



# HBSC Briefing Paper 9

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HBSC is the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children: WHO Collaborative Cross-National Study

## Social Context of Bullying Behaviours

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### Introduction

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to bullying, particularly in the context of school. This has led to the development and expansion of anti-bullying programmes, coping and intervention strategies designed to safeguard and protect the victim and, as a result of expanding school involvement, a move towards widespread zero tolerance of bullying behaviours.

Some facts about bullies are well established. Bullies take advantage of a real or perceived imbalance of power between themselves and the victim. A bully, whether a boy or a girl, often chooses a victim who is smaller, younger or thought not to be as strong, either physically or psychologically. Bullying can involve psychological or verbal abuse or physical actions. These may be the actions of a lone bully or a group may bully an individual. Bullying often involves a repetitive type of behaviour. In these ways, bullying is distinct from teasing.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, bullies often have more than one victim and a victim may be targeted by more than one bully. The immediate effects of victimisation can include physical harm, anxiety and lowered self-esteem.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there is evidence which suggests that victimisation during school years has lasting and measurable effects in adulthood, including reports of higher levels of loneliness, emotional distress and greater difficulty forming adult relationships.<sup>2-5</sup>

It is important to understand the behaviour of those who bully others. In the absence of a bully there can be no victim. Thus, this Briefing Paper and its companion paper (*Briefing Paper 10*) focus primarily on pupils who reported that they bullied others; pupils whom for purposes of brevity are termed 'bullies'. Estimates of prevalence, by gender, both nationally and cross-nationally have been reported previously.<sup>6,7</sup>

Briefing Papers 9 and 10 take complementary approaches to describing bullies. Briefing Paper 10 focuses on physical and mental well-being as well as risk-related behaviours. Here we focus more on the pupils' social experiences given their developmental importance.<sup>8,9</sup> In particular, perceptions of school, teachers and peers, rates of truancy and perceptions of parental monitoring are presented.

### Main Findings

#### Perceptions of School

- ~ Among girls who reported bullying others, 15.7% reported positive views of their school atmosphere as compared to 29.2% who reported themselves to be Neither Bully nor Victim (NBV).
- ~ Among boys, 20.4% of bullies reported positive views about their school atmosphere as compared to 25.5% of NBVs.

#### Perceptions of Teachers

- ~ Among girls, 41.6% of NBVs viewed teachers positively as compared to 26.7% of bullies. For boys, 37.6% of NBVs viewed their teachers positively as compared to 30.4% of bullies.

#### Perceptions of Peers

- ~ For boys, 27.6% of bullies and 34.0% of NBVs reported positive views of their peers. This compares with 21.6% of girl bullies and 30.2% of girl NBVs.

#### Truancy

- ~ Overall, significantly fewer bullies, 62.4%, reported never skipping school [this term] as compared to 79.8% of their NBV peers.

#### Perceived Parental Monitoring

- ~ Bullies reported most frequently that their mothers didn't really know where they were at night. For boys, this was the case for 19.5% of bullies vs. 9.6% of NBVs. For girls, rates were 23.0% and 8.0%, respectively.

### Details of the 2002 Survey

In 2001/2, the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC): WHO Collaborative Cross-National Study was conducted in 35 countries. National samples of 11, 13 and 15 year olds were drawn in accordance with the Study protocol. In the main, fieldwork took place between the autumn of 2001 and the spring of 2002. Approximately 1,500 respondents in each age group were targeted in every country. Pupils who were absent on the day of the survey were not followed up.<sup>10,11</sup>

**Statistics** When the difference between two percentages is significant, asterisks are used in the text to denote the level of statistical significance as follows: \*  $p < 0.05$  significant difference \*\*  $p < 0.01$  highly significant difference \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  very highly significant difference.

