

## **A problem shared is a problem halved: satisfaction with classmates and life as a student among the children who have experienced bullying at school**

Mai Beilmann<sup>a1</sup>, Kadri Soo<sup>a</sup>, Dagmar Kutsar<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu*

### **Summary**

Every child has a right to feel safe at school; however, many children experience bullying more or less regularly and feel unsafe at school. A feeling of safety is a fundamental human right and the source of children's subjective well-being (González-Carrasco *et al.*, 2019; Kutsar *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, when children perceive school as a safe place, they enjoy going to school a lot more (Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017). On the other hand, bullying at school uncovers the risk of deteriorating mental and physical well-being and learning outcomes (Erath *et al.*, 2008). This article aims to attest that the perceived aid from parents, teachers and other students can relieve the adverse effects of bullying and help maintain satisfaction with different aspects of school life.

According to Olweus (1991), bullying is often defined as repeated aggression towards another person who is perceived as weaker and less able to defend himself or herself from the aggressor. This definition outlines the critical components of bullying: victims are regularly exposed to negative actions from one or more other students; there is intent to cause distress or harm the victim; and a power imbalance often exists (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). Studies have revealed that about one-fifth of school students in Estonia suffer because of bullying (Mark *et al.*, 2015; Treial, 2016). In international terms, Estonia is one of the countries where the proportion of children who have experienced bullying at school is above average (Inchley *et al.*, 2016; Rees & Main, 2015). Estonian schoolchildren mainly experience non-physical bullying, such as laughing at them, ridiculing them, disparaging their appearance, making fun of them, spreading rumours and being excluded from the group (Mark *et al.*, 2015).

Bullying has a significant impact on students' well-being, and it is expected to lead to lower satisfaction with school and life in general. This article studies the relationship between bullying, belief in receiving help from significant

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu, Lossi 36, Tartu, 51003 Estonia; mai.beilmann@ut.ee

others, satisfaction with life as a student and satisfaction with classmates. It is known that the support of classmates (Huitsig *et al.*, 2012) and the opportunity to share their burden with someone (Siyahhan *et al.*, 2012) help victims of bullying. Therefore, it can be assumed that students who experience not only bullying but also support from classmates, teachers or family members, are more satisfied with their school life than bullied students who do not have such support. The existence of supportive relationships is one of the factors that could relieve some of the negative consequences of bullying. Therefore, we tested the hypothesis that students who have experienced bullying but can rely on help from significant others (classmates, teachers or family members) are more satisfied with their lives as students and with their classmates than those who cannot rely on help from others.

### Method

We used the third wave data of the International Children's Worlds study from Estonian 6th graders ( $N = 1079$ ). Cluster sampling of schools was based on national education statistics by sex, age, type of school and region of children attending school. The sample is representative of 6th grade children in Estonia. The questionnaire was administered in Estonian and Russian. The number of boys and girls in the sample were roughly equal.

In order to measure children's satisfaction with the different dimensions of school life, children were asked to assess items such as "Your life as a student", "Other children in your class", and "Things you have learned at school" on an 11-point scale. In order to gain information about their bullying experience, children were asked how often, in the last month, they had been "Hit by other children in your school (not including fighting or play fighting)", "Called unkind names by other children in your school" and "Left out by other children in your class". The scale enabled us to indicate whether bullying had occurred "never", "once", "two or three times", or "more than three times". Children's perception of relationships with family members, teachers and peers at school were assessed with three individual items, such as "If I have a problem, people in my family will help me", "If I have a problem at school, my teachers will help me" and "If I have a problem at school, other children will help me". Children rated the items on a 5-point scale.

## Results and discussion

The results reaffirmed our belief that school bullying is widespread in Estonian schools, with 71% of respondents reporting that they had experienced bullying at least once in the last month and every second child had been repeatedly bullied. It means that school can be an unsafe place for many children, especially when there is no supportive network of teachers, classmates or family members. Most of the children in our sample rely on help from their families in cases of concern. However, only less than a third of 6th graders assess that they always can receive help from teachers when they have some worries at school. The belief in receiving help from classmates is even rarer. About one-fifth of 6th graders have a weak support network – their responses revealed a limited reliance on help from parents, teachers and students in cases of concern.

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that satisfaction with 'life as a student' is predominantly related to the confidence in help received in cases of concern from parents and teachers, and to a lesser extent, from classmates. Satisfaction with life as a student is less strongly related to the experience of school bullying, although victims of repeated bullying are less satisfied with their life as a student than children who have experienced bullying once or not at all. Interaction of receiving help and bullying was not statistically significant in predicting satisfaction with life as a student. However, there is a tendency that victims of repeated bullying are less satisfied with their life as a student than children who have not experienced bullying. Satisfaction with classmates is affected by both experiencing bullying at school and confidence in receiving help from significant others (especially from teachers and classmates). The results clearly demonstrated that frequently bullied children who feel that they can receive help from significant others (teachers, classmates, parents) if there is a concern, are still on average more satisfied with their classmates than those bullying victims who have not received any help. At the same time, those victims of repeated bullying who felt being left alone with their concern were dissatisfied with their classmates. Therefore, children who can rely on help from significant others can be content with their classmates even when they are bullied.

As supportive relationships are so important in relieving some of the negative effects of school bullying (see also Huitsig *et al.*, 2012; Siyahhan *et al.*, 2012), children with weak support networks (that is, with limited reliance on receiving help from parents, teachers and classmates in case of problems) need special attention. The lack of close, trusting, and supportive relationships leaves a child vulnerable to threats, such as bullying at school. About one-fifth of Estonian 6th graders are in such a vulnerable position.

To summarise, experiencing bullying reduces the satisfaction with life as a student and with classmates, whereas receiving help from significant others increases satisfaction with these aspects of school life. In addition, receiving help acts as a regulating factor which helps, to some extent, buffer the negative effects of bullying.

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