



Bullying behaviours at preschool age: Does it matter?

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Introduction

- ◆ Bullying is defined as a deliberate, repeated or long-term exposure to negative acts performed by a person or group of persons who are considered of higher status or greater strength than the victim (Olweus, 1993).
- ◆ Many researchers divide bullying into three categories: physical, verbal and psychological. Due and colleagues (2005) identify verbal form of bullying as threats, insults or nicknames, physical form as assault or theft and psychological form as exclusion from the peer group or spreading rumours.
- ◆ The problem of bullying is systemic, extending beyond the bully and victim. Like other forms of aggression, bullying unfolds a set of social contexts: the bully, the victim, the peer group, and the playground or the school environment (O'Connell et al., 1999).
- ◆ According to Bandura (1977), children are more likely to imitate a model when this model (a) is a powerful figure, (b) is rewarded rather than punished for the behaviour, and (c) shares similar characteristics with the child. Additionally, O'Connell et al. (1999) sustain that in the case of a bullying episode, peers who are present usually observe the bully as a powerful figure who is seldom punished for the aggressive behaviour.
- ◆ Children with specific behaviours select and create environments that promote and maintain their behaviour (Scholte et al., 2007). For example, bullies may affiliate with children who are similarly aggressive, while victims are more likely to have friends who are less accepted by peers or who themselves are victimized.
- ◆ Although nowadays bullying episodes increase among children, studies usually focus on school-age children whereas limited studies are conducted on preschoolers.

Aim of the study

- ➔ The present study aimed to investigate bullying behaviours among Greek preschoolers, specifically: a) the frequency of occurrence of such behaviours, b) the types of bullying among this population and c) some behavioural characteristics of the bullies.

Method

Participants

- ◆ 200 mothers of preschool children (108 boys and 92 girls), (mean age=68.1 months, SD =10.1), enrolled in kindergartens in Athens.

Measures

- ◆ The questionnaire is conducted by the authors, for the investigation of several forms of bullying behaviour. It is consisted of 28 items, some of which are multiple choice questions and the rest are of alternative answer (yes/no).

Procedure

- ◆ The questionnaires were distributed at the children's nursery schools and kindergartens and were completed individually at home by the children's mothers.

