

What Children Do When They Witness Bullying

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INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a particular cause for concern among children in schools. It has a detrimental effect on the health and well-being of victims and bullies,¹ the influence of which often continues into adulthood.² Those who witness bullying behaviour are also at an increased health risk.³ There is growing recognition of the role played by those who witness or are bystanders to bullying. Bystanders have the power to promote or prevent bullying behaviour.⁴

OBJECTIVE

To explore what children report doing when they witness bullying at post-primary schools in Ireland.

METHODOLOGY

Data were sourced from the 2010 Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey. Students were asked what they had done, in the last couple of months, when they saw bullying. Response options were 'I didn't see bullying in the last couple of months,' 'I did nothing, I stepped away,' 'I did nothing, I just watched,' 'I helped the victim,' 'I encouraged the attacker(s)' or 'I called an adult.' There was also a response option to record if they 'did something else' and space was provided for students to specify what they had done.

RESULTS

Table 1 - What Post-Primary School Children (Ages 11-18) Did When They Witnessed Bullying

What they did	N	%
I helped the victim	1,090	34.2
I did nothing, I stepped away	1,033	32.5
I did nothing, I just watched	585	18.4
I called an adult	254	8.0
I encouraged the attacker(s)	176	5.5
I did something else	45	1.4

While the majority of students (63.6%) reported that they did not witness bullying in the last couple of months, over 36% of students reported that they had witnessed bullying. Of the 3,183 students that reported witnessing bullying, more than a third reported helping the victim followed closely by 'did nothing, stepped away.' Only 8.0% of bullying witnesses reported that they had called an adult. Of the total 45 students (23 girls, 22 boys) who reported that they had done 'something else,' 17 (37.7%) said that they intervened verbally, for example by telling the bully to 'stop' or to 'cop on,' 9 (20.0%) that they intervened with violence against the bully, 4 (8.8%) that they tried to mediate between the bully and the victim, and 2 (4.4%) that they had laughed. A further two reported that whether they would help would depend on the consequences and if they liked the victim.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory work has given some insight into what children report doing when they witness bullying at school. While the majority of children reported that they did nothing to help the victim, a large proportion reported that they tried to help either verbally or physically and minorities reported that they encouraged the bully or intervened to fight the bully themselves. Empowering children to be active bystanders against bullying is an important strategy for bullying prevention in schools.

REFERENCES

Available on request.

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