Research into school bullying has highlighted the important part that bystanders can play in preventing victimization if they are prepared to intervene or seek adult help. However, children who feel strongly enough to get involved in that way may be a minority.

A study among 9 to 12-year olds in the United States has found that children who react emotionally to videos showing different types of bullying are also more likely to be identified by their classmates as someone who would “stop a bully.” Yet more than half the children taking part (57 per cent) responded unemotionally to the bullying scenes – and were rated by their peers as less likely to intervene.

These findings, especially if replicated by further research, hold implications for the way prevention programs work with children and young people. But they also cast new light on existing evidence that school students tend to overestimate the likelihood that they would intervene to help the victim of a bullying incident.

Bystanders and prevention

As University of Delaware psychologist Lydia Barhight and her colleagues observe, bullying is “an alarmingly common problem” in American schools. Large-scale survey data suggests that 13 per cent of students have experienced physical bullying and 37 per cent have been victims of verbal bullying.

Victimization has, in turn, been linked to an increased risk of reduced academic performance, depression, self-harm and suicidal behavior.

Since most school bullying incidents are witnessed by bystanders, preventive interventions increasingly include a component where children are encouraged to intervene or seek adult help if they see another child being bullied. Going further, the evidence-based KiVa program in Finland seeks to improve children’s empathy for victims and strengthen their sense of self-efficacy as potential interveners when a bullying incident occurs.

“Emotional” and “unemotional” responses

The Delaware researchers sought deeper insight into the way that bystanders feel by discovering how far the way children’s reaction to bullying scenes on video was linked to actual behavior.

The researchers invited 771 children at nine elementary schools to complete a self-report questionnaire that focused on their emotional reasoning, empathy and sense of self-efficacy. They were also asked to say “who tries to stop the bullying” when incidents occur, by ringing names on a list of their classmates.

A second phase of the study was carried out in a laboratory where a representative sub-sample of 79 children watched short video clips depicting different kinds of bullying. Heart monitors were used to assess their physiological reactions and the children were asked afterwards to rate the strength of their feelings.

The results led the researchers to identify two distinct groups of children described from their reactions as “emotional” and “unemotional”. A statistically significant link was found to exist between these two categories and the classroom exercise when peers reported whether children were likely to intervene when bullying occurred. This association held good irrespective of factors such as the child’s age, race and gender.

While the “emotional” group was in a 43 per cent minority, the research team avoids suggesting that the remaining children were callous or insensitive in any pathological sense. Although they did not react strongly to the video clips, it was possible that some would have responded more readily if witnessing real-life bullying rather than a video clip.

Less positively, it was also possible that some children might have witnessed bullying so often that they had become desensitized to seeing it depicted.

Despite these limitations, the research provides valuable information about children’s response to bullying. It underlines the importance of engaging children in class who may not be especially shocked by bullying and, consequently, more willing to tolerate it as bystanders. It may also be a good idea to make it clearer to children that “intervening” does not necessarily mean physical involvement. Fetching a responsible adult, such as a teacher could be an equally effective response.

*********

References