Results

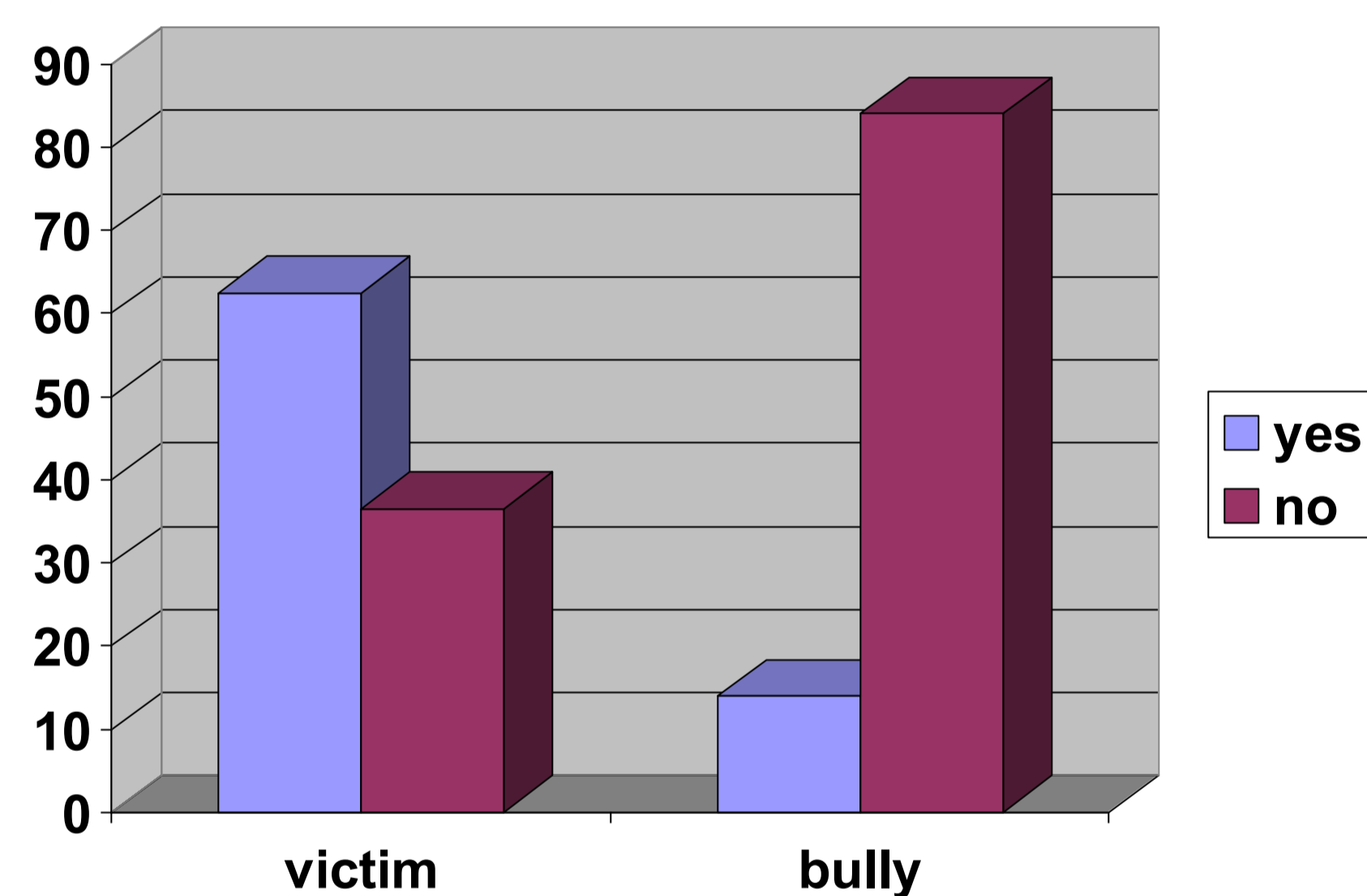


Figure 1. Percentage of preschoolers that are being bullied and of those that bully other children.

Figure 1 shows that almost 60% of the preschoolers in Greece have suffered some form of bullying in the school environment, while approximately 14% of the children have been reported as bullies.

