Types of Defending Behaviors among Late Elementary and Middle School Students

Chloe M Suchy and Erin K Tomasino
Department of Psychology
Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, IL 61920

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Lyndsay Jenkins

Abstract

This study explored the frequency of different types of defending behaviors (i.e., confronting, helping, and reporting) in both late elementary students and middle school students. Previous research has found that defending peers is a prosocial behavior that can have a positive impact on victims, but only one known study has examined the frequency of different types of defending behaviors (Rock and Baird 2012). The current sample consisted of 1574 students from four different schools (49.7% Male, 49.9% female). Results of this study suggest that helping is the most common form of defending. Additionally, students in third, fourth, and fifth grade report that they defend their peers more than students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. Future research should seek out additional information regarding inter-and intra-personal characteristics in order to be able to predict bullying role behaviors.

Keywords: Bullying, Defending, Bystanders

1. Introduction

1.1 Types of Defending Behaviors among Late Elementary and Middle School Students

Bullying can be defined as repeated aggression (physical, relational or verbal) which has been inflicted by a perpetrator with greater power over a victim (Rock and Baird 2012). Bullying has become a widespread problem that has sparked the interest of many psychologists. There are many different bullying roles, including bullies, assistants, victims, defenders, and outsiders (Salmivalli et al. 1996). Bullies and victims have received the majority of the attention in the literature; however, the role of bystanders (i.e., defenders and outsiders) has recently become of interest to researchers and educators. Bystanders can either ignore that bullying is occurring (i.e., outsiders) or try to stop bullying from occurring (i.e., defenders). Given the potentially positive impact that defenders can have on bullying, it is important to have a better understanding of individuals who engage in these behaviors. Defenders are unique because they are willing to take a "social risk" to stand up for their peers. Social psychology researchers began studying a phenomena in the 1960s known as the "bystander effect," which is a theory that attempted to explain why individuals do not intervene during emergency situations.

   The original research on the bystander effect sought to explain why individuals may or may not help a victim of a crime in progress. Social psychologists suggested that bystanders refuse to take action because the bystanders were either unsure if there was an emergency (pluralistic ignorance) or expected other neighbors to help the victim (diffusion of responsibility). These two ideas, pluralistic ignorance and diffusion of responsibility, have recently been used to explain why bystanders may or may not intervene when witnessing bullying (Nickerson et al. 2014). For example, adult bystanders may fail to respond effectively because they may question their own judgment or feel as if they are not responsible to act in the situation. Due to similar reasons, children bystanders also may feel apprehensive about intervening and therefore ignore the situation.

So far, bullying researchers have treated defending as a single type of behavior, but Rock and Baird (2012) have recently suggested that there are different types of defending behaviors. Rock and Baird conducted a study that asked elementary students what people should do in four different hypothetical bullying episodes. The sample consisted of 104 participants age six to eleven years (18 first grade, 30 second grade, 26 third grade, 16 fourth grade, and 14 fifth grade). To measure types of defending responses, participants were presented with four different stories depicting different bullying situations. The most common responses suggested by the participants were labeled "report to teacher", "confront bully", or "help the victim". Confront the bully was the most common strategy suggested by the participants, followed by report to teacher then help the victim. Though they found that some types of defending were more common, their study only included a small sample of late elementary students. To replicate and extend the Rock and Baird study, the current study explored the frequency of these types of defending among a large sample of late elementary and middle school students.

1.2 Purpose Of The Study

The goal of this study was to examine the participant-reported frequency of different types of defending behaviors (i.e., confronting, helping, and reporting) among late elementary students and middle school students. Two research questions were posed: 1) Which type of defending is most common?, and 2) Are there significant grade level differences in the frequency of different types of defending behaviors (i.e., confronting, helping, and reporting) among third through eighth grade students? It was predicted that confronting would be the most frequent type of defending because that was the most common strategy suggested by participants in the Rock and Baird study. Additionally, it was predicted that younger students would report higher levels of all types of defending compared to older students (Rock and Baird 2012).