Data were collected by self-administered questionnaire. On completion of fieldwork, national data files were prepared using standard documentation and submitted to the HBSC International Data Bank at the University of Bergen, Norway. Data files were checked, cleaned and returned to countries for approval prior to their placement in the international file. Further details can be found in *Young People's Health in Context*.<sup>11</sup>

The sample in Scotland was nationally representative, drawn from mixed ability classes of both state and independent schools and yielded responses from 4,404 young people in Primary 7 (1,743 eleven year olds), Secondary 2 (1,512 thirteen year olds) and Secondary 4 (1,149 fifteen year olds).<sup>10,11</sup>

## Definitions

Prior to asking questions concerned with bullying and victimisation (being bullied) pupils were presented with definitions to clarify conceptual issues.

*We say a pupil is BEING BULLIED when another pupil, or a group of pupils, say or do nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a pupil is teased repeatedly in a way he or she does not like, or when they are deliberately left out of things.*

*It is NOT BULLYING when two pupils of about the same strength or power argue or fight. It is also not bullying when the teasing is done in a friendly and playful way.*

Pupils were then asked: *How often have you been bullied at school in the past couple of months?* and *How often have you taken part in bullying another pupil(s) at school in the past couple of months?*

Four of the five response categories were constant: *Several times a week; About once a week; 2 or 3 times a month* and *It has only happened once or twice*. The final response category was: *I haven't been bullied at school in the past couple of months or I haven't bullied another pupil(s) at school in the past couple of months*. From these response categories, the following categorisations were made:

Neither bully nor victim (NBV)	Pupils responded negatively to both items.
Bully (B)	Pupils reported bullying others and not being bullied themselves.
Victim (V)	Pupils reported being bullied and not bullying others.
Bully/Victim (B/V)	Pupils responded positively to both items.

These categories differ from those used in the HBSC International Report<sup>11</sup> and Briefing Papers 5<sup>7</sup> and 8<sup>6</sup> in two respects. In this Briefing Paper pupils are classed into *only one*

category and all data for *the past couple of months* have been utilised. Furthermore, this Briefing Paper focuses on differences between bullies and NBVs. Thus all positive reports, including *It has only happened once or twice [in the past couple of months at school]* have been used to contrast those pupils who reported engaging in bullying with the large majority of pupils who did not report bullying.<sup>6,9</sup>

Irrespective of these definitional differences, it is clear that both in Scotland and cross-nationally, by far the largest group of pupils is NBVs, regardless of age and gender. In Scotland, the second largest group are the targets of bullying behaviours, the victims.

Should results from bullies be compared with results from victims? This is a difficult area as we do not know for certain that a victim's reported attitudes and behaviours are independent of the victimisation that they suffer. Do they hold a particular view because they have been victimised or did they hold this view prior to being victimised? Similarly, the group of pupils who identified themselves as bully/victims share characteristics of two distinct groups, bullies and victims. For these reasons, many of the comparisons focus on bullies and those who reported being neither bullied nor victimised.

## School Atmosphere

Six established items were used to measure perceptions of school atmosphere: In our school, pupils take part in making the rules; The pupils are treated too severely/strictly in this school; The rules in this school are fair; Our school is a nice place to be; I feel I belong at this school and I feel safe at this school.<sup>11-13</sup> Pupils reported whether or not they agreed a lot or a bit, neither agreed nor disagreed or disagreed a lot or a bit for each of these items. A composite score was produced for each pupil.<sup>§</sup>

Regardless of gender, more bullies (\*\*\*) reported negative perceptions of school as compared to NBVs. Conversely, fewer bullies reported positive perceptions of school atmosphere (\*\*\*). Responses are shown in Figure 1. Most pupils reported moderately positive views.

Among girls, more NBVs (\*\*\*) reported positive views compared to bullies (29.2% and 15.7%, respectively). Among boys, 20.4% of bullies reported positive views about their school atmosphere as compared to 25.5% of NBVs.

