



Research article

Overweight, perceived overweight and involvement in bullying in middle adolescence



Riittakerttu Kaltiala-Heino^{a,b,c,*}, Vilma Lankinen^a, Mauri Marttunen^{d,e,f},
Nina Lindberg^{e,g}, Sari Fröjd^h

^a University of Tampere, School of Medicine, 30014 University of Tampere, Finland

^b Vanha Vaasa Hospital, Vierinkiventie 1, 65380 Vaasa, Finland

^c Tampere University Hospital, Department of Adolescent Psychiatry, 33380 Pitkämäki, Finland

^d National Institute for Health and Welfare, Mental Health Unit, Box 30, 00271 Helsinki, Finland

^e University of Helsinki, Faculty of Medicine, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland

^f Helsinki University Hospital, Department of Adolescent Psychiatry, Box 590, 00029 HUS, Finland

^g Helsinki University Hospital, Kellokoski Hospital, 04500 Kellokoski, Finland

^h University of Tampere, School of Health Sciences, 33014 University of Tampere, Finland

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ABSTRACT

Overweight is reportedly a risk factor for being bullied, and body image may mediate this association. Research on associations between overweight and bullying has so far only focused on children and early adolescents. We explored associations between actual and perceived overweight at age 15 and involvement in bullying at ages 15 and 17. A total of 2070 Finnish adolescents responded to a survey at ages 15 and 17. Self-reported weight and height, perceived weight and involvement in bullying were elicited. Being overweight at age 15 was not associated with being bullied or with being a bully at age 15 or 17. Perceived overweight among girls was associated with subsequent involvement in bullying as a bully and in feeling shunned. Weight related bullying may decrease from pre- and early adolescence to middle adolescence. The associations between perceived overweight and self-identification as a bully, and those between perceived overweight and feeling isolated may be explained by the phenomena representing psychological dysfunction.

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1. Introduction

1.1. What is bullying?

Bullying is aggressive behavior where peer(s) deliberately inflict psychological harm on a victim, verbally or physically, repeatedly over time, and in a situation where there is a power imbalance between the victim and the bully/bullies (Kaltiala-Heino & Fröjd, 2011; Nansel et al., 2001). Of school-aged children and adolescents 10–20% are frequently involved in bullying, either as victims, as bullies, or as both; boys more often than girls, and younger subjects more than older ones (Kaltiala-Heino & Fröjd, 2011). Excessive victimization has been associated with being different from the majority, for example having

* Corresponding author at: Tampere University Hospital, Department of Adolescent Psychiatry, 33380 Pitkämäki, Finland. Tel.: +358 50 339 2583.

E-mail addresses: merihe@uta.fi (R. Kaltiala-Heino), Lankinen.Vilma.L@student.uta.fi (V. Lankinen), mauri.marttunen@thl.fi (M. Marttunen), nina.lindberg@hus.fi (N. Lindberg), sari.frojd@uta.fi (S. Fröjd).

disabilities and belonging to sexual minorities, although not necessarily with minority ethnic status (Blake, Lund, Zhou, Kwok, & Benz, 2012; Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013; Russell, 2011; Tippett, Wolke, & Platt, 2013).

1.2. Overweight and subjection to bullying

Among children and adolescents being overweight or obese may be a visible difference that results in being subjected to bullying. Several studies have found that overweight children and adolescents are more commonly targets of bullying than their normal weight peers, and are bullied more viciously and intensively than their non-overweight peers (Brixval, Rayce, Rasmussen, Holstein, & Due, 2012; Danielsen, 2012; Hayden-Wade et al., 2005; Lumeng, 2010; McCormack, 2011). Being bullied due to overweight may further result in unfavorable coping attempts, such as avoiding physical exercise and indulging in binge eating (Puhl & Luedicke, 2012).

