At Issue:
The Case for Calling it Peer Victimization and Aggression

Colleen Friend, PhD, LCSW

Introduction: The Importance of Making a Shift

We all gravitate to specific areas of practice for a reason. In the case of the author, it was due to the accounts of youthful relatives who had firsthand experiences with the problem widely known as bullying. I learned that being a child victim of this form of abuse is all consuming, hijacking one's academic and social growth, often at a critical developmental time. The child's lament of loneliness, sadness, and loss of self-esteem is very compelling. Since I have adopted peer victimization and aggression as an integral focus of my work, I have been moved by the number of colleagues who come to professional presentations, acknowledging that this has either happened to them in the past or is currently perplexing them because it is occurring with their children now. They have all been my teachers. I also wish to acknowledge the role of David Finkelhor in putting together a co-presentation we did at the APSAC Colloquium in 2015. Much of what is said here was drawn from his work.

Some of what we know about this problem comes from the front line and some is gleaned from the recent and past research. Both ways, it continues to command our attention; therefore, I am using this opportunity to reach APSAC practitioners though the *Advisor*. Given that the conclusions are somewhat controversial, it is up to you to see where you stand. Ultimately, I think the time has come to shift our consciousness, perception, and language from identifying this dynamic by the term bullying to calling it peer victimization and aggression.

Making the Case

First, let's ask, "What's in a name?" A name should be an accurate reflection of the concept it represents. A name is a label that can often shape the identity and behavior of those to whom it is applied.

Daniel Olweus (1994) defined the word bullying as a hypothesis for a phenomenon he was uncovering in his work with young students. Olweus' formulation is limited to two components: repeated activities, and acts occurring in the context of a power imbalance.

Several immediate concerns come to mind: What about one time serious acts of aggression, such as rape or assault, without a preexisting power differential? How are we defining a power differential? Is it gender, size, strength, or popularity? If a large popular girl repeatedly intimidates a smaller popular boy, what is the controlling dimension? As the intimidation or aggression progresses, one party might be legitimately intimidated, but this may not mean there was a power imbalance initially. In an attempt to clarify this ambiguity, Olweus explained that a power imbalance exists when it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend him or herself. What if the student is committed to nonviolence or fears a consequence for fighting back? What if the student is blindsided in an ambush? So this power imbalance criterion is hard to define and grasp clearly.

Since Olweus's work in the 1990s, bullying has been adopted wholesale by researchers, educators, and the public at large. The realities of life in the 21st century, coupled with recent research and reflections on prior historical movements, all offer cogent arguments for renaming the phenomenon as peer victimization and aggression.

Making the Case

We have learned a lot from recent research on how children experience aggression. In the Second National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (Turner, Finkelhor, Shattuck, Hamby, & Mitchell, 2015), we see the complexities of peer assault and victimization. For example, we know that many children experience polyvictimization, and as such incidents increase, so do their trauma symptoms, regardless of the power imbalance. Also in this research, we see that incidents with children can have aggravating elements that would potentially distort an initial power imbalance, for example, the addition of a weapon, sexual content, an internet component, or a bias slur (e.g., something said about sexual orientation). With the emergence of cyberbullying, one often cannot determine who is the initiator, let alone if there is a power imbalance. On top of that, the level of repeating is very difficult to gauge as the threats and insults are all available for rebroadcast. Thus, we should not limit this phenomenon of abuse among peers only to episodes that are repeated with a power imbalance. Both elements of the Olweus hypothesis seem to have outgrown their ability to describe what children currently experience.

There are some good bridges to the future, and we could build on past success in related fields when an initially narrow concept was broadened to allow more empirical definitions from research and clinical practice. In fact, many front line movements contain examples in which the defining of certain words became key to gaining broader acceptance and a more accurate portrayal of a phenomenon. The initial mobilization of researchers and advocates around rape and rape prevention gave way to broader terms such as *sexual*

assault and *sexual violence* in recognition of harm caused by nonpenetrating forms of sexual offense (Basile & Saltzman, 2002). Similarly, an initial focus on wife abuse in the early domestic violence movement has progressed to a more general emphasis on intimate partner abuse, which includes dating violence as well as the understanding that males may also be harmed. We moved into recognizing intentional child abuse injuries with the case of "the battered child syndrome" (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1962) and then took that into the broader and current concept of child maltreatment. The term *mental retardation* was eliminated from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-V* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and replaced with *intellectual disability*. All of these examples demonstrate that terms often start out being the best reflection of their time, but as the science progresses, we should hear arguments for opening up the concepts and then seeing where the dust settles, rather than insisting on an attachment to a name that has limited utility.

Another sense of urgency to consider a shift comes from children's and youth's perception of the situation. For example, when the Kaiser Family Foundation conducted a survey in 2001, asking children ages 8–15 what their "toughest issue" was, they found that bullying/teasing ranked number one over these other problems in descending order: drugs/alcohol, discrimination, pressure to have sex, racism, and AIDS. In presentations, I have shown parts of YouTube videos that portray real kids reacting to bullying (Fine Brothers Entertainment, 2011). In these videos, we hear children calling for "an act of Congress" to solve this problem because it is so harmful. They insightfully talk about bullies as being scared and abused and looking for an opportunity to engage an audience. The kids compassionately offer to help anyone who experiences bullying. Incredibly, all of them admit to having experienced the problem themselves. When we start with the child's point of view, it centers us on their sense of harm, urgency and seriousness. This is another precise reason why our current concept is so limited.

Recently, a study examined two large data sets (one from UK, one from USA) to compare the long-term adult mental health outcomes of child maltreatment (by adults) with being bullied by peers (Lereya, Copeland, Castillo, & Wolke, 2015). The researchers found that while children who experienced both forms of abuse were at increased risk for mental health problems, the children who were bullied by peers only were more likely to have worse overall mental health problems (anxiety and depression in both cohorts, self-harm in the UK cohort) compared with the group that experienced only child maltreatment (Lereya et al., 2015). While I acknowledge that there may be many explanations for these findings, I can conclude that the enduring effects of peer victimization are at least equivalent to the effects of child maltreatment. I applaud Lereya (2015) and colleagues' assertion that bullying is another form of child maltreatment.

Historically, child protection professionals have believed that parental maltreatment is most harmful to children, but this new finding suggests that bullying may, in fact, have even greater adverse effects, especially in terms of anxiety, depression, and self-harm. Although this interpretation may be debated within the field, at a minimum it calls for renewed consideration of bullying as a significant form of abuse. Substituting the term *peer victimization* for *bullying* could incorporate a harm intent for peers acting outside the norms of appropriate conduct as well as the relationship context. Such elements could help us approach these concepts with more openness and flexibility, increasing our sensitivity to what children are telling us and what research has now revealed.

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About the Author

Colleen Friend, PhD, LCSW, teaches at California State University, Los Angeles, where she is the Director of both the Child Abuse and Family Violence Institute and the Institute's certificate program. Her practice experience and research publications are in child welfare training, intimate partner violence, peer aggression, risk assessment, multidisciplinary teams and child sexual abuse interviewing. She has directed two multidisciplinary child sexual abuse assessment centers in the Los Angeles area: The Los Angeles County Child Crisis Center at Harbor UCLA and Stuart House. She trains for the University Consortium for Children and Families. Dr. Friend serves on the board of the California Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (CAPSAC).