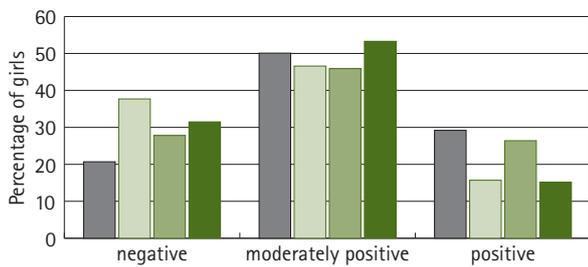
More girl bullies (37.7%) as compared to boys (28.5%) reported negative views about their school atmosphere (\*\*\*). Indeed, bullies and B/Vs (31.5% among girls and 33.7% among boys) comprise the largest groups. Among NBVs, 20.7% of girls and 22.5% of boys reported holding negative views about their school atmosphere.

Overall, bullies were found to be more negative and less positive in their reporting as compared with NBVs.

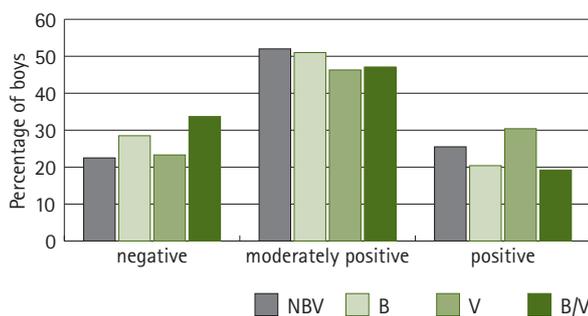
<sup>§</sup> The composite score reflected the positive aspect of five variables and the inverse aspect of the second.

Figure 1: Perceptions of school atmosphere

(a) Girls



(b) Boys



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### Perceptions of Teachers

Four established items were used to measure perceptions of teachers: *I am encouraged to express my own views in my class(es); Our teachers treat us fairly; When I need extra help I can get it and My teachers are interested in me as a person.*<sup>12,13</sup> As previously noted, pupils reported the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with these statements. Responses from each pupil were summed to produce a composite score.

Among those with moderately positive views, proportions are similar between groups (Figure 2).

Regardless of gender, more bullies (\*\*\*) reported negative perceptions of teachers as compared to NBVs. Conversely, fewer bullies reported positive perceptions (\*\*).

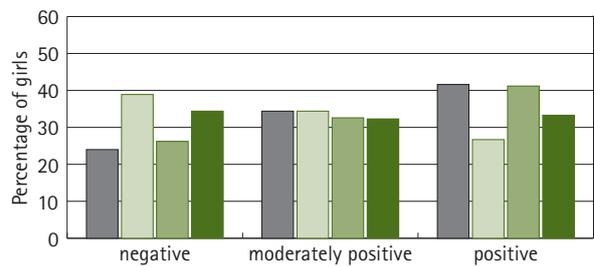
Among those reporting positive views of teachers, 41.6% of girl NBVs viewed teachers positively as compared to 26.7% of girl bullies (Figure 2). This represents a significant difference of 14.9% between groups (\*\*\*). Among boys, 37.6% of NBV and 30.4% of bullies (\*\*) reported positive views of teachers.

Among girls, 38.9% of bullies and 24.0% of NBVs reported negative views about their teachers, representing a significant difference between these groups of about 15% (\*\*\*). Similarly among boys, 39.4% of bullies and 27.0% of NBVs reported negative views, a difference of about 12% (\*\*\*).

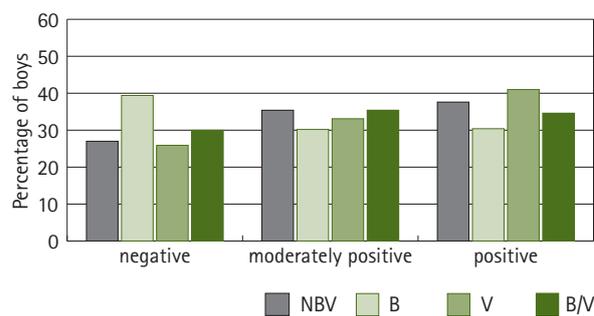
As was the case with perceptions of school atmosphere in general, perceptions of teachers differ markedly between bullies and their NBV peers at either end of the spectrum as bullies can be seen as reporting more negatively and less positively.