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The current study included 1574 students from four different schools, including 785 boys (49.9%) and 782 girls (49.7%). There were 143 (9.1%) third graders, 145 (9.2%) fourth graders, 146 (9.3%) fifth graders, 390 (24.8%) sixth graders, 370 (23.5%), and 370 (23.5) eighth graders. The sample was primary White. One hundred forty-five of the students received special education services (9.2%).

2.2 Measures

To assess defending behavior, the defender subscale of the Bully Participant Behavior Questionnaire (BPBQ; Summers and Demaray 2008) was used. The BPBQ is a 50-item rating scale that contains 10 questions about each bullying participant behavior: bullying, assisting, victimization, defending, and outsider behavior. Only the defending subscale was used in the current study. The BPPQ has been used in previous research and has established psychometric properties (Demaray et al. 2014). Students answered two questions for each type of defending behavior using a 5-point rating scale (*0 = Never, 1 = 1 to 2 times, 2 = 3 to 4 times, 3 = 5 to 6 times, 4 = 7 or more times*). Confronting items were "I defended someone who had things purposely taken from them" and "I defended someone who was being called mean names", Helping items were " I tried to include someone if they were being purposely left out" and "I tried to become friends with someone after they were picked on", and Reporting items were "I encouraged someone to tell an adult after they were picked on" and "When I saw someone being physically harmed, I told an adult".

2.3 Procedures

The data was collected as part of school-wide, social-emotional evaluations conducted at each school. Passive parental consent was used since the data were collected as part of an evaluation. IRB approval was obtained in order to use the dataset for the current study. Students completed their surveys in their classrooms (elementary) or in large cafeteria or gymnasium setting (middle school). Research assistants gave instructions prior to handing out surveys and were available to answer questions for the duration of the evaluation.

3. Results

To answer the first research question (Which type of defending is most common?), a paired-samples *t* test was conducted. Results indicate that Helping is the most common type of defending, followed by Confronting, then Reporting. There were statistically significant differences between Helping (M=4.36, SD 4.27) and Confronting (M=3.96, SD 4.67), $t(1499) = -8.24$, $p <.001$, and between Helping and Reporting (M=2.00, SD2.22), $t(1499) = 33.60$, $p <.001$. There was also a significant difference between Confronting and Reporting, $t(1499) = 26.10$, $p <.001$

To answer the second research question (Are there significant grade level differences in the frequency of different types of defending behaviors (i.e., confronting, helping, and reporting) among third through eighth grade students?), a MANOVA was conducted. Figure 1 displays the average rate of reporting, helping, and confronting at each grade level. The independent variable was Grade and the dependent variable was Defending Type (Confront, Help, Report). Results of the MANOVA indicate that the main effect of Grade was significant, Wilks' Lambda = .86, $F(15, 4119.16) = 15.75$, $p < .001$. The follow up ANOVAs indicated a significant difference for each type of Defending: Confront, $F(15, 1494) = 28.41$, $p < .001$; Help, $F(5, 1494) = 41.50$, $p < .001$; Report, $F(5, 1494) = 176.07$, $p < .001$. Post hoc Scheffe analyses indicate significant differences between the grade levels. Third and fourth grade students reported significantly more Confronting than sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students and fifth graders reported significantly more Confronting that sixth graders. Third and fourth graders also reported significantly more Helping than fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Fifth graders reported significantly more Helping than seventh and eighth graders. Finally, third, fourth, and fifth graders reported significantly more Reporting than sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Overall, third and fourth graders reported significantly more defending in all areas compared to sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. The decline in defending behaviors is consistent for all types of defending and seems to be fairly gradual.
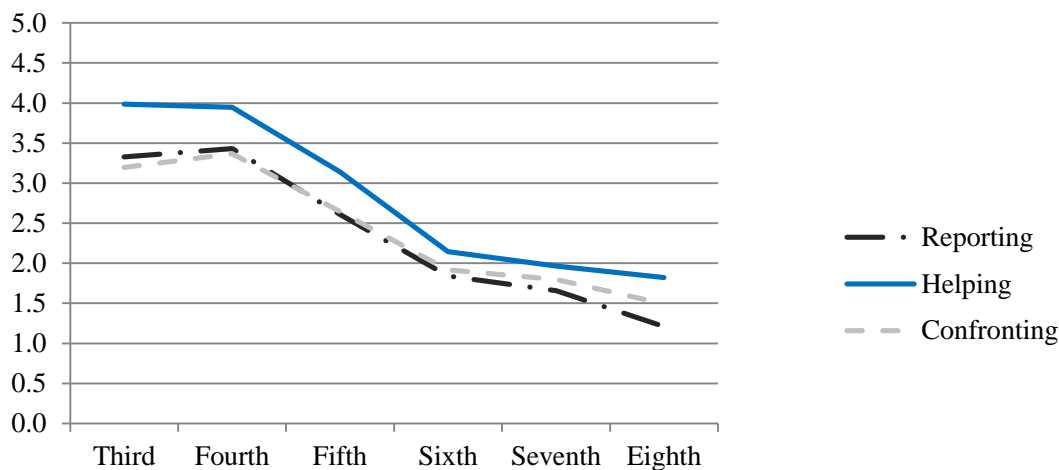

