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# "That Could Be Me Squishing Chips on Someone's Car." How Friends Can Positively Influence Bullying Behaviors

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**Abstract** Semi-structured one-on-one interviews with a purposive sample of 51 grade 7 students (12 years old) who reported bullying others explored what might encourage students to stop bullying others. The theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism, in particular the development of self and definition of the situation, were used to inform this study. Dissonance theory was used to understand how students felt about their bullying behaviors. The theme of *peer group* emerged as an influence when considering desisting bullying others. Feelings of dissonance reinforced by peers and the need to be accepted by peers facilitated positive changes if significant peers disapproved of bullying. Some students changed friendship groups to move away from negative situations, representing significant development of self. School-based programs can work to enhance the positive influence of prosocial students, to focus on the development of self, and to reduce the social status achieved by some through bullying others.

**Keywords** Peers · Schools · Children · Bullying · Health promotion

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## Introduction

Bullying is a concerning issue for school-aged children and adolescents, with a recent Australian study finding that 6.1 and 28.7% of grade 6 (10–11 years of age) students report bullying others regularly (every few weeks or more often) and occasionally (at least once a term), respectively (Burns et al. 2008). When considering bullying prevention interventions, it is important to recognize the complexity of bullying behavior and acknowledge the socioecological influences of this bullying. Perhaps one of the most influential of these socioecological factors is the peer group. The peer group becomes a particularly salient influence in bullying behaviors around middle primary school (Stauffacher and DeHart 2006) and continues to be very influential through secondary school (Owens et al. 2000b).

The importance of peer ecology in bullying behaviors has been widely discussed in the literature

(Atlas and Pepler 1998; Craig et al. 2000; Rodkin 2004; Rodkin et al. 2006). It is now recognized that bullying is not just restricted to the conflictual dyadic relationship between those who bully and/or who are victimized but is an aspect of group process that is closely associated with the group dynamics of peer relationships (Gini 2006a, b; Gini et al. 2008; Salmivalli et al. 1996; Sutton and Smith 1999).

There is considerable debate in the literature about the popularity and social skills of students who bully others and how these attributes relate to the peer group. Some research suggests that aggression and bullying are associated with social information processing and social skills deficits (Crick and Dodge 1996, 1999; Crick et al. 2002). Others have found aggressive children to have less effective and more disruptive communication strategies than non-aggressive children (Austin and Joseph 1996), to have lower levels of prosocial behavior than other children (Veenstra et al. 2005), and for aggressive boys to participate in more intense negative conflicts with their friends than non-aggressive boys (Bagwell and Coie 2004). These traits have been found to contribute to peer rejection from the broader peer network (Crick and Dodge 1996, 1999; Crick et al. 2002) and may in turn encourage socialization with other aggressive children (Salmivalli et al. 1997).

However, this is not true for all aggressive students. Some students who bully are disliked but not always marginalized (Bukowski 2003; Estell et al. 2007; Gini et al. 2008; Veenstra et al. 2005), and there is evidence that some of these individuals are socially integrated and perceived to be popular students. One study found "tough" (aggressive with average popularity) third grade girls were held in high status by their peers in some ways. These girls were not socially marginalized and were well integrated into the social ecology of their class and school; however, they were disliked by most of their classmates (