



## Targets of peer mistreatment: Do they tell adults? What happens when they do?



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We identify predictors of targets' telling adults at school about their plight.
- We determine which adult responses were most helpful to targets.
- We identify predictors of targets' ratings of outcomes of adult responses.
- Students in special education reported less positive outcomes of adult responses.
- Students who were more distressed rated adult responses as less helpful.

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### ABSTRACT

Using data from 3305 students mistreated by peers two to three times per month or more often, we examined predictors of targets' telling adults at home and school about what happened. Grade, being in special education, having lower socioeconomic status, and physical and forms of social mistreatment were predictors of telling an adult at school. Grade, being in special education, race/ethnicity, experiencing some forms of social mistreatment and specific foci of mistreatment were related to telling an adult at home. We also report how helpful targets found 14 specific adult responses to be (things got better, things stayed the same, things got worse). The helpful responses from teachers most often leading to reports that things got better including showing concern and care for the targeted child.

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Numerous anti-bullying programs, along with media and conventional wisdom, suggest that the best strategy for youth who are mistreated by peers is to report the victimization to an adult. The underlying assumption is that adults can and will intervene effectively to stop the bullying and prevent recurrence. However, the literature reveals that students do not always follow this advice, and furthermore, telling an adult does not always lead to the expected positive outcome. To better understand which youth report peer maltreatment to teachers and/or parents, and for whom teacher and parent intervention is most effective, this study

investigated demographic and maltreatment-related predictors of telling an adult at home or at school, and students' perceptions of adult intervention effectiveness.

The social ecological framework related to bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2011) situates bullying within a series of concentric circles, each of which influences the individual participants at the center. The next layers are family, peers, and school. We find this conceptualization to be useful when examining peer mistreatment at school. The incidents that affect the participants (including perpetrators, targets, and bystanders) cannot be understood without considering the school context; the teacher is arguably the person at school most likely to see or hear about peer mistreatment, and their responses in those cases communicate their willingness to intervene, and the outcome of their interventions are observed by involved students and others who use that information in making decisions about seeking teacher help.

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Research suggests that teachers' interventions are not as frequent or effective as teachers themselves believe them to be (Crothers & Kolbert, 2004; Holt & Keyes, 2004; Rigby & Bauman, 2010). Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan (2007) found that 61.5% of middle school students and 57% of high school students reported that teachers made bullying situations worse when they intervened and 51.7% of students at both levels reported that they had observed adults at school ignoring a bullying incident. Smith and Shu (2001) found that as many as 70% of children who were victimized did not report their victimization to teachers, and when they did report, the bullying stopped in 27% of cases, decreased in 29% of cases, resulted in no change in 28% of cases, and got worse in 16%.

In the interview portion of a larger mixed methods study, Mishna, Pepler, and Wiener (2006) met with 18 students in grades four and five who reported being targeted by bullying at least three to four times in the previous five days on the Safe School Questionnaire. The interviews included at least one parent of each child, 13 teachers, two assistant principals and two principals for a total of 55 participants. The data showed that about half of parents and teachers did not know the child was being targeted. Several of the children who did not tell an adult proclaimed that telling makes things worse, although a few children said it was helpful to tell an adult. Interestingly, several participants said they would only tell an adult if the bullying became "serious," although one of the boys had refrained from telling an adult after being beaten up by other boys because he did not think that was a serious enough offense. deLara (2012) reached similar conclusions in her qualitative study, and a recent study in the Netherlands in which interview data with teachers in grades three through six were compared to data from 373 of their students found that teachers did not have a clear understanding of bullying, were not told about bullying by their victimized students, and were able to identify only 25% of those students who reported that they were being victimized (Oldenburg, Bosman, & Veenstra, 2015).

In line with children's reports that they would only tell an adult if the bullying became serious, other studies found that reporting to adults increased when the victimization was more frequent (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). This study also found that reporting to adults decreased when targets perceived the school climate to be one in which bullying was tolerated, and when targets' parents used coercive measures of discipline at home. In a study conducted in the Netherlands with 2766 9 to 11-year-old elementary school children, only 53% of chronically victimized youth told their teacher about their plight, and 67% told their parents. Teachers succeeded in stopping the bullying in 49% of cases, while parents were successful in 46% of cases. As in the Unnever and Cornell (2004) study, the most frequently targeted children were more likely to tell an adult than those whose victimization was less frequent.

Other research (see Mishna & Alaggia, 2005, for a summary) has reached similar conclusions: a significant portion of victimized children do not tell adults – teachers or parents – about their victimization. Mistreated children fear that the bullying will intensify if they tell, or that they will be labeled as "tattletale" and attract even more hostility from peers. Many youth also lack confidence that adults can change the situation (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). The literature consistently shows that the frequency of victimization contributes to increased reporting; more girls than boys and younger rather than older targets tend to report their victimization more often (Unnever & Cornell, 2004).

Unnever and Cornell (2004) summarized previous research that had found gender and age differences in reporting victimization to an adult, and observed that differences by race had been investigated with mixed findings. Although we did not locate any studies that examined demographic predictors of telling adults about

victimization, the aggression and bullying literature has identified family factors as important variables (e.g., Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000) and since differences between students in general and special education have been detected regarding bullying and victimization (Hartley, Bauman, Nixon, & Davis, 2015) we included special education status as a demographic variable in our analyses.

However, there are many other factors that might affect the willingness to tell adults and the ways in which targets perceive the effectiveness of the actions of adults, but the literature has been virtually silent on these potential influences.

Thus, we attempted to answer several research questions in an effort to better understand variations in children's reporting of peer mistreatment to adults at school and at home:

1. Do demographic variables (such as target sex and grade, which have previously been investigated, and also child socioeconomic status, race, disability, placement in special education, parental immigration) predict telling a teacher or parents?
2. Does the focus or type of mistreatment predict reporting to teachers or parents?
3. Are there differences in the degree to which youth report teacher responses to student mistreatment lead to things getting better, staying the same, or getting worse?

Because this research was exploratory, we did not put forth specific hypotheses.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

Participants were 3305 students who reported being victimized at least two to three times per month on an online survey conducted for the Youth Voice Project (Nixon & Davis, 2014). Schools were invited by the third author to participate in a study about student characteristics related to peer victimization. Schools were recruited through postings on bully-related websites, emails to colleagues who shared the invitation with schools and other colleagues, and through presentations at national conferences. The participants were students at schools in 31 states in five geographic regions of the US. Each school made reasonable efforts to have all their students (except those whose parents or guardians opted them out) complete the survey. A total of 13,177 students participated in the survey.

### 1.2. Procedure

Participants were sampled from the Youth Voice Project (YVP); a national study that explores peer victimization among children and youth, including students' responses to the victimization and their associated outcomes (See [www.youthvoiceproject.com](http://www.youthvoiceproject.com), for additional information). Following procedures used in past work (e.g., Olweus, 1993; 1997; Solberg & Olweus, 2003), students were classified as repeatedly victimized if they experienced peer victimization at least two times per month. A total of 3305 students (i.e., 25%) of the YVP sample met this criterion (mean age = 13.19 years). Participants (50% female) were students in grades 5 through 12.

Data were collected in the 2010–2011 school year. Schools that participated in the project surveyed the entire student body; consistent with practices established in previous research (Severson & Biglan, 1989), passive consent procedures were used to obtain parental consent. Approval to conduct this research was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at a northeastern university. Students provided no identifying information, their

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