Figure 1. Comparison of Frequency of Types of Defending between Late Elementary and Middle School Students

4. Discussion

The current study investigated three different types of defending behaviors, helping, reporting, and confronting. Results indicate that helping is the most common type of defending behavior among third-eighth grade students and that younger students defend more than older students. It was originally predicted that confronting would be the most commonly used defending behavior because in the Rock and Baird study it was the strategy most frequently suggested by participants. However, there are key differences between their study and the current study. The Rock and Baird study used hypothetical situations and asked students to generate ideas about what they would do;

however, in the current study participants were asked about their actual frequency of engaging in defending behaviors. It is reasonable to expect differences between a hypothetical response and actual response in bullying situations. Hypothetically, a person may think they would intervene more directly by trying to confront the bully, but in reality, they may choose a less direct way of intervening, like helping. By confronting a bully, the defender runs the risk of becoming a victim him/herself, which is a somewhat risky behavior. Additionally, when reporting bullying to an adult, youth run the risk of being labeled a "tattle tell." Therefore, it is not surprising that helping was most frequent, followed by confronting, and reporting.

Results also demonstrated that third and fourth grade students reported higher levels of all defending behaviors compared to middle school students. Additionally, Figure 2 visually demonstrates a substantial decrease in defending from fourth grade to sixth grade. A possible explanation for the rapid decrease from late elementary to middle school may be related to other well-documented changes during middle school. Adolescence is a time where youth increasingly turn to peers for social support, feedback, and information about their social standing (Furman and Buhrmester 1992). Adolescents may engage in less defending during this time because they do not want to be perceived as "different" or task other social risks that may negatively impact their social relationships during this time. It is unfortunate that defending decreasing in middle school because victimization typically reaches its peak in middle school. At the time when youth engage in the most victimization, there is a corresponding dip in defending behaviors. Future research should examine interventions for increasing defending behaviors during this critical developmental time period.

4.1 Future Research

This study found the most frequent form of defending among third to eighth graders is helping, followed by confronting, the reporting. Additionally, third, fourth, and fifth graders reported that they defend their peers more than sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. However, this does not explain why students engage in defending. There are many individual characteristics could account for defending behavior, such as social status, interpersonal skills, empathy, and perceived social support. Evaluating which of these characteristics defenders do and do not have may help researchers to have a better understanding of factors that inhibit defending behaviors. For example, empathy seems to be a key predictor in defending behavior (Nickerson et al. 2008), but there are other skills that likely need to be in place before a student would defend.

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