Figure 2: Perceptions of teachers

(a) Girls



(b) Boys



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### Perceptions of Peers

Three established items were used to measure perceptions of peers: *The pupils in my class(es) enjoy being together; Most pupils in my class(es) are kind and helpful and Other pupils accept me as I am.*<sup>12,13</sup> Pupils were asked to say whether or not they agreed a lot or a bit, neither agreed nor disagreed or disagreed a lot or a bit for each of these items. Responses from each pupil were summed to produce a composite score.

Overall, 37.1% of bullies and 36.2% of NBVs reported moderately positive attitudes towards their peers. For all pupils, both positive and negative perceptions of peers differed between bullies and their NBV peers (\*\*).

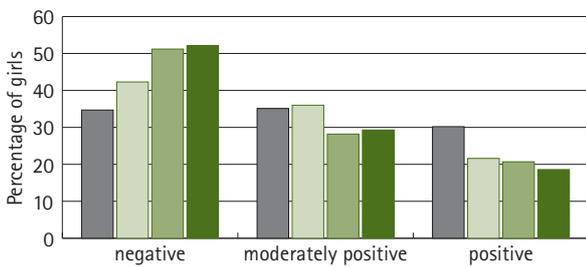
More bullies express negative views of their peers as compared with NBVs (Figure 3). For girls this was the case for 42.3% of bullies and 34.0% of NBVs (\*\*). For boys this was the case for 34.6% of bullies and 28.7% of NBVs (\*).

Fewer bullies reported positive views as compared with NBVs although only in the case of girls was this difference significant (\*\*). For boys, 27.6% of bullies and 34.0% of NBVs reported positively as compared with 21.6% of girl bullies and 30.2% of girl NBVs.

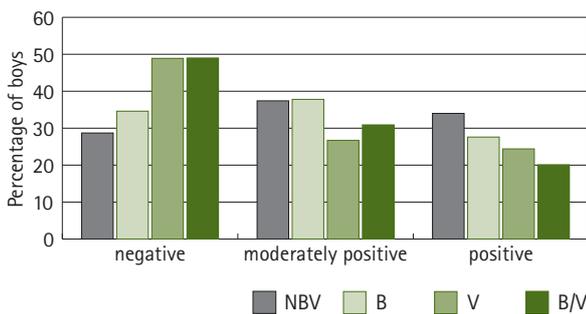
Again, consistent reporting differences can be seen between bullies and their NBV peers at both ends of the spectrum. Victims and B/Vs account for the highest proportions of pupils with negative views of their peers (48.9% of boys and 51.2% of girls) and the smallest proportions reporting positive views (24.4% boys and 20.7% girls, \*\*\*).

Figure 3: Perceptions of peers

(a) Girls



(b) Boys



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### Truancy

Negative attitudes towards school, social alienation and 'disengagement' from school-based peer networks are factors which have been associated with, and used to predict, the likelihood of a pupil dropping out of school.<sup>14-16</sup> Truancy can be used as a surrogate measure of these attitudes and behaviours.

Truancy was measured by asking: *How many days have you skipped classes or school (without permission) this term?* Response options to this question (0, 1, 2, 3 days or 4 days or more) were recorded into three categories; not at all, 1-3 days and 4 or more days.

A small number of pupils reported being truant 4 or more days, irrespective of bully-victim status, at age 11 (24 pupils, 1.4%). This rose to 5.2% (n=74) among 13 year olds and to 13.4% (n=190) among 15 year olds.

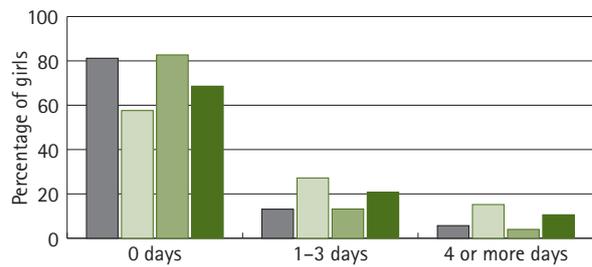
Overall, nearly twice as many bullies, 11.6%, reported skipping school 4 or more days as compared to 6.2% of their NBV peers (\*\*\*). Fewer bullies (62.4%) reported never skipping school as compared to 79.8% of their NBV peers (\*\*\*).

