

# **FROM VICTIM TO TAKING CONTROL: SUPPORT GROUP FOR BULLIED SCHOOLCHILDREN**

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## **Introduction**

School bullying is a serious problem that affects the daily school lives of its victims. Bullying is a systematic and repeated set of hostile behaviors toward an individual who cannot properly defend himself or herself (Olweus, 1997). Victimization can be direct and physical or it can be relational, which is defined as purposeful damage and manipulation of peer relationships leading to social exclusion or the withdrawal of friends (Wolke, Woods, & Samara, 2009).

Victims have negative health consequences (Analitis et al., 2009; Cassidy, 2009), poorer relationships with peers, more difficulty making friends and often feel lonelier and more unsafe (Jacobson, Riesch, Temkin, Kedrowski, & Kluba, 2011) than those children who are not bullied (Cassidy, 2009; Fox & Boulton, 2006). Continued victimization also leads to high school absenteeism (Wolke et al., 2009). Victims of bullying often feel unhappy, rejected by their peers and less popular than children who are social (Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005; Thornberg, 2010). Social support from friends and teachers may reduce the incidence of bullying and help the victim to shed their victim status (Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009).

## **Background**

The school nurse is in an ideal position to prevent school bullying (Jacobson et al., 2011) because the school nurse's role is to promote health, prevent illness and support children with social, emotional or physical problems at school. Children are more likely to confide in the nurse because he or she does not have a disciplinary or academic role (Cooper, Clements, & Holt, 2012). The task of the school nurse is to promote health and well-being among schoolchildren.

One factor that can promote health is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's competence to handle difficult or novel tasks and to cope with demanding situations (Bandura, 1997). Bandura emphasized the power of positive thinking in his theory of self-efficacy, which asserts that if we believe in our own competence we will be more persistent, less anxious and healthier. Our belief that we can do something depends on our control over the outcome (Bandura, 1997). It is expected that interventions aimed at strengthening close peer friendships will create supportive relationships and, in turn, enhance adolescents' perceived efficacy for managing their friendships (Fitzpatrick & Bussey, 2014).

Prosocial experiences can act as a protective factor against victimization (Davidson & Demaray, 2007), and a previous study found that bullied children valued their friendships (Purcell, 2012). Standing up for the victim is an effective way to stop peer harassment (Poyhonen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2012). One way to help children who are victimized is through support groups, which have been used to assist victims of bullying (e.g., in the 'no-blame' program) (Young, 2009; Young & Holdorf, 2003). This approach provides support to victimized children who often become introverted and have difficulty making friends because of fear of rejection (Fox & Boulton, 2006; Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005). The role of friendship in promoting schoolchildren's social and emotional competence is emphasized in this approach. Peer support groups can help schoolchildren through a variety of difficulties arising from bullying (Kvarme, Aabø, & Sæteren, 2013; Young, 2009; Young & Holdorf,

2003) and can strengthen self-efficacy among those who are socially withdrawn (Kvarme, Helseth, Sorum, et al., 2010). However, little research attention has been paid to helping the victim change their victim role and take control of the situation.

### **Aim**

The aim of this study was to investigate whether support groups are able to help victims of bullying to overcome their victim status and to explore what it meant to be a member of a support group.

### **Design**

We used a qualitative approach with an exploratory design. Data collection and analyses followed Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) guidelines for qualitative research and used a phenomenological hermeneutic method. The research interviews were an attempt to understand the world from the school age bullied victim's perspective and to determine the meaning of the schoolchildren's experiences at school.

### **Methods**

We selected individual and focus group interviews. Schoolchildren's stories during the individual interviews were used to explore the victim's experiences of being part of a support group. The method combined the phenomenology and hermeneutic tradition of text interpretation and is appropriate for exploring experiences, concerns and opinions by emphasizing the participants' experiences (Barbor & Kitzinger, 1999). This may achieve a deeper understanding of how children feel and think about a specific problem. To explore the children's experiences of their participation in the support groups, we used focus group interviews because these achieve an understanding of the support groups' experiences

through their focus group discussion (Wilkinson, 2004). The Norwegian Social Science Data Services approved the study.

### **Participants and Setting**

In total there were 19 schoolchildren (18 girls, 1 boy) that participated from two different schools. Each school had about 400 school children and there were about 30 school children in each class in seventh grade. Three girls withdrew from the support group. Each school had one school nurse that was available four days a week. All the school nurses in one town were asked to participate, but only two schools wanted to join in this project. Three bullied girls received support from the member of the support group, there were 16 children that participated in the groups. These children were 12–13 years old and attended different classes at two schools in Eastern Norway. The first author provided relevant information about the study to all classes, after which participants volunteered to try a support group. The schoolchildren received the same information in class about the project from the first author and the school nurse. The participants decided, based on their own perceptions, whether they were bullied, and those who wanted to participate contacted the school nurse after they received this information. The selection criteria for the bullied children were that they were in the seventh grade of primary school, had been exposed to bullying and wanted to have a support group.

