



Research article

Does defending come with a cost? Examining the psychosocial correlates of defending behaviour among bystanders of bullying in a Canadian sample



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ABSTRACT

Bullying is a form of interpersonal trauma that impacts all parties involved, including the youth who witness the bullying. Some bystanders choose to intervene and defend the child being bullied. Defending may be positively associated with psychosocial difficulties because youth are becoming more involved in a traumatic event, or because youth may be actively coping with the distress elicited from witnessing bullying; however, the link between defending and psychosocial difficulties has not yet been examined. The current study investigated the age-related differences and psychosocial difficulties associated with defending behaviour in school bullying. Data were collected from 5071 Canadian youth from Grades 4–12. Participants completed an online survey at school, which assessed demographic information, recent defending behaviour, location and frequency of witnessing bullying, and psychosocial difficulties (internalizing, anger, psychosomatic, academic, and relationship difficulties). A subsample of 1443 pure bystanders (no current bullying involvement) was used for regression analyses. Defending behaviour was more common among girls and among younger students. For boys, defending behaviour was associated with more psychosocial difficulties compared to boys who only witnessed the bullying. This relationship was less consistent for girls. Defending behaviour was also associated with more psychosocial difficulties at high levels of bullying exposure. These associations suggest that defending may come at a cost for youth, or that youth are defending their peers to cope with negative emotions associated with witnessing interpersonal trauma. More longitudinal research is needed to clarify these associations.

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1. Introduction

Bullying is a pervasive relationship problem, with an estimated 27%–36% of Canadian youth being involved in school bullying (Craig, Lambe, & McIver, 2016). Bullying can be viewed from a trauma perspective, as it is associated with physiological and emotional dysregulation (Jones & Barlow, 1990); however, little is known about the traumatic nature of peer intervention in school bullying. Peers are present for 85% of these bullying incidents (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001), creating ample opportunities for youth to be exposed to this form of interpersonal trauma. Indeed, it is estimated that youth

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witness bullying once every seven minutes (Pepler & Craig, 1995). After witnessing bullying, 19% of youth intervene to support their peers who are being victimized (Hawkins et al., 2001). Peer defending is associated with a number of positive outcomes, such as stopping the bullying (Hawkins et al., 2001; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011) and higher levels of self-esteem and peer acceptance for youth who have been defended (Sainio, Veenstra, Huitsing, & Salmivalli, 2010). Intervention programs have been developed that encourage students to take a defender role to reduce victimization (e.g., Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012); however, the psychosocial correlates of defending behaviour are unknown. Youth who defend others take an active role in a traumatic event, and as such, may be at greater risk for psychosocial difficulties than youth who do not defend their peers. In contrast, youth may find witnessing the bullying traumatic, which may prompt them to intervene as an active way to cope with this distress. The current study is the first to explore the age-related differences and psychosocial difficulties associated with defending behaviour in school bullying.

Trauma can be broadly defined as any form of psychological abuse perpetrated towards an individual that has the potential to cause harm (Bernstein et al., 2003). While traumatic events are traditionally thought of as being adult-perpetrated, peer-perpetrated events can be associated with similar levels of psychological harm and have detrimental developmental consequences (Aber, Brown, Jones, Berg & Torrente, 2011). Traumatic events can have serious physiological and psychological consequences – in the short-term, children often react to interpersonal violence with an immediate fear response (Jones & Barlow, 1990). In the long-term, children exposed to trauma experience a dysregulation of both physiological and emotional responses, and maladaptive social cognitions. Like other forms of interpersonal trauma, both direct victimization and witnessing bullying are associated with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Carney, 2008; Idsoe et al., 2012; Janson & Hazler, 2004). Youth who experience interpersonal trauma are at greater risk for internalizing and externalizing difficulties, relationship problems, and school difficulties compared to those who do not experience trauma (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; Margolin, Vickerman, Oliver, & Gordis, 2010).

The factors associated with interpersonal violence are not just experienced by youth who are directly involved in the traumatic event. Youth who witness parental and community violence experience more psychiatric illnesses than their peers who do not witness these traumatic events (Zinzow et al., 2009). Exposure to peer violence is no exception; children who witness bullying experience numerous psychosocial difficulties, including somatic complaints, depression, anxiety, substance use, interpersonal sensitivity, helplessness, and suicidal ideation (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009; Rivers & Noret, 2013). In sum, exposure to bullying is a traumatic event that is associated with maladaptive outcomes for children and youth.

The potential for adverse outcomes following trauma exposure may be moderated by a number of factors (Evans, Davies, & DiLillo, 2008; Jones & Barlow, 1990), including the decision to intervene, individual differences (e.g., age and gender), and the magnitude of trauma exposure. The decision to defend in school bullying is based on a number of personal, interpersonal, and contextual factors that can vary over time (Chen, Chang, & Cheng, 2016). The dynamic nature of these contextual factors may explain why defending behaviour is only moderately stable over time (Sijtsema, Rambaran, Caravita, & Gini, 2014), and unstable among boys (Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998). Thus, the current study conceptualized defending as a behaviour.

Theoretically, there are several mechanisms through which defending behaviour may be associated with psychosocial difficulties for youth. First, it is possible that defending behaviour is associated with difficulties because youth are actively involved in a traumatic situation. For example, youth who attempt to stop interparental conflict experience more internalizing and externalizing problems over time compared their peers who simply witness the violent behaviour (Jouriles, Rosenfield, McDonald & Mueller, 2014). Like youth who defend in situations of interparental conflict, it is possible that youth who defend against bullying are using aggressive behaviours (e.g., yelling or using physical aggression) to stop the bullying. Observational research indicates that physical aggression is a common type of defending behaviour, particularly among boys (Hawkins et al., 2001). If successful, these aggressive behaviours are negatively reinforced, leading to a pervasive pattern of aggressive behaviour and externalizing difficulties (Davis, Hops, Alpert, & Sheeber, 1998; Jouriles et al., 2014). In contrast, youth who attempt to defend and are not successful in stopping the bullying may become more depressed or anxious (O'Brien, Margolin, & John, 1995). Secondly, it is also possible that youth may be defending their peers to cope with negative emotions associated with witnessing interpersonal trauma. Defending behaviour is associated with problem-solving coping strategies (i.e., approach coping), suggesting that it is a socially competent way to manage the distress elicited from observing peer victimization (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010). In sum, there are many ways through which defending behaviour may be associated with difficulties for youth, although this has yet to be evaluated.

The psychosocial difficulties associated with defending behaviour may also depend on individual characteristics, such as age and gender. Girls and younger students consistently engage in more defending behaviours than boys and older students (Fox, Jones, Stiff, & Sayers, 2014; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004), suggesting that girls and younger students may experience more psychosocial difficulties due to their higher rates of defending behaviour. In contrast, the prevalence of psychosocial difficulties generally increases with development regardless of defending behaviour (Steinberg & Morris, 2001), suggesting that younger students may have some protection from these psychosocial difficulties. In sum, both age-related and gender differences may play a role in understanding the psychosocial correlates of defending behaviour among youth.

The cumulative effects of bullying exposure can be measured in terms of frequency of exposure and whether the exposure is pervasive (i.e., the number of places bullying is witnessed). Research on other forms of trauma suggests that the

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