

# Associations Between Frequency of Bullying Involvement and Adjustment in Adolescence

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## ABSTRACT

**OBJECTIVE:** To examine whether infrequent bullying perpetration and victimization (once or twice a month) are associated with elevated levels of internalizing and externalizing problems and to assess evidence for a minimum frequency threshold for bullying involvement.

**METHODS:** The analytic sample included 128,681 6th, 9th, and 12th graders who completed the 2010 Minnesota Student Survey. Logistic regression and general linear models examined the association between bullying frequency and adjustment correlates including emotional distress, self-harm, physical fighting, and substance use while controlling for demographic characteristics. Gender and grade were included as moderators.

**RESULTS:** Infrequent bullying perpetration and victimization were associated with increased levels of all adjustment problems relative to those who did not engage in bullying in the past 30 days. Grade moderated many of these findings, with perpetration frequency being more strongly related to substance use, self-harm, and suicidal ideation for 6th graders than 12th

graders, whereas victimization frequency was associated with self-harm more strongly for 12th graders than 6th graders. Evidence for minimum thresholds for bullying involvement across all outcomes, grades, and bullying roles was inconsistent.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Infrequent bullying involvement may pose risks to adolescent adjustment; thus, clinicians and school personnel should address even isolated instances of bullying behavior. Researchers should reexamine the use of cut points in bullying research in order to more fully understand the nature of bullying in adolescence. These data indicate the need for prevention and intervention programs that target diverse internalizing and externalizing problems for bullies and victims, regardless of bullying frequency.

**KEYWORDS:** adjustment; adolescence; bullying; externalizing; internalizing; victimization

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## WHAT'S NEW

Adolescents engaging in infrequent bullying perpetration and victimization (once or twice in 30 days) had higher odds of internalizing and externalizing problems than youth reporting no bullying involvement. These findings differed by grade, suggesting the need for attention to development.

BULLYING BEHAVIORS HAVE emerged as a significant factor influencing the adjustment of both bullies and victims and the learning environment of all students. In the United States in 2005, over half of 6th through 10th grade youth reported involvement in relational and/or verbal bullying as either a bully, victim, or bully/victim,<sup>1</sup> and research suggests that each of these bullying roles is associated with significant academic, psychosocial, and health-related problems.<sup>2–5</sup> Some studies suggest boys are more involved in bullying than girls<sup>4</sup>; however, recent investigations of a variety of forms of bullying (eg, relational, verbal) suggest that girls may be involved at equal rates.<sup>1,6</sup> In light of the serious effects bullying involvement exerts on youth, empirical work is needed to determine at what frequency threshold bullying

perpetration and victimization are associated with adjustment problems.

The CDC defines bullying as behaviors that are aggressive, repeated, and involve a power imbalance.<sup>7</sup> Common measures of bullying are limited in their ability to assess bullying based on this definition. For example, few measures of bullying thoroughly assess the power differential between bully and victim.<sup>8</sup> Repetition of bullying behaviors has been a key piece of traditional definitions of bullying.<sup>9</sup> However, a variety of frequency scales and cut points for categorizing individuals as bullies and/or victims exist, and variation among them makes synthesizing research findings difficult.<sup>10,11</sup> This dichotomization necessarily considers students who perpetrate or are victimized less frequently as equivalent to those who never experience bullying involvement. Yet, when asked to describe bullying, only 6% of 3rd through 12th graders mentioned repetition in their descriptions.<sup>12</sup> An alternative possibility is that even infrequent bullying behaviors may be associated with adjustment problems, which would suggest that researchers and practitioners should be concerned with low-frequency bullying behavior.

A key limitation of work in this area is lack of attention to developmental change in creating bullying categories, as the same frequency cutoffs for creating bully/nonbully

groups are used across ages. As older adolescents undergo brain development that supports more advanced regulation and coping skills, experience less pressure to conform to peer norms, and cultivate more supportive friendships,<sup>13,14</sup> they may be better prepared to manage infrequent bullying involvement. Early adolescents, however, may be more susceptible to less frequent bullying involvement. Furthermore, frequency cutoffs may vary with age, depending on the developmental relevance of the adjustment correlates. Infrequent bullying may be associated with tobacco use in 6th compared to 12th grade because smoking is far more common in 12th grade, where a number of factors in addition to bullying may socialize youth toward smoking.<sup>4</sup>