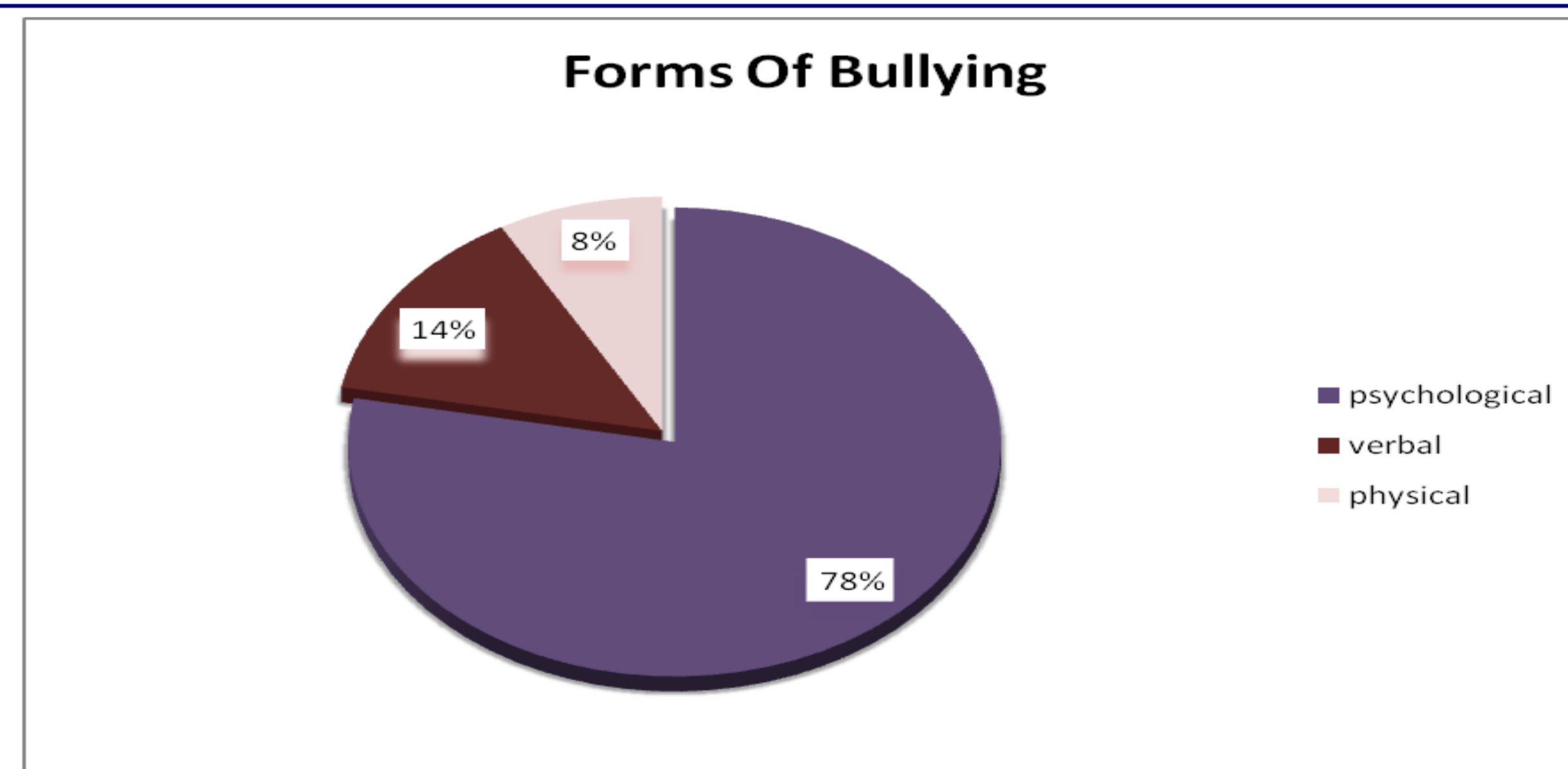


Figure 2. The different forms of bullying behavior among preschoolers.

It is clear from Figure 2 that the most common form of bullying behaviour among preschoolers is the psychological one (78%), while verbal (14%) and physical (8%) follow. This is in contrast with previous research which state that the most common form of bullying in younger children is either verbal, (Forero et al., 1999) or physical (Kumpulainen et al., 1998).

Table 1. The relationship between hyperactivity and bullying behaviours.

		Bullying behaviours (%)		
Hyperactivity (%)		Yes	No	Total
	Yes	75	25	100
No	36.5	63.5	100	
Total	14.5	85.5	100	

$$\chi^2=12,94, p=.002$$

As we can see in Table 1, bullies were found to exhibit higher levels of hyperactivity (75%) compared to their classmates, agreeing with previous research (Bosworth et al, 1999; Kumpulainen et al., 1998).

Table 2. The relationship between attention problems and bullying behaviours

		Bullying behaviours(%)		
Attention problems (%)		Yes	No	Total
	No	9.7	90.3	100
Yes	23.7	76.3	100	
Total	14.5	85.5	100	

$$\chi^2=6,1, p=.01$$

As shown in Table 2, bullies were more likely to face attention problems compared to non-bullies, confirming partly Lagerspetz and colleagues (1982 in Kumpulainen et al., 1998) who found this characteristic only for male bullies.

Discussion

- ◆ Being continuously involved in bullying in primary school may leave children, either bullies or victims, without positive social experiences, restraining the possession of prosocial and fostering social skills deficits. These children do not learn how to adequately respond in social interactions and may become prone to social adjustment problems later in life (Scholte et al, 2007).
- ◆ Additionally, Emond and colleagues (2007) state that early bullying predicts the development of later aggressive conduct disorder (ACD). While research with young children is limited, bullying in primary school shows continuity into adolescence and is recognized as an early indicator of persistent conduct problems. Our survey indicates that parents seem to be able to acknowledge bullying/victimization behaviours during the preschool years, a crucial period which apparently serves to our understanding of bullying onset.
- ◆ Moreover, our survey indicates that bullies at preschool age demonstrate some special characteristics in their behaviour, such as attention problems and hyperactivity, which can lead to the existence of a disorder like ADHD, which in turn could explain their aggressive behaviour.
- ◆ Another possible cause for bullying is a child's social environment. Banks (1997) refers to different studies indicating that bullies often come from homes where physical punishment is used, the children are taught to strike back physically as a way to handle problems, and parental involvement and warmth are frequently lacking.
- ◆ In conclusion, bullying at this age probably exists due to specific causes and it is not accidental. If parents can successfully detect bullying behaviours among preschoolers, as it is shown in our survey, it would be useful for them to be informed for the possibility of the co-existence of a developmental disorder, like ADHD, as well as for the extent of the consequences of their behaviour at home.
- ◆ Finally, even school staff can be assisted by given the appropriate information about the causes of bullying and how to successfully cope with it.

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