The victims selected who they wanted to be in their support group peers. All of the selected peers wanted to participate in the support group. The support group was asked if they wanted to help the school nurse to ensure that the selected children felt safe and enjoyed going to school. The focus of the group sessions was to develop empathy for the victims of bullying among participating peers but not to discuss specific bullying incidents.

The group members then made suggestions about what to do to help the victimized child. Examples of suggestions include: playing together in their free time, eating lunch

together and doing group work. The suggestions came from the group members and were written down.

The support groups met in the school nurse's office once a week until the bullying stopped. It lasted for about four to six weeks and the meeting lasted for about 30 minutes during school hours. All members attended the meetings. The support group received encouragement for any progress they made. The school nurse spoke with each victim individually each week to follow up on their progress and maintained regular contact with the parents of the bullied children and school staff during the project.

### **Data Collection**

There were six individual interviews conducted with the three bullied children: one immediately after the support group sessions ended and the second, three months later. The improvements remained after three months. Three focus group interviews with the peers were also conducted immediately after the support group sessions ended. Data were collected during 2011 and 2012. The second author and the school nurse observed the group process and recorded participant comments. The first author, who is experienced in leading groups with children at the ages studied, served as the focus group moderator and conducted the individual interviews.

### **Interview Guides**

The moderator presented the group rules, which stated that only one person at a time should speak and that the group should address their experiences. The individual interview guides contained open-ended questions covering aspects of being bullied and the bullied children's experience with having a support group (Table 1). The guide also included questions about the children's experiences with participating in their group (Table 2). Each interview was

audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim, as recommended by Kreuger and Casey (2000).

### **Ethical Approval and Considerations**

Before the interviews commenced, we obtained written informed consent to participate from the participants and their parents. Care was taken to ensure that no information in the study findings would identify any individual participant.

In the information we provided the parents and children it was emphasized that participation was voluntary and that the participants could leave the study at any time without any consequences. The participants were asked not to talk about the content of the discussions in the focus group with anyone and were asked to show respect and to listen carefully to the other participants.

### **Analysis**

In the analysis process, the researchers listened to the audiotapes and read the transcribed text of the individual and focus group interviews to achieve an overall understanding of the texts, before dividing them into themes and subthemes. We used the guidelines in Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) qualitative interview method, based on a phenomenological and hermeneutical framework, when analyzing the interviews. This interpretation is based on three levels: self-understanding, critical understanding based on common sense and theoretical understanding. The first level, self-understanding, consists of what the informants said and intended to mean. The second level is based on critical understanding and the researchers used common sense and a critical perspective to interpret and comment upon what the informants said in each focus group. We analyzed each interview separately to gain an understanding of its unique contribution, and interviews were also analyzed as a whole to find common patterns or differences among the groups. The

interpretation was a circular process that moved back and forth between parts of the text (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). An example of the analysis process from the individual interview, according to Kvale's levels, of self-understanding: *"Now, I dare to stand up for myself because I receive support, and I manage to say to them "Don't do that, I don't like it."* Common sense: Having support and friends make you manage to speak up for yourself and change your role from being a victim to taking control, and theoretical understanding: improved self-efficacy.

The researcher's background, position and preconceptions may affect what is investigated and the perspective of the investigation (Malterud, 2001). At the third level we used a theoretical framework based on self-efficacy to interpret the text. In addition, research findings were used to broaden our perspective. The authors are three independent researchers: two public health nurses and one researcher, who read and interpreted the interviews and discussed the interpretations further to reach a consensus. There were no conflicts between different views when discussing the analytic process. Multiple researchers may strengthen the validity of the results by supplementing and providing comparisons between one another's statements (Malterud, 2001).

## **Results**

The victims of bullying experienced being afraid, unsafe and being left alone. The bullying stopped after the victims received help from their support groups and did not recur during the following three months. The victims' situations changed from being excluded to being included by peers at school after they received support and the improvements remained after three months. The main themes drawn from the individual interviewees about their experience after receiving help from the support groups were a change from lack of control to taking control and the importance of friendship. The support group members experienced

feeling important by being selected, as well as joy and challenge from helping. The individual victim's interviews are presented first, followed by the results of the support groups in the focus group interviews.