This study addresses 2 primary research questions in a population-based, adolescent sample. First, we examined whether infrequent bullying perpetration and victimization were associated with increased adjustment problems. Secondly, evidence was evaluated for a threshold at which increases in bullying frequency were not associated with increases in adjustment problems, given that current practice involves dichotomizing bullying involvement based on specific frequency criteria. Past research has established that bullying perpetration is robustly associated with externalizing and conduct problems, and emerging evidence suggests that internalizing problems may also be seen among bullies.<sup>4,15</sup> Bullying victimization has most consistently been associated with internalizing problems.<sup>15,16</sup> Thus, analyses focused on both internalizing and externalizing problems for bullying perpetration and internalizing problems for bullying victimization. Both grade and gender were examined as potential moderators of these associations.

## METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

Data were obtained from the 2010 Minnesota Student Survey (MSS), a cross-sectional, population-based survey of youth behavior. In 2010, 88% of school districts participated. In total, 130,908 6th, 9th, and 12th graders attending public, private, and charter schools (71% of enrolled students) completed the survey. Additional methodological details are available elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> The analytic sample included participants who completed both questions assessing bullying involvement ( $n = 128,681$ ; 50.3% girls).

### MEASURES

Bullying perpetration was assessed with one item: "During the last 30 days, how often have you, on your own or as part of a group, made fun of or teased another student in a hurtful way or excluded another student from friends or activities?" Response options were never, once or twice, about once a week, several times a week, and every day. The victimization item was parallel in structure, asking how often students were recipients of those behaviors in the last 30 days. Both items were created for the MSS and have been used in past research.<sup>18</sup>

Emotional distress was assessed with 5 items from the Pediatric Symptom Checklist (eg, "During the last 30 days, have you felt nervous, worried, or upset?").<sup>19</sup> Item anchors varied slightly; participants responded to 4 of the items on a 1 to 5 scale. The fifth item used a 4-point scale, which was transformed to a 1 to 5 scale. The 5 items demonstrated adequate reliability ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ) and were averaged to create the emotional distress scale.

Self-directed violence was assessed with 3 items asking whether participants hurt themselves on purpose (eg, cutting, burning, bruising), thought about killing, or had tried to kill themselves. Items were adapted from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS).<sup>20</sup> Participants who indicated engaging in a behavior in the last year were coded as 1; all others were coded as 0.

One item assessed physical fighting and was created for the MSS. Responses were dichotomized into never engaged in physical fighting and ever engaged in physical fighting in the past year. Participants reported how often they used alcohol, tobacco (cigarettes, cigars, chewing tobacco), marijuana, and illicit drugs (eg, cocaine, heroin, LSD) using items from the YRBS.<sup>20</sup> Responses for each item were dichotomized into never used and used once or more in the last 30 days.

### ANALYSIS PLAN

We used general linear models (GLMs) and logistic regression, depending on whether the outcomes were continuous or binary, to evaluate associations between bullying frequency and adjustment. For perpetration, we assessed the association with both internalizing and externalizing variables; for victimization, analyses focused on internalizing variables. Because of the large sample size and considerable number of analyses, the alpha level was set to  $P < .001$ . First, we examined whether students' gender and grade in school moderated associations between bullying and adjustment correlates using multiplicative interaction terms (eg, gender  $\times$  perpetration) in both GLM and logistic regression models. For significant interaction terms in GLM analyses, we compared confidence intervals (CIs) for estimated marginal means of each subgroup (eg, boys and girls) and categorized groups without overlapping CIs as significantly different. For significant interaction terms in logistic regression models, the sample was stratified on the basis of the significant moderator. Planned contrasts in these follow-up analyses examined the odds of experiencing the adjustment problem when comparing one frequency category (eg, once a week) to the adjacent category (eg, once or twice). Significant planned contrasts and nonoverlapping CIs indicated significant differences.

Victimization was controlled in all analyses examining bullying and vice versa. Analyses also controlled for key demographic characteristics commonly controlled in MSS research: race, family structure, urbanicity, and participation in free/reduced price lunch program.<sup>18</sup> Of primary interest were: 1) comparisons between infrequent bullies or victims ("once or twice") and the 2 adjacent categories: never or once a week; and 2) whether a threshold

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