

Bullying—



And the Power of Peers

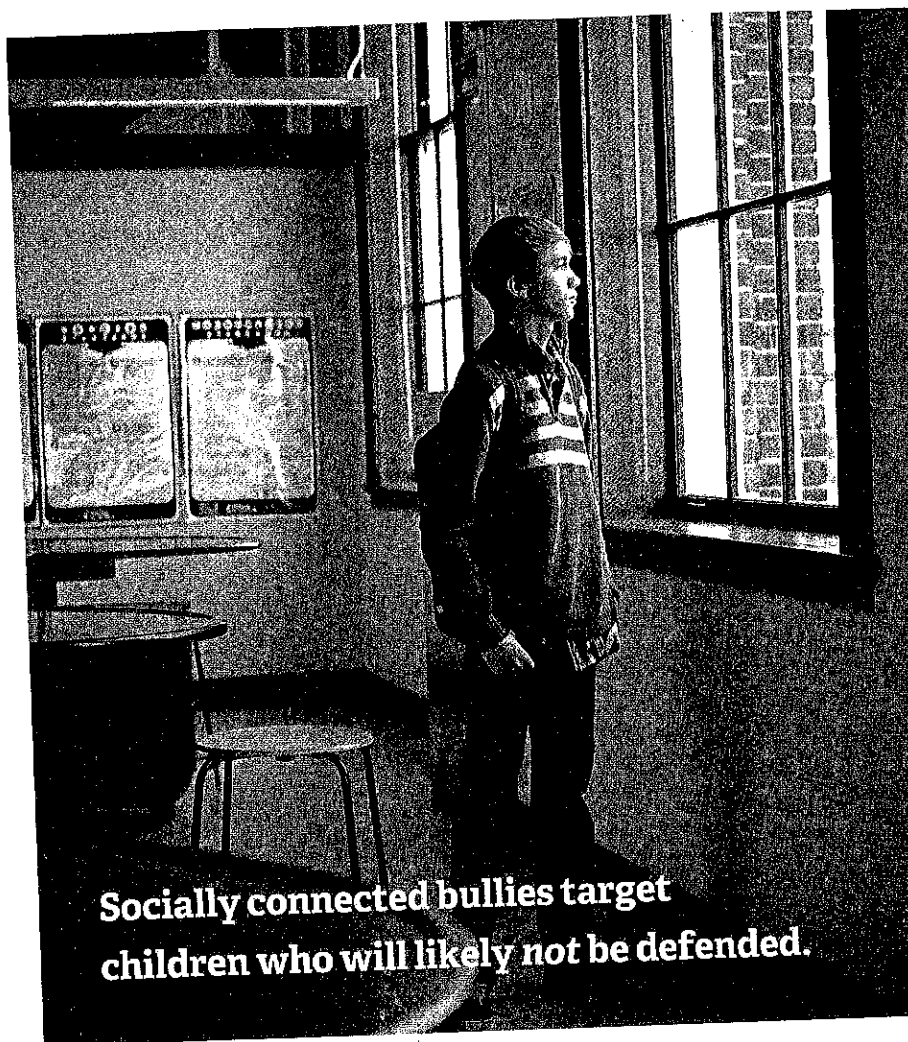
Research indicates that peers play an essential role in promoting or preventing bullying.

Philip C. Rodkin

Editor's note: This report was commissioned for the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention, which met on March 10, 2011. The conference brought together President Barack Obama and members of his cabinet, First Lady Michelle Obama, youth, parents, researchers, school officials, and other groups to craft a national strategy for reducing and ending bullying in schools. A longer version of this report was included in the briefing book distributed at the conference.

On first thought, the words *bully* and *peer* hardly belong in the same title; for all intents and purposes, the two words are opposites. A peer is an equal, of the same social standing as oneself, whereas bullying lacks the elements of equality and free choice. What distinguishes bullying from other forms of childhood aggression, whether a hard-fought basketball game or rough-and-tumble play, is *unequal, coercive power* (Olweus, 1993; Vaillancourt, McDougall, Hymel, & Sunderani, 2010). It's this sense of inequality, abuse, and unfairness—and of a peer culture valuing all the wrong things—that makes bullying incompatible with the democratic spirit; all youth should be free to learn in peace and safety, making the most of their talents and goals.

What kind of power does a bully really have? Children and youth (and some adults) use bullying to acquire resources and—here is where peers come into the picture—to demonstrate to an audience that they can dominate (Pellegrini et al. 2010; Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2010). The success of bullies in attaining resources and recognition depends on factors that include the characteristics of the bully, the relationship that exists between bullies and those whom they target for harassment, and the reactions of classmates who witness bullying. Do schoolmates embarrass the harassed and stroke the bully's ego? Do they ignore the bullying in front of them? Does somebody intervene to support the victim and help stop the bullying?



Socially connected bullies target children who will likely not be defended.

Socially connected bullies tend to be proactive and goal-directed in their aggression. They have lots of experience with peers, perhaps as far back as the day-care years (Rodkin & Roisman, 2010). Some bullies incorporate prosocial strategies into their behavioral repertoire, for example reconciling with their targets after conflict or becoming less aggressive once they have established a clear dominance relationship (Pellegrini et al., 2010).

Socially connected bullies are both underrecognized as seriously aggressive and popularized in the media, as in, for instance, the 2004 movie *Mean Girls*, which describes how female high school social cliques operate and the effect they can have on girls. Vaillancourt and colleagues (2010) go so far as to call these socially connected bullies “popular, socially skilled, and competent” (p. 218). Although this portrait of mental health may be overdrawn, there is no doubt that a substantial proportion of aggressive children and youth have surprisingly high levels of popularity among their peers.

Bullying may peak in early adolescence, but these two social worlds of bullying can exist as early as kindergarten. These worlds represent two central but seemingly inconsistent views of aggressive behavior: as dysfunctional and maladaptive or functional and adaptive. As light can be both wave and particle, aggression can be maladaptive or adaptive depending on where the aggression occurs; the time frame (that is, adaptive in the short run, but maladaptive in the long run); the consequences of the aggressive act; and one perspective (Rodkin & Wilson, 2007). Educators and parents need to ask where bullying works from the perspective of bully and what goals are being served by bullying behavior, as they will differ for different children.

The Bully-Victim Relationship
Any law enforcement official would quickly want to establish the

Of course, peer culture in elementary, middle, and high school exists not in some *Lord of the Flies* lawlessness, but rather under the presumably watchful eyes of responsible adults: teachers, principals, bus drivers, school staff, and parents. So how peers and adults act in response to—or, even better, in anticipation of—bullying is crucial.

The Two Social Worlds of Bullying

In a recent article, Tom Farmer and colleagues (2010) report on the “two social worlds” of bullying: *marginalization* on the one hand, and *connection* on the other. Socially marginalized bullies “may be fighting against a social system that keeps them on the periphery,” whereas socially connected bullies “may use aggression to control” others (p. 386).

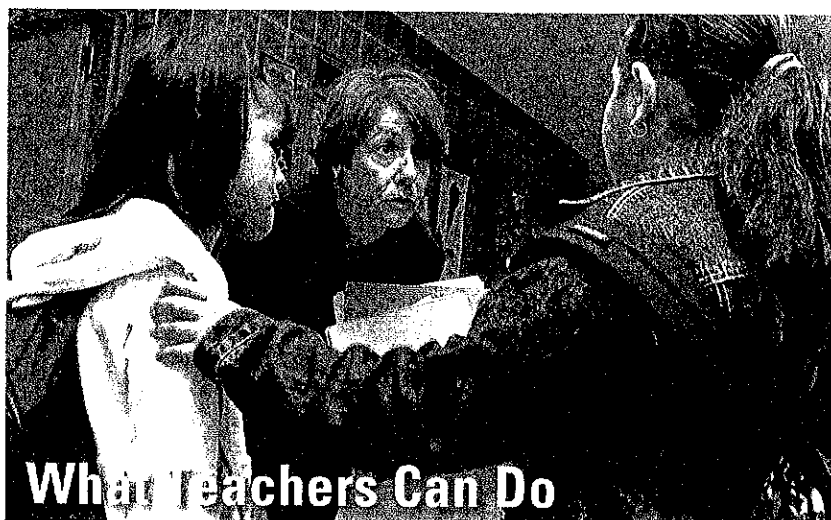
Farmer and colleagues report that marginalized, unpopular bullies, whether girls or boys, are often shunted into peer groups with other bullies, and sometimes even with the children they harass. Marginalized bullies, more often boys than girls, have a host of problems of which bullying behavior is but one manifestation. Their bullying might stem from an inability to control their impulsive actions or from a desire to gain status that generally eludes them.

Then there are bullies whose social worlds are networked and integrated—these children don’t lack for peer social support. Socially connected bullies are more evenly split between boys and girls. They have a variety of friends, some bullies but others not, and strengths such as social skills, athleticism, or physical attractiveness.

relationship that may exist between an alleged perpetrator and a victim. However, little is known about the relationship between a bully and the child he or she targets. Instead, the focus has been on identifying children who fall into *bully*, *victim*, and *bully-victim* categories and determining prevalence rates and behavioral characteristics for these categories (see Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). This puts bullies and victims into separate boxes and overemphasizes their separateness. This could imply that there is no known relationship between a bully and victim—that the targeting is random.

Reality is more complicated. Bullies and victims often have a previously existing relationship that presages bullying, which, if known, would alert knowledgeable adults about possible trouble spots (Card & Hodges, 2008). One clear predictor is reciprocated dislike and animosity. Potential bullies, particularly socially connected bullies, turn angry thoughts into aggressive behavior toward low-status peers whom they already dislike and who dislike them (Hodges, Peets, & Salmivalli, 2009). Socially connected children choose same-sex bullying as part of a struggle for dominance, particularly in the beginning of the school year or between transitions from one school to another, when the social hierarchy is in flux and unpopular children can be targeted (Pellegrini et al., 2010).

In a disturbing number of cases, aggressive boys harass girls (Berger & Rodkin, 2009; Rodkin & Berger, 2008; Veenstra et al., 2007). Sixty percent of 5th to 7th grade girls whom Olweus (1993) reported as being harassed said that they were bullied by boys. Similarly, the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (2001) reported that 38 percent of girls who experience sexual harassment “say they first experienced it in elementary school” (p. 25). Unpopular, rejected-aggressive boys are most likely to harass girls (Rodkin & Berger, 2008),



➔ **Ask students about bullying.** Survey students regularly on whether they are being harassed or have witnessed harassment. Make it easier for students to come to an adult in the school to talk about harassment by building staff-student relationships, having suggestion boxes where students can provide input anonymously, or administering schoolwide surveys in which students can report confidentially on peers who bully and on the children whom they harass. Consider what bullying accomplishes for a bully. Does the bully want to gain status? Does the bully use aggression to control others?

➔ **Ask students about their relationships.** Bullying is a destructive, asymmetric relationship. Know whom students hang out with, who their friends are, and whom they dislike. Know whom students perceive to be popular and unpopular. Connect with students who have no friends. School staff members vary widely in their knowledge of students' relationships and tend to underestimate the level of aggression among peers.

➔ **Build democratic classroom and school climates.** Identify student leaders who can encourage peers to stand against bullying. Assess whether student social norms are *really* against bullying. Train teachers to better understand and manage student social dynamics and handle aggression with clear, consistent consequences. Master teachers not only promote academic success, but also build relationships, trust, and a sense of community.

➔ **Be an informed consumer of antibullying curriculums.** Antibullying interventions can be successful, but there are significant caveats.¹ Some bullies would benefit from services that go beyond bullying-reduction programs. Some programs work well in Europe, but not as well in the United States.² Most antibullying programs have not been rigorously evaluated, so be an informed consumer when investigating claims of success. Even with a well-developed antibullying curriculum, understanding students' relationships at your school is crucial.

➔ **Remember that bullying is also a problem of values.** Implement an intellectually challenging character education or socioemotional learning curriculum. Teach students how to achieve their goals by being assertive rather than aggressive. Always resolve conflicts with civility among and between staff and students. Involve families.

¹Merrell, K. W., Gueldner, B. A., Ross, S. W., & Isava, D. M. (2008). How effective are school bullying intervention programs? *School Psychology Quarterly*, 23, 26–42.

²Farrington, D. P., & Ttofi, M. M. (2009). School-based programs to reduce bullying and victimization. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 6.

whereas socially connected bullies tend to demonstrate within-sex bullying and dominance against unpopular targets (Pellegrini et al., 2010).

Peer Relationships That Promote or Prevent Bullying

Peer relationships are like oxygen that allows bullying to breathe and spread; peers can use these relationships as a cudgel, a weapon of shame against victims. However, even one good friend to a victim of bullying can help assuage the harmful consequences of harassment.

Socially marginalized bullies who are also victims, who predominantly act aggressively in reaction to provocation, stand out through their segregation

and abuse; and still others who intervene to support children being harassed (see also Salmivalli et al., 2010).

As Pepler and colleagues (2010) write, "Bullying is a social event in the classroom and on the playground," with an audience of peers in almost 90 percent of observed cases (p. 470). This silent, mocking audience grows exponentially, in frightening anonymity, with cyberbullying. Thus, the problem of bullying is also a problem of the unresponsive bystander, whether that bystander is a classmate who finds harassment funny, a peer who sits on the sidelines afraid to get involved, or an educator who sees bullying as just another part of growing up.

One good friend can make a crucial difference to children who are harassed.

from most peers as loners or as members of deviant, peripheral peer cliques. These youth would benefit from services that go beyond bullying-reduction programs, such as violence-reduction therapies and social skills training (Cook et al., 2010). Where feasible, the social ties of marginalized bullies should be broadened to include a greater variety of peers.

A colleague and I have referred to socially connected bullies as "hidden in plain sight" (Rodkin & Karimpour, 2008) because they are more socially prominent than marginalized bullies, yet less likely to be recognized as bullies or at risk. Because socially connected bullies affiliate with a wide variety of peers, there is an unhealthy potential for widespread acceptance of bullying in some classrooms and schools. This is what Debra Pepler and colleagues call the *theater of bullying* (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010), which encompasses not only the bully-victim dyad, but also children who encourage and reinforce bullies (or become bullies themselves); others who silently witness harassment

and abuse; and still others who intervene to support children being harassed (see also Salmivalli et al., 2010). Peers who do intervene in bullying can make a real difference. These defenders may be successful in more than 50 percent of such attempts, but unfortunately they stand up in fewer than 20 percent of bullying incidents (Pepler et al., 2010; Salmivalli et al., 2010).

One good friend can make a crucial difference to children who are harassed. Victims who are friends with a nonvictimized peer are less likely to internalize problems as a result of the victimization—for example, being sad, depressed, or anxious (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999). Even 1st graders who have a friend but who are otherwise socially isolated seem to be protected from the adjustment problems that other isolated children may suffer (Laursen, Bukowski, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). Peer relationships are crucial both for the bully who looks to maintain or acquire social status and for

the child who looks to cope with—and better yet, end—peer harassment.

Classroom and School Climate

With clouds of war gathering, German émigré and child psychologist Kurt Lewin and his colleagues created clubs for 10-year-old boys that were organized in an authoritarian (fascistic) or democratic fashion (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). Victimization and scapegoating were highest in groups with an autocratic atmosphere, with a dominant group leader and a strongly hierarchical structure. Victimization was lowest in groups with a democratic atmosphere, where relationships with group leaders were more egalitarian and cohesive.

It's well worth asking whether today's schools are characterized by a democratic or autocratic social climate and whether differences in school climate are related to bullying. Classrooms with more egalitarian social status hierarchies, strong group norms in support of academic achievement and prosocial behavior, and positive social ties among children should deprive many socially connected bullies of the peer regard they require (Ahn, Garandeau, & Rodkin, 2010; Frey, Edstrom, & Hirschstein, 2010; Pellegrini et al., 2010; Rodkin & Gest, 2011). In contrast, even children who are not bullies themselves will form probullying attitudes in classrooms where bullies are popular (Dijkstra, Lindenberg, & Veenstra, 2008).

Using Peers to Intervene

In a review of bullying-reduction programs, Farrington and Ttofi (2009) found that interventions that involve peers, such as using students as peer mediators or engaging bystanders to disapprove of bullying and support victims of harassment, were associated with *increases* in victimization! In fact, of 20 program elements included in 44 school-based programs, work with peers was the *only* program element associated with significantly *more* bullying

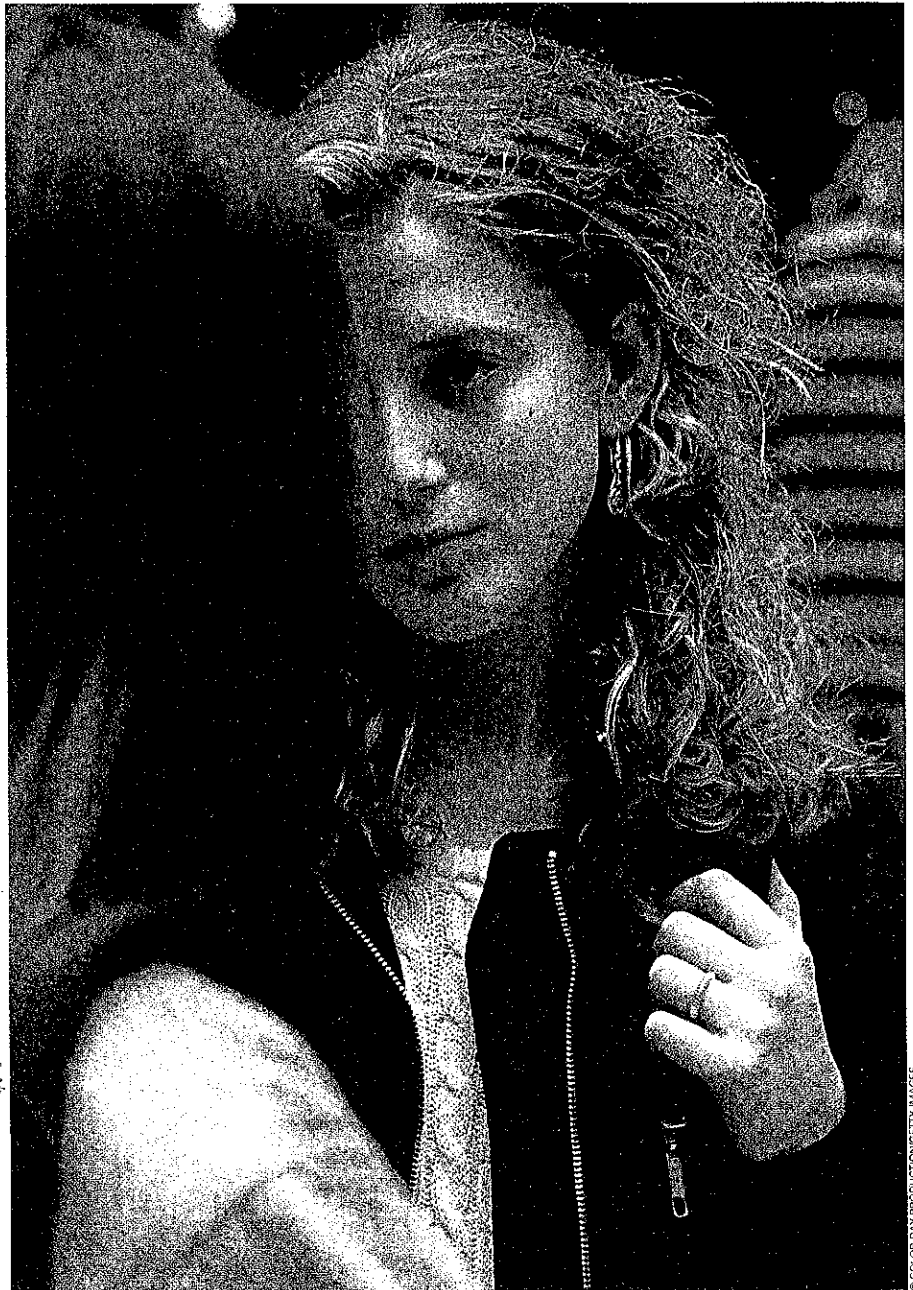
and victimization. (In contrast, there were significant and positive effects for parent training and school meetings in reducing bullying.) Still other reviews of bullying intervention programs have found generally weak effects (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008).

These disheartening results speak to the fact that peer influences can be a constructive or destructive force on bullying and need to be handled with knowledge, skill, and care. Antisocial peer groups can undermine behavioral interventions. For peer mediation to be effective, students who are chosen to be peer mediators should probably be popular and prosocial (Pellegrini et al., 2010; Pepler et al., 2010; Vaillancourt et al., 2010).

Some of the most innovative, intensive, grassroots uses of peer relationships to reduce bullying, such as the You Have the Power! program in Montgomery County, Maryland, have not been scientifically evaluated. The final verdict awaits on some promising programs that take advantage of peer relationships to combat bullying, such as the Finnish program KiVa (Salmivalli et al., 2010), which has a strong emphasis on influencing onlookers to support the victim rather than encourage the bully, and the Steps to Respect program (Frey et al., 2010), which works at the elementary school level.

Teachers can ask what *kind* of bully they face when dealing with a victimization problem. Is the bully a member of a group, or is he or she a group leader? How are bullies and victims situated in the peer ecology? Educators who exclusively target peripheral, antisocial cliques as the engine of school violence problems may leave intact other groups that are more responsible for mainstream peer support of bullying. A strong step educators could take would be to periodically ask students about bullying and their social relationships. (See "What Teachers Can Do" on p. 13.)

In his 2008 book *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in*



Urban Schools, Charles Payne makes the point that even the best, most rigorous, and most validated intervention won't be successful without taking into account the weak social infrastructure and dysfunctional organizational environments of some schools. If adult social networks can doom education reform, then surely youth social networks can as well. When popular children engage in or endorse bullying, they send a message to all students that conflicts with

the basic values of respect and tolerance.

The task ahead is to better integrate bullies and the children they harass into the social fabric of the school and better inform educators of how to recognize, understand, and help guide children's relationships. With guidance from caring, engaged adults, youth can organize themselves as a force that makes bullying less effective as a means of social connection or as an outlet for alienation. ■

Editor's note: Prepared for *Educational Leadership*, this article is a condensed version of "Bullying and Children's Peer Relationships," a report that the author delivered at the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention in March 2011. The full version of this report, with complete references, is available at www.stopbullying.gov/references/white_house_conference/white_house_conference_materials.pdf#bullying_and_peer_relationships.

References

- Ahn, H.-J., Garandeau, C. F., & Rodkin, P. C. (2010). Effects of classroom embeddedness and density on the social status of aggressive and victimized children. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 30, 76–101.
- American Association of University Women Educational Foundation. (2001). *Hostile hallways*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women.
- Berger, C., & Rodkin, P. C. (2009). Male and female victims of male bullies. *Sex Roles*, 61, 72–84.
- Card, N. A., & Hodges, E. V. E. (2008). Peer victimization among schoolchildren: Correlations, causes, consequences, and considerations in assessment and intervention. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 23, 451–461.
- Cook, C. R., Williams, K. R., Guerra, N. G., Kim, T. E., & Sadek, S. (2010). Predictors of bullying and victimization in childhood and adolescence. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 25, 65–83.
- Dijkstra, J. K., Lindenberg, S. M., & Veenstra, R. (2008). Beyond the classroom norm. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 36, 1289–1299.
- Farmer, T. W., Petrin, R. A., Robertson, D. L., Fraser, M. W., Hall, C. M., Day, S. H., & Dadisman, K. (2010). Peer relations of bullies, bully-victims, and victims: The two social worlds of bullying in second-grade classrooms. *Elementary School Journal*, 110, 364–392.
- Farrington, D. P., & Ttofi, M. M. (2009). School-based programs to reduce bullying and victimization. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 6.
- Frey, K. S., Edstrom, L. V., & Hirschstein, M. K. (2010). School bullying: A crisis or an opportunity? In S. R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 403–415). New York: Routledge.
- Hodges, E. V. E., Boivin, M., Vitaro, F., & Bukowski, W. M. (1999). The power of friendship. *Developmental Psychology*, 35, 94–101.
- Hodges, E. V. E., Peets, K., & Salmivalli, C. (2009). A person x situation approach to understanding aggressive behavior and underlying aggressogenic thought. In M. J. Harris (Ed.), *Bullying, rejection, and peer victimization: A social cognitive neuroscience perspective* (pp. 125–150). New York: Springer.
- Laursen, B., Bukowski, W. M., Aunola, K., & Nurmi, J.-K. (2007). Friendship moderates prospective associations between social isolation and adjustment problems in young children. *Child Development*, 78, 1395–1404.
- Lewin, K., Lippitt, R., & White, R. K. (1939). Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created "social climates." *Journal of Social Psychology*, 10, 271–299.
- Merrell, K. W., Gueldner, B. A., Ross, S. W., & Isava, D. M. (2008). How effective are school bullying intervention programs? *School Psychology Quarterly*, 23, 26–42.
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Payne, C. M. (2008). *So much reform, so little change: The persistence of failure in urban schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pellegrini, A. D., Long, J. D., Solberg, D., Roseth, C., DuPuis, D., Bohn, C., & Hickey, M. (2010). Bullying and social status during school transitions. In S. R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 199–210). New York: Routledge.
- Pepler, D., Craig, W., & O'Connell, P. (2010). Peer processes in bullying. In S. R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 469–479). New York: Routledge.
- Rodkin, P. C., & Berger, C. (2008). Who bullies whom? Social status asymmetries by victim gender. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 32, 473–485.
- Rodkin, P. C., & Gest, S. D. (2011). Teaching practices, classroom peer ecologies, and bullying behaviors among schoolchildren. In D. L. Espelage & S. Swearer (Eds.), *Bullying in North American Schools* (2nd ed., pp. 75–90). New York: Routledge.
- Rodkin, P. C., & Karimpour, R. (2008). What's a hidden bully? In S. Hymel, S. Swearer, & P. Gillette (Eds.), *Bullying at school and online*. Retrieved from www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_What_s_Hidden_Bully
- Rodkin, P. C., & Roisman, G. I. (2010). Antecedents and correlates of the popular-aggressive phenomenon in elementary school. *Child Development*, 81, 837–850.
- Rodkin, P. C., & Wilson, T. (2007). Aggression and adaptation: Psychological record, educational promise. In P. H. Hawley, T. D. Little, & P. C. Rodkin (Eds.), *Aggression and adaptation: The bright side to bad behavior* (pp. 235–267). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Salmivalli, C., Kärnä, A., & Poskiparta, E. (2010). From peer putdowns to peer support: A theoretical model and how it translated into a national anti-bullying program. In S. R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 441–454). New York: Routledge.
- Vaillancourt, T., McDougall, P., Hymel, S., & Sunderani, S. (2010). Respect or fear? The relationship between power and bullying behavior. In S. R. Jimerson, S. M. Swearer, & D. L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 211–222). New York: Routledge.
- Veenstra, R., Lindenberg, S., Munniksma, A., & Dijkstra, J. K. (2010). The complex relation between bullying, victimization, acceptance, and rejection. *Child Development*, 81, 480–486.
- Veenstra, R., Lindenberg, S., Zijlstra, B., De Winter, A., Verhulst, F., & Ormel, J. (2007). The dyadic nature of bullying and victimization. *Child Development*, 78, 1843–1854.

Copyright © 2011 Philip C. Rodkin

VIDEO

To watch President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama give their opening remarks at the Conference on Bullying Prevention, go to www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/03/10/president-obama-first-lady-conference-bullying-prevention

Philip C. Rodkin is associate professor of child development in the Departments of Educational Psychology and Psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; rodkin@illinois.edu.