For girls, reported rates of not skipping school differed between bullies (57.6%) and NBVs (81.2%) (\*\*\*). For boys, these figures were bullies 65.2% and NBVs 78.3% (\*\*) as in Figure 4.

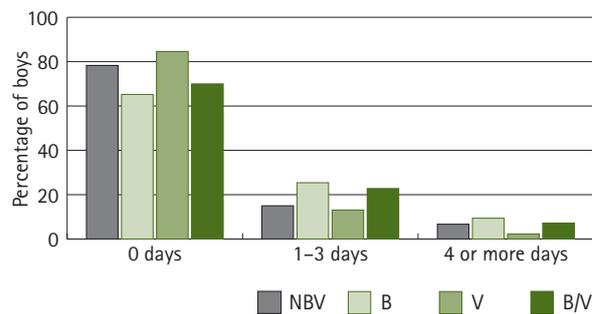
Skipping school for 1-3 days also varied between bullies and NBVs (\*\*\*). For boys, 25.4% of bullies reported skipping school 1-3 days as compared with 15.0% of their NBV peers (\*\*\*). Similar differences were reported among girls (27.2% and 13.1% respectively (\*\*\*)).

Figure 4: Reports of truancy

(a) Girls



(b) Boys



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Among girls, skipping school 4 or more days was reported more frequently by bullies (15.2%) than NBVs (5.7%) (\*\*\*). Among boys, bullies also reported more frequently (9.4%) but not significantly so as compared to their NBV peers (6.7%).

It is not surprising that those who perceive school more negatively are more likely to report being truant.

### Perceptions of Parental Monitoring

Perceptions of parental monitoring, as reported by young people, have been shown to correlate with 'problem behaviours'.<sup>17</sup>

Two similar measures of parental monitoring were investigated, namely if pupils reported that their mothers 'really' knew where they were after school and at night. Pupils were asked: *How much does your mother really know about ....? Where you are after school and Where you go at night.* Response categories were: *A lot; A little; She doesn't know anything.*

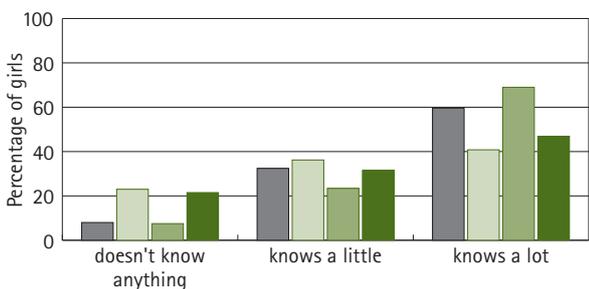
Similar patterns in reporting, both within and between groups, were observed for these questions. Only data for where pupils go at night are reported.

Overall, 54.8% of young people reported that their mothers knew a lot about where they really went at night; 33.9% reported that they knew a little and 11.2% reported that they really didn't know anything. More girls than boys reported that their mothers knew a lot (\*\*) and slightly more boys than girls reported that their mothers knew a little.

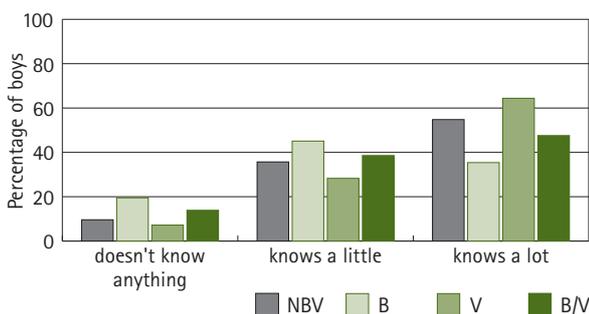
Similar reporting patterns emerged for both boys and girls (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Perceptions of parental monitoring for going out at night

(a) Girls



(b) Boys



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Bullies reported most frequently that their mothers didn't really know where they were at night. For boys, this was the case for 19.5% of bullies as compared to 9.6% of NBVs (\*\*). Slightly higher rates were observed for girls, 23.0% of bullies vs. 8.0% of NBVs (\*\*).