Overweight/obese children and adolescents may become targets of bullying more commonly than their normal weight peers, but due to psychological distress they may also perceive hostility in neutral interactions. A slim figure is an important facet of the prevailing beauty ideal, particularly among Western white women (Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012; Smolak, 2004). Wishful identification with the (slim) beauty ideal and perceived failure to achieve it increases body concerns in young women, and overweight/obese adolescents may consequently develop psychological distress and lowered self-esteem (Danielsen, 2012; Greenwood & Dal Cin, 2012; Hesketh, 2004; McClure, 2010; Swallen, 2005). Consequently obese/overweight adolescents may also perceive themselves to be bullied and shunned because of distorted processing of social information: an adolescent with negative self-perception may anticipate negative attention and perceive it in social interactions intended by others to be neutral or even positive, as may be the case among adolescents with depression and anxiety disorders (Kaltiala-Heino & Fröjd, 2011).

1.3. Perceived overweight, weight related distress and bullying

Perceived overweight refers to feeling overweight, whether or not this is really the case. Of both Western and non-Western adolescent girls, 30–60% perceive themselves to be too fat or overweight (Isomaa, Isomaa, Marttunen, Kaltiala-Heino, & Björkqvist, 2011; Kaltiala-Heino, Kautiainen, Virtanen, Rimpela, & Rimpela, 2003). Distorted perception of one's body size and weight are characteristic of eating disorders, but erroneous perception of one's weight and size, particularly that of perceiving overweight, is also commonly met with in people without eating disorders and actually within the normal weight range (Greene, 2008; Grogan, 2007; Isomaa et al., 2011). Feeling fat is a type of negative body image which in adolescents is associated with psychological distress (Isomaa, Isomaa, Marttunen, Kaltiala-Heino, & Björkqvist, 2010). Some studies have suggested that negative body image and low self-esteem due to negative body image mediate the association between being overweight and being bullied (Brixval et al., 2012; Fox & Farrow, 2009; Reulbach, 2013). Negative body image may be an indicator of more comprehensive psychological vulnerability and dysfunction that precedes involvement in bullying (Isomaa et al., 2011; Reulbach, 2013). Thus, being overweight – physically different from the majority – may contribute less to becoming involved in bullying than adolescents' distress about their perceptions of their weight and size.

1.4. Need for further research

To summarize, it has been suggested that being overweight may predispose children and adolescents to being bullied, but also that this association could be explained by negative subjective appraisals of one's body. However, there are still gaps in the research on the associations between perceived overweight, body image and involvement in bullying and these need to be addressed. Firstly, most of the research on overweight and bullying have been cross-sectional and unable to demonstrate causal relationships. Secondly, most of this work has been carried out among prepubertal children, thus little is known about associations between overweight and bullying in adolescence. One longitudinal study (Mamun, 2013) found that being bullied in early to middle adolescence increased the likelihood of being overweight in early adulthood. This could suggest unhealthy eating as an attempt to cope with peer victimization rather than overweight being the reason for being victimized. Another study (Lumeng, 2010), however, found no longitudinal association between being bullied and overweight in children aged 8–11. The findings are contradictory, and causal pathways may also differ between age groups. Thirdly, not only subjection to bullying but also being a bully is associated with mental health problems (Kaltiala-Heino & Fröjd, 2011). Being a bully and being a victim of bullying each increase the risk of mental health problems 2–4 fold, while being both a bully and a victim increases the risk 4–6 fold. Regarding weight and perceptions of weight in particular one study claimed that being a bully was associated with perceptions of oneself either as underweight or overweight, but not with actual weight, further emphasizing the need to consider psychological dysfunction perhaps more than physical difference in researching weight and bullying (Reulbach, 2013). However, the longitudinal associations between being overweight, having weight concerns, and being involved in bullying in different roles have been little studied. Being overweight is a visibly different physical characteristic and a potential reason for being subjected to bullying. As the slim ideal concerns especially girls and women, it could be hypothesized that being overweight is associated with involvement in bullying particularly among girls. However, if it is not the physical appearance per se but subsequent psychological vulnerability that results in involvement in bullying, perceived overweight can indeed be assumed to be associated with involvement in bullying, and could then be expected to mediate the associations between actual overweight and involvement in bullying.

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