### **From Lack of Control to Taking Control**

The victims described difficulties in their daily school lives and talked about how they experienced being bullied before they received support. They had been bullied during their seven years in primary school and felt vulnerable and unsafe at school as a result. One girl explained: *I used to be afraid all the time everywhere I went. I always looked around and tried to hide myself so they would not find me.* These girls shared stories about feeling lonely and excluded by peers: *Before, I used to just be by myself. Then, I was always alone during the break, and then they bullied me.* The victims seemed to struggle to fit in with peers and lacked control of their situation. One girl talked about being afraid to go out: *I had to be at home all the time. If I went out alone, they use to hit me and things like that.* The victims had been bullied many times each week. One girl said she had told a teacher about the bullying many times but it had not changed the situation. She explained: *On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 was the worst, I had it, like, 0. I used to be afraid wherever I went and I tried to hide away from the others.*

Another topic about which the girls spoke was the importance of following and agreeing with the leader in the class. One girl said: *One girl acts as a leader for all the girls in our class. If she does anything, the other girls follow her and do the same thing. If she is not friendly to someone, the others are not friendly either. Everyone is frightened of her and they do not want to disagree or be in conflict with her.* They said that if this leader became their enemy, all the girls would begin spreading rumors about the victim. The victims lacked friends and support from peers: *I had no one to support me before. If I tried to say something, it always turned out to create conflict among the girls.*



The victims' school situations changed in a positive way after they received help from their support groups. They spoke of feeling seen and worthy. When asked how her life was now on a scale from 0 to 10, one girl explained how her life had changed: *I have much better days now. I will say 10 because the support group has helped me and I feel safer now. After receiving help from the support group, she said: I am not afraid to go home and to be out and play with friends anymore.*

The girls reported that their situations changed from being afraid to say what they meant to being able to express themselves to their classmates after receiving support. They felt more visible, were no longer afraid to voice their opinions and they managed to take control of their situation. One girl said that an older girl used to bully her before she got help from the support group: *Now, I dare to stand up for myself because I receive support, and I manage to say to them "Don't do that, I don't like it."* When asked how she managed to say that, she replied: *The reason is when I am with friends then I feel I mean something, and then I manage to say what I mean.* This illustrates how important it is to have support from a friend when taking control.

### **The Importance of Friendship**

The participants often mentioned the importance of friendship. One girl said: *Now that I have got good friends I manage to concentrate better at school and I have a friend to do my homework with.* Being included and having friends helped them to express their feelings. One positive change after receiving help from the support group was described: *If someone bullies me, then I manage to say that I am proud of being short. I say: "God has created me like that, so what can I do?" Then they become quiet.* This illustrates a change in her attitude toward herself and that she managed to accept herself as she is. However, it is not easy to manage this change without support from others.

Schoolchildren are not as vulnerable to bullying when they are with someone else, especially during breaks. When asked what was better for them after receiving help from the support group, one girl said: *I feel better, because I don't need to hide away anymore. I just walk on and I am not afraid anymore. I stand up for myself.*

They also talked about how this had positively affected their emotional mood: *Yes, you know, before, when I came home, I was not happy, but now I am happy. Everything changed after I received help from this group.* They reported that friendship made them feel better. Another girl said: *I don't know—in a way, I feel that all the bad things have disappeared.* This illustrates the importance of support from peers and significant others at school. The school nurse may be an important significant other to bullied children. They also described receiving help from the school nurse. One girl commented: *She helps me. She always says that I can come to her if I ever need help from her for anything.* It is important for schoolchildren to know that the school nurse is available to them when they need her.

### **The Importance of Being Selected**

The support group reported that it was meaningful to them to help the victim of bullying, even if it caused some problems and conflicts with their classmates. They felt that they were doing an important job. The support group felt that they had been selected. They spoke of helping the victims by showing trust and being with them. One group member said: *After she received support from us, she told me that she is fine and much better than before she got support from us.*

A boy in the support group said that he had not been one victim's friend before participating in the support group and that he, along with the other classmates, previously disliked her. After joining the support group, he discovered that she was actually a nice person. The support group members also spoke of doing different nice things with her, such as joining an Internet playgroup. The support group members reported that the victim was not

very interested in learning at school before, but that once she had friends, she enjoyed herself at school and liked to learn. One member of the group said: *She doesn't feel so lonely now that she has good friends to rely on and she is not alone anymore.*

