significant correlations of parental physical punishment with being a victim (also true when boys and girls were examined separately) (see Tables 1 and 2).

Two multiple linear regressions were performed to see whether age, level of education, marital quality (GRIMS score) and the four types of punishment frequency as reported by mother and by father would predict their child's attitude towards bullying. A summary of findings is given in Table 3. The regression with mother's reports of physical punishment yielded no significant result. However, for fathers the overall regression was significant, with frequency of smacking as a significant predictor. Two further regressions examined child age and child-reported frequency of the four types of punishment received from their mother and their father. The overall regressions were significant for mother and for father. No specific variable reached significance for mothers, but for fathers perceived (by child) frequency of punishment by ingestion was significant.

**Table 3**

**Summary of results for regression analyses on child's attitude to bullying, on mother's and father's reports of four types of physical punishment, including child's age, parent's level of education and marital quality, and on child's reports of four types of physical punishment from mother and father, including child's age**

<p><u>Mother's reports</u> Overall <math>F = 1.43</math>, n.s.</p>	<p><u>Father's reports</u> Overall <math>F = 3.21</math>, <math>p = .005</math> Smack, <math>Beta = .359</math>, <math>p = .043</math></p>
<p><u>Child's report of mother</u> Overall <math>F = 3.93</math>, <math>p = .003</math> Nothing significant individually</p>	<p><u>Child's report of father</u> Overall <math>F = 3.75</math>, <math>p = .004</math> Ingestion, <math>Beta = .207</math>, <math>p = .048</math></p>

**Discussion**

This study found a number of significant associations between parental physical punishment and their child's attitude to bullying and acting as a bully in school. The data come from parental reports on the one hand and from child reports on the other, so shared method variance is avoided. Although mother's and father's reports of physical punishment within a family correlated (for frequency,  $r = 0.38$ ), this was moderate. Thus, there is substantial individual variance for mothers and for fathers.

The pattern of correlations is similar for mothers and fathers (Tables 1, 2), but not identical. Regarding the child's attitude to bullying, the overall correlations are higher for father's physical punishment than for mother's, and in the predicted direction. More frequent and severe punishment, and especially smacking, predicts higher pro-bullying attitudes in school. The correlations are much higher for boys than for girls – indeed, the girl's correlations do not reach significance. (The only significant correlation for girls is a counter-intuitive negative correlation with mother's perceived fairness of physical punishment. As this is just one correlation out of 21 in Table 1, we are inclined to regard it as a chance result, although it could prove meaningful if replicated in other studies.)

The higher correlations for boys may relate to the nature of boy's aggression and bullying. This is much more typically physical in nature (Rigby, 2002; Underwood, 2002). By contrast, girls and boys both use verbal aggression and bullying, and girls often specialize in rumour spreading and social exclusion (indirect bullying). As we saw earlier, this sex difference in physical forms of aggression is very marked in Greek studies too. This study concentrated on *physical* punishment inflicted by parents, and this appears to relate most strongly to physical bullying. A different pattern of results might emerge if we examined other kinds of punishment – verbal rebukes, social exclusion (sending to room, time out) and the perceived frequency and severity of these. These might predict more verbal and indirect forms of aggression and bullying.

A similar pattern of correlations is found between father's and mother's physical punishment and the child's report of acting as a bully (stronger for boys and, in this case, near-zero for girls). Given the low frequency of physical bullying in girls, modeling of this by parents may have even less effect on their behaviour (as a bully) than on their attitudes (as pro-bully). The other interesting finding emerging from this pattern of results is that, whereas father's physical punishment altogether had a stronger effect than mother's on child's attitudes to

bullying, it is mother's physical punishment which tends to have a stronger effect on acting as a bully, especially for boys. It may be that, for boys especially, fathers act as a model for attitudes in this respect, but mothers (who actually smack more frequently and usually have more disciplinary contact with the child) have more influence in terms of models of relationships for actual behaviour.

Very consistently, measures of physical punishment by father and mother do not predict a child's report of being a victim at school. (There is one significant correlation related to father's punishment by ingestion for boys, but, as it is only 1 of 42 correlations in Tables 1 and 2, we do not attach importance to this.) These correlations are generally very low. It seems that what children may learn from their parents' physical punishment is related to (probably physical) forms of bullying and not to general interpersonal difficulties or being a victim of bullying.

These correlations do not prove causation. There may be other important variables, such as parental involvement and warmth of relationship between parents and children. Age of child could also be a factor. However, regression analyses found that important associations remained –notably for fathers' use of physical punishment and children's pro-bullying attitudes– when controlling for child's age, parent's level of education and marital quality. Similarly, associations were found with the child's reports of parental punishment, controlling for child age.

The factors investigated explained up to some 10-18% of variance. The age range of the children (10-18 years) is older than those of most samples in earlier studies. Thus, although mean frequency of physical punishment was not high –around once a year on average–, these could be seen as quite serious at this age, and certainly outside the 2 to 6 year age range at which smacking was postulated as possibly effective and not harmful in the Larzelere (2000) review.

While no correlational study can prove causation, these results do suggest that more

extensive use of physical punishments such as smacking and hitting by parents may act as a model of attitudes, relationships and behaviour for their children in school. Their sons especially may take these physically abusive forms of behaviour into peer relationships and engage in bullying behaviours in school. This has important policy implications for encouragement of good parenting and for ways of helping parents with difficult children.

This does not mean that there may not also be a biological or genetic component to aggressive behavior, via individual characteristics such as temperament. Indeed, genetics and parenting environment may interact as causative factors. In a longitudinal New Zealand study from birth to age 26 Caspi et al. (2002) found that boys who were severely maltreated in childhood were more likely to show antisocial/criminal behaviour as adults. However, this depended on genotype, specifically the high-or low-activity variants of a gene encoding for the enzyme MAOA (which metabolizes neurotransmitters such as dopamine). Maltreated boys with the low-activity genotype were at high risk; those with the high-activity genotype were not. Thus, recognition of the importance of a child's own personality and temperament does not in any way deny the importance of good parenting, although it may help us refine our knowledge.

### Concluding comments

Many factors are involved in reducing bullying. Some are focused on school curricula and anti-bullying policies and some on working with individual pupils (Smith, Ananiadou, & Cowie, 2003). However, one does not have to be a child in order to be a bully. Parental physical punishment can involve aggressive behavior and bullying. Bullying children often come from homes where physical punishment is used and where children are taught to strike back



physically as a way of handling problems. The home environment and disciplinary strategies of parents are also a legitimate focus of interest and possibly of intervention –whether through parent training, parent support and/or legal prohibition of violent behaviour to children– which may help produce a safer climate of peer relationships in schools.

Parents and schools have a vital role in reducing bullying; but the impact of the wider society –portrayals of violence in the mass media and attitudes to aggression, bullying and violence in society, the workplace (including among teachers) and the local community– must also be taken into consideration. The concern with the «systematic abuse of power» in schools has a legitimate and important focus on relationships in school (and even on pupil-pupil relationships primarily), but it is also part of a wider set of relationships and issues in families, communities and societies that we are still grappling with, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

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