Significantly more boy bullies (\*\*\*) but not girl bullies reported that their mothers knew a little about where they really were at night as compared to NBVs. Rates for boys were 45.1% for bullies and 35.7% for NBVs. For girls, rates were 36.2% for bullies and 32.4% for NBVs.

For both genders separately (\*\*\*) fewer bullies as compared to their NBVs peers reported that their mothers knew a lot about where they really were at night. For boys, figures were: bullies 35.4% and 54.8% for NBVs. For girls, figures were: bullies 40.8% and 59.6% for NBVs.

More victims (64.4% boys and 69.0% girls) as compared to NBVs (54.8% boys and 59.6% girls) reported that their mothers knew a lot about where they were at night (\*\*).

Discussion

The pattern emerging clearly distinguishes bullies from their NBV peers. Bullies reported more negatively, and less positively, about their perceptions of school in general, their teachers and peers; they

reported being truant more frequently and their scores on parental monitoring were lower.

What do these HBSC data mean for Scotland? HBSC has collected information on the prevalence of bullying since 1994.<sup>6</sup> There is however considerable scope to improve our understanding of this problem among young people in Scotland. As of yet, we have no nationally representative information about *why* pupils choose to bully others, or how long they have engaged in this behaviour. We do not know if, nationally, there is a tendency for bullies to bully others of the same age or, for example, if cross-gender bullying is most common. We do not know if there are regional differences or if group bullying predominates within Scotland. It may be that the variations observed between schools reflect differences in school ethos.

While it is necessary to meet the needs of victims, bettering our understanding of bullies and the application of this knowledge to anti-bullying strategies may enhance early intervention which, if successful, could result in a decline in the number of victims.

As is the case with victimisation, where effects, behaviours and attitudes have been shown to extend into adulthood, it is conceivable that childhood bullying may also be of a lasting nature, and that bullies will retain their attitudes and behaviours well into maturity. This may be particularly relevant in the development and refinement of interventions, the on-going actions of schools as well as local and national initiatives including Health Promoting Schools<sup>18</sup> and the Anti-Bullying Network in Scotland.<sup>19</sup>

Two useful websites, for both adults and young people are:

[www.antibullying.net](http://www.antibullying.net)

[www.healthpromotingschools.co.uk](http://www.healthpromotingschools.co.uk)

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## HBSC publications and HBSC information

Further information on the international report from the 2001/02 survey can be obtained from the International Study website, [www.hbsc.org](http://www.hbsc.org). The International Coordinating Centre of the HBSC Study is the Child and Adolescent Health Research Unit (CAHRU), The University of Edinburgh ([www.education.ed.ac.uk/cahru/projects/hbsc](http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/cahru/projects/hbsc)).

## Briefing Papers from this survey include

Todd J et al. (2004). *HBSC Briefing Paper 8: bullying and fighting among schoolchildren in Scotland: age and gender patterns, trends and cross-national comparisons*.

Alexander LM et al. (2004). *HBSC Briefing Paper 7: How are Scotland's young people doing? A cross-national perspective on physical activity, TV viewing, eating habits, body image and oral hygiene*.

Alexander LM et al. (2004). *HBSC Briefing Paper 6: How are Scotland's young people doing? A cross-national perspective on health-related risk*.

Alexander LM et al. (2004). *HBSC Briefing Paper 5: How are Scotland's young people doing? A cross-national perspective on physical and emotional well-being*.

Alexander LM, Currie C (2004). *HBSC Briefing Paper 4. Mental-health and well-being in the context of school: Young people in Scotland*.

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