Another group member commented that a victim had said in class that she had considered committing suicide after being bullied in school for seven years, illustrating how serious it is for a child to be bullied: *She used to be bullied before, and, in a way, I feel we are saving her life by helping her.* They also showed bravery in their support roles. One girl said: *She was not included by the other girls in our class, and they gossiped about her. When I walked with them, I said that they should stop bullying her and be nice to her instead.*

The support group members had different roles in helping the victim. They spoke of situations in which they needed to give the bullied girl advice: *I have advised her that she should be careful choosing who she can trust, because she cannot trust everyone in our class—they talk behind your back.* Another said: *One day, when we were together, I said to her, "watch what you are saying."* The victims of bullying had been alone at school for a long time and did not know how to interact and develop positive peer relationships. Some group members struggled to find their role. One explained: *To start with, I thought "what can I help her with," but after I got to know her, it was easier for me.* This illustrates the importance of being together, listening, and knowing each other in order to help.

### **The Joy and Challenge of Helping Others**

The members of the support group expressed joy in helping the victim; they felt they were doing an important job and felt that they had been chosen. One girl said: *You get a feeling that you have helped someone. It gives me a warm feeling that someone is there for you and is a good friend.* Another commented: *I think it is important that we are kind to her because she chose us and I feel lucky that I could join in this support group.* They felt that they had learned a lot about what bullying can be like and one even admitted that he had also been

bullied: *I was also a victim of bullying before, but now I dare to talk back. Before, I used to get in a bad mood, but now I say what I mean.* This illustrates the importance of speaking up for yourself and expressing your feelings.

Some support group members experienced problems with being supportive and felt unsure about their role. One girl explained her difficulty in supporting the victim because she thought the victim could sometimes be rude. Some were worried that they would lose their own friends because they supported the victim: *They are angry with us because we support her, and they don't want to be our friends anymore. However, I don't care. I can handle it. They are the ones who bully and do what is not good. We make things better when we try to support her, even if it makes it worse for us.* One of the support group members experienced having the girl she supported write something negative about her on the Internet. She spoke to the victim about it, together with the teacher and school nurse.

An interesting finding from this study was that the support group members reported positive improvements in the class environment. One said: *Everyone in our class has become better friends. They make fewer negative comments to one another now.* This positive change in the class might have been due to the positive role models the support group provided for their peers.

One of the victims described an example of assistance from the school nurse: *I think I have received help from the school nurse. She has helped me to talk to the person I was afraid of and my self-esteem has increased.* This may illustrate that the girl experienced the school nurse believing in her strength to handle the problem, which taught her to speak in a more positive way. The support group appreciated assistance from the school nurse and teacher during this project. One support group member said: *Those who bullied her used to come to me and say bad things about her. Then I said to them: "Why do you do that? You are*

*three people, and she is alone*". The support group members spoke of receiving positive affirmation from others as their parents, teacher and themselves.

## **Discussion**

The main study finding was that the bullying stopped after victims received support group assistance. The victims changed their roles from lack of control to taking control and made friends after receiving support group assistance. The victims also reported greater happiness and more positive feelings after receiving support. The support group members experienced the importance of being selected and the joy and challenge of helping others.

This study supports the findings of previous studies that children who experience bullying feel lonelier, have greater difficulty maintaining friendships (Holt & Espelage, 2007; Schäfer et al., 2004) and feel unsafe at school (Jacobson et al., 2011). The bullied children in this study reported that they missed having a friend during elementary school. Victims of bullying generally lack the use of adaptive coping strategies and social support may be one coping strategy (Hansen, Steenberg, Palic, & Elklit, 2012). Being alone and without friends may contribute to a lack of social relationships and social competence and being more vulnerable to bullying.

There are many reasons why some children are more vulnerable to becoming victims of bullying. The combination of individual characteristics and social factors may account for children remaining in the victim role. The development of proactive and adaptive coping strategies that enable children to cope more successfully with victimization is important. Those who continue to be victimized are likely to have less effective coping skills. Coping behavior can be influenced by both internal resources, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, personality and emotional health and by external resources such as social support (Wolke et al., 2009). Internal resources, such as increased self-esteem, are important to overcome the

victim role (Sapouna & Wolke, 2013). The victims in this study spoke of increased self-efficacy after receiving help from their support group. They said that after receiving support they managed to state their opinions. A previous study found that good relationships with friends and family appear to play a role in experiencing resilience to bullying (Sapouna & Wolke, 2013).

Victims of bullying perceived that they had a low level of control, which may be due to an imbalance of power between themselves and the bullies. The victims often used avoidant coping (Hansen et al., 2012). Previous research has found that peer support (Wolke et al., 2009) and friendship can protect children from bullying (Kendrick, Jutengren, & Stattin, 2012). Encouraging schoolchildren to practice safe strategies to support and defend their victimized peers can protect them from bullying (Poyhonen et al., 2012). The bullied girls gained at least one trusted friend through the support group. After receiving help from the support groups, the victims emerged from their roles as victims and were no longer bullied.

“Given the harm that is caused to interpersonal relationships as a result of social victimization, it is important for adolescent victims to believe in their ability to engage in close friendships, which may counter the negative effects of victimization” (Malcolm, Jensen-Campbell, Rex-Lear, & Waldrip, 2006 in Fitzpatrick, & Bussey, 2014; 43 ). Furthermore, the extent to which adolescents believe in their own ability to interact effectively with a best friend who satisfies their needs and solves problems is expected to influence the degree to which they are able to manage the distress associated with negative events (Bandura, 1997). Before the bullied girls received help, they felt excluded and isolated from their classmates. Consistent with Bandura’s (1997) theory, we found that their self-efficacy increased after they received support from significant others. The victims thought differently about themselves, made friends, became more visible and had improved self-

efficacy after the group sessions. The victims also reported that they felt happier and safer after the bullying stopped.

A review of the contemporary literature shows that being a victim of bullying in childhood is strongly correlated with suicidal behavior in adolescence (Cooper et al., 2012). Previous studies have shown that bullying can lead to depression and suicide (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Hanish & Guerra, 2000). As reported in this study, one girl mentioned having suicidal thoughts, indicating the seriousness of this problem. This girl even told the children in her class about these thoughts, indicating that bullied children are in need of help, from both the school staff and the school health service. This student had no friends at school. Her support group reported that they found that she was a nice person when they got to know her and said that they felt very sorry for her. This example illustrates the meaning and importance of friendship at this age and the experience improved their hope and optimism. Peer support (Kendrick et al., 2012) has been shown to promote psychological well-being. Friendship and close relationships are necessary for a good life. Moreover, social support represents a potential coping mechanism for schoolchildren dealing with bullying and may function as a buffer against bullying (Davidson & Demaray, 2007).

The support group reported that it was meaningful to help the victim. They felt selected and enjoyed having an important task and the responsibility of helping another person. However, the support group members also reported conflicts and problems in this role and some support group members withdrew from the group. There were three girls who withdrew from the support group, because their classmates were angry towards them because they supported the victim. It is important that teachers, parents and the school nurse attend to such conflicts and try to resolve them. School nurses, in collaboration with teachers, may help victims to enhance their coping strategies to better enable them to handle the bullying situation themselves, with support from others.

## **Implication for Practice**

It is important to understand the individual characteristics of school children that may contribute to remain or escape from the victim role (Wolke et al., 2009). A longitudinal study on how bullying can be stopped showed that it is important to help the victim with new coping strategies, such as telling the bully to stop, fighting back or ignoring the bullying, because some victims tend to cope poorly in bullying situations (Frisen, Hasselblad, & Holmqvist, 2012).

In line with a previous study (Kvarme, Helseth, Saeteren, & Natvig, 2010), the participants in this study thought it was helpful to talk about bullying with the school nurse. Consistent with previous findings (Kvarme et al., 2013; Young, 2009; Young & Holdorf, 2003), we also found that support groups helped the victimized children. A review article that evaluated effective antibullying programs in schools emphasized the importance of working with bullying at both the individual and school levels and that the most successful programs are interdisciplinary (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009).

School nurses, in collaboration with school staff, are uniquely positioned between policy makers and children, and advocates and experts, and this allows the school nurse to play a major role in reducing bullying (Cooper et al., 2012). School nurses can develop anti-bullying programs such as support groups to help victims of bullying,

## **Limitations**

The current study was small and included only two schools and the findings cannot be generalized. The findings may be transferable, however, to other settings with schoolchildren. The majority of the participants were females; however the male and female support group members had the same reaction. Our analyses and interpretation were guided by our pre-understanding as school nurses and researchers and by the theoretical framework we selected.



However our pre-understanding may also have helped us to create a safe atmosphere in the meetings.

### **Conclusion**

Victims of bullying were able to rid themselves of their victim roles after receiving help from a support group. They managed to think differently about themselves and to take control.

Findings from this study show that support groups contribute to the cessation of bullying and that improvements remain three months later. The support group's experience included feeling important for being selected and the joy and challenge of helping others. It is important for the school nurse and teachers to follow up with victimized children, in collaboration with their parents, to help the victim to no longer be a victim.

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