Fear of bullying affects more than a quarter of 12-13 year olds

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The young people that are afraid of going to school

One quarter of 12-13 year old boys, and one third of girls in the same age group, are sometimes, often, or very often afraid of going to school because of bullying.

These figures were derived from Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire (HRBQ) surveys carried out in 1995 and 1996. The Version 17 questionnaire used in this work was the first of our survey instruments to contain a question about bullying, and its inclusion arose out of increasing concern about the level of bullying in some schools and the distress it caused.

Fig. 1 shows how the section of the questionnaire containing the question appeared.

What is 'bullying'?

We deliberately did not attempt to define bullying, since we were more concerned with its effect. In an indirect way we were also finding it something generated by the other young people that could make the person afraid of going to school.

Work reported at the recent Kingston conference on Preventing and Responding to Bullying did, however, examine the question of what constituted bullying. In addition to the official or actual physical assault, other anti-social behaviour towards an individual, such as taunting or gesturing, interfering with their belongings, sending them unpleasant notes, or even ignoring them altogether, was considered by some researchers to amount to bullying.

This professional view is doubtless more sophisticated than that of the young people. It would be helpful to discover what kind of anti-social behaviour in this list, or perhaps outside it, young people of different age and either gender find the most distressing.

Where does bullying happen?

Within the school gates, or on the journey to and from school? Again referring to the Kingston report, approximately 30% of the respondents from across the whole age range in four secondary schools reported having been bullied at least once in school during the previous term, and more than 10% had been bullied at least once on their journey during the same time interval.

Within the school, as well as the playground,
The context of the question

The 'bullying' question was introduced into Version 17 in 1995 in the context of increasing concern about personal safety. Since its inception in the late 1970s, the questionnaire has been regularly revised and expanded to reflect the widening concept of health-related behaviour, as well as changing priorities and changes in the young people's lifestyles with the passing years.

Comprehensive surveys, video films and diaries are just three examples of consumer products that have come prominently to the scene since HRBQ began, and changes in levels of smoking, and the increased contact with drugs, have been monitored.

Rising concern about personal safety had already led to some questions being included in Version 16 for the first time. In Version 17, it was decided to make room for other material, these questions were cut down and the specific problem of bullying, as well as general personal safety, was addressed.

The situation of the "bullying" question, number 84 in Fig. 1, which immediately follows a question about feelings of personal safety and itself precedes one about fear of attack, does place it in the context of physical violence, and may thus influence the respondent's interpretation of what "bullying" means.

How many fear being bullied?

Table 1 shows how the young people in our 1995-96 sample responded to question 84. It shows that more girls than boys fear being bullied at school.

Take particular note of the generated values for at least sometimes. The highest percentages are found among the Year 7 and 8 pupils. This agrees with other research and observation showing that bullying is most widespread in the junior classes.

In this report we concentrate on the Year 8 pupils, because their level of concern about bullying is high and the sample is substantial. Therefore, please bear in mind that the percentages within this group that fear going to school because of bullying at least sometimes are:

- **BOYS**: 26.6%
- ** GIRLS**: 34.6%

What kind of people fear being bullied?

To examine this question, we shall compare the responses by the 'fear at least sometimes' and 'never fear' groups to other questions in the HRBQ, to see what differences there are and to consider their significance. To save space we shall refer to the first category as the 'fear bullying' group.

However, the reader needs to be aware that the histograms show only the percentages within each category of answers that relate to fear of bullying, and do not say anything about the other behaviour being examined.

For example, Table 2 links fear of being bullied at school to fear of being physically attacked when out and about. The basic data are:
Fear of physical attack

The link with fear of bullying is very clear, and perhaps comes as no surprise (Table 2). Most of the small percentage of boys and girls that fear physical attack often or very often come into the 'fear bullying' category. However, it is interesting that of the 61.2% of boys and 64.1% of girls that never fear physical attack, 17.0% and 24.5% respectively still fear bullying.

Does this mean that, for bullying does not imply physical attack? Or that going to school is not the same as 'going out'? Perhaps they feel safer outside school than within it?

Table 2. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to how often they fear physical attack when they go out in their neighbourhood (light figures). Thus, of the 61.2% of boys that never fear physical attack when they go out, 17.0% fear bullying.

Self-esteem

The self-esteem score (Table 3) has been derived by asking the young people to respond to a set of nine questions, with a maximum total score of 18, about confidence in themselves, their parents, and their friends.

The small percentages of boys and girls that score very low measures of self-esteem include very high percentages of individuals that fear bullying.

Those in the highest self-esteem group include far smaller percentages that fear bullying, but even so they include almost 10% of the young people.

One can imagine, or in many cases clearly recall, the destructive effects of physical or verbal bullying on feelings of self-confidence and self-worth.

We may also reflect upon two different scenarios. A person who feels 'low' invites abuse and is still further bruised by the encounter, whereas those who feel good and confident do not 'invite' attack, and should happen to be exposed to it they can easily deflect it or contain it with no personal damage.

Table 3. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to their self-esteem score (light figures). Thus, of the 2.5% of boys with very low self-esteem, 71.7% fear bullying.

Meeting a member of the opposite sex

About one in five of the boys and girls report being very uneasy or quite uneasy when meeting people of their own age and opposite sex for the first time (Table 4).

The connection between confidence and how often people of their own age and opposite sex (light figures). Thus, of the 18.1% of boys that are quite uneasy or very uneasy, 38.9% fear bullying.

Table 4. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to their confidence when meeting new people of their own age and opposite sex (light figures). Thus, of the 18.1% of boys that are quite uneasy or very uneasy, 38.9% fear bullying.

Attitudes to physical activity

Fewer than 5% of the boys and girls reported no enjoyment of physical activities at all, and 61.1% of boys, compared with 38.0% of girls, enjoyed them a lot (Table 5).

The lowest proportion of boys and girls that fear bullying are found within the groups that find most enjoyment in physical activity.

If we assume that enjoyment of physical activity is positively linked to health, strength and mobility, then voluntary participation in sports makes it less likely that people will be physically abused and more likely that they will be 'physically respected'.

It is interesting that a similar connection is found within another question asking the respondents to estimate their own fitness. This suggests that perception of one's own physical wellbeing also conveys 'messages' to others about personal vulnerability.

Table 5. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to their enjoyment of physical activities (light figures). Thus, of the 4.4% of boys that do not enjoy physical activities at all, 36.7% fear bullying.
Visits to the doctor

Table 6 shows that over 50% of the Year 8 boys and girls had visited their doctor at least once within the last three months. Assuming that the intervals recorded here are an indication of average frequency, then the most frequent visitors will include the highest percentage of those who fear bullying.

Those who visit the doctor most frequently are the most likely group to be absent from school through illness. They may therefore be under-represented in the data, just as those who are the most fearful of going to school because of bullying are under-represented.

Table 6. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to the time since their last visit to the doctor (light figures). Thus, of the 8.5% of boys that visited the doctor in the past 7 days, 33.0% fear bullying.

Breathing difficulties

Large percentages of boys and girls are included in each category (Table 7). The stepwise increase in association between breathing difficulties and experience of fear of bullying is clear for both sexes.

The overlap between those who report that they ‘ wheeze’ and have trouble breathing when they run, and those known to be suffering from asthma, has been reported in publications such as Asthma in the Classroom, available from the Asthma Training Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

If breathing difficulties are being brought on or exacerbated by anxiety, or by being chased in earnest rather than in fun, then these alternatives could help to explain the link with fear of being bullied.

Table 7. The percentage of young people that fear bullying (bold figures), according to any breathing difficulties they have when they run (light figures). Thus, of the 43.3% of boys that never experience breathing difficulties, 21.1% fear bullying.

Disturbed rest due to night cough

More girls (9.9%) than boys (6.8%) report disturbed nights quite often or very often (Table 8).

The stepwise increase between the frequency of disturbed nights and the fear of being bullied is clear for both sexes.

Disturbed sleep is associated with worry and anxiety. Those who sleep soundly may not cough, or may not know that they cough. Many sound sleepers snore.

Those who lie awake at night worrying may remember coughing as well as worrying.

Having a close friend that smokes

Table 9 is one of several pieces of analysis revealing a positive link between being close to smokers and fear bullying. The associations are remarkable, and perhaps unexpected.

Why do young people associated with smokers have more fear of being bullied? The suggestion that the close friend does the bullying raises obvious difficulties.

There is also a positive link between fear of bullying and the number of smokers in the person’s home. In addition, we discover that the young people with the greatest belief in the power of advertising to persuade people to start smoking are also the most likely to fear bullying.

Missing connections

There are correlations or correlations that people suggest as probable or obvious, sometimes from their personal experience or that of other children. For example:

“Sean was very small for his age until he was about 12, and then he began to grow. He suffered from being bullied until this growth spurt which put him ahead of the others, and he had had no trouble since.”

The data do support this expectation with respect to height. For both boys and girls, increase in height is clearly linked with a decrease in the prevalence of fear of being bullied, the shorter children being more likely to fear being bullied.

Weight seems to show no consistent relationship with fear of bullying, although we can perhaps recall knowing some obese people being ridiculed and persecuted, and other obese people dealing out the punishment. This, perhaps, contributes to the observation of no con-
The vast majority of the behaviours measured within this wide-ranging HRBQ survey are attributable particularly to the environment in which the young people live, rather than the effects of the school. However, this measure of fear of bullying is definitely school-connected.

We believe that the climate of bullying in any one school need not remain fixed. The article in this issue by Bill Rogers shows that improvement is possible. The observed variations between schools and between genders within one school may support this view.

Carrying personal protection

As Fig. 1 shows, Version 17 of the HRBQ introduced questions about personal safety and carrying "protection" when out and about in the neighbourhood.

The first results of this research were published in the Unit's report Cash and Carry?, available for £10.00 including postage, and the surprising levels of potentially 'offensive' protection being carried about by young people attracted nationwide attention.

Only a small percentage report carrying protection when they go to school (as opposed to out in the street, in night clubs, etc.) but Table 11 shows a very clear link between the level of Year 8 boys' fear of bullying at school and carrying personal protection at any time. Of those who never fear bullying, 21.1% sometimes carry personal protection, compared with 29.3% that sometimes fear bullying and 41.8% of those who fear it often or very often.

The statistics for the girls do not show clear connections, and at this age the numbers involved in carrying protection are far smaller than for the boys.

Although few report carrying protection to school, the link between fear of bullying and carrying protection in places other than school is 'stepwise' and clear. One might assume that those fearful of being bullied are more likely to carry for protection rather than for offensive action.

The Unit's report, from which these extracts are taken, is entitled CASH AND CARRY?

It will be published at the end of June, price £10.00 post free from the Unit.