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## **HARM IS WHAT'S IMPORTANT WHEN EVALUATING PEER AGGRESSION**

**A new study has found that disturbing student ‘banter’ is common in Australia, with some students going so far as to tell their friends they wish they would ‘die in a car crash’ or drown. The students see this as innocuous, and while their comments may be naive, the study authors emphasise that harm is what counts when it comes to bullying and peer aggression.**

Dr Grace Skrzypiec and Dr Mirella Wyras of Flinders University conducted a study with over 800 Australian students aged 11-16 in South Australia and the Northern Territory. The goal was to understand student experiences of bullying and peer aggression, and to see how students responded to these.

Almost half of students reported having been harmed by their peers (48.1%), while the number of victimised students—those who were targeted but did not cause harm themselves—was almost one-in-three. This is a worrying increase from 2009, when a study found that only one quarter of students were victimised.

Australian students experience less harm overall than students in many places: The Australian study was part of a larger, global study of young people in 11 countries, and only 47.5% of students across these countries reported being “unharmed” by peer aggression. On the other hand, the international rate for *victimised* students identified by the authors was 23.9%, as opposed to the one-in-three statistic here in Australia.

The authors are careful to separate bullying from more general forms of peer aggression.

“It is the *harm* associated with peer aggression that should form the focus of our attention,” the authors state, “rather than whether the experience can be considered bullying.”

While many anti-bullying initiatives exist in Australia, other aggressive actions can make students miserable, too. By focusing on harm instead of bullying itself, the researchers hope that communities can better respond to any aggressive behaviour in schools.

One of the problems, the authors write, is that the general public—including educators and students—don’t share the same idea of bullying that researchers do.

“The technical definition of bullying is not well understood and bullying is not being thought of in terms of the criteria of intentional harm, repeated action, and power imbalance between victim and bully.”

These three criteria are necessary for it to count as bullying, they write. But this is not to say that isolated incidents can’t cause pain. Unfortunately, it’s not yet clear how much overlap there is between students who experience bullying and general peer aggression.

The power imbalance is also important to recognise as part of bullying, and can be much more subtle than one student simply being physically bigger or stronger than another.

In their 2016 paper, Associate Professor Cristopher Donoghue and Dr Alicia Raia-Hawrylak noted that less visible forms of power could include “superior intelligence, a broader vocabulary, the capacity to engage in effective premeditation, and the awareness of a potential victim’s greatest vulnerabilities.”

There are other subtleties to bullying and peer aggression, too. Skrzypiec and Wyra were somewhat surprised to find that many young people experience victimisation in close friendships, including with those they consider their best friends.

Also considering that some outwardly aggressive behaviour may not be perceived as harmful by the recipients, it becomes difficult to easily identify hostile behaviour in schools, and recent anti-bullying initiatives demonstrate this. Despite their national prevalence, they have done little to curb the increase in peer aggression.

“Both state and federal governments have recognised the decline in wellbeing and increase in victimisation, and are taking action to address them,” said Dr Skrzypiec. “But they need to stick with it. More resourcing is still needed to enable schools to fully implement programmes. Continued research is also needed to ensure programmes are effective.”

An intense focus on bullying in the national discussion and in schools may be one reason why these initiatives aren’t helping to reduce more general victimisation. Many scholars and governments have leapt straight to trying to stamp out bullying, rather than trying to understand it first.

“We must have a very good understanding of the phenomenon in question (in this case bullying) if we are to design interventions that will be effective. However, bullying research appears to have jumped from confirming that bullying exists in schools to interventions to prevent it, without stopping to sort out some of the issues associated not just with its measurement, but also in the constructs that comprise its definition.”

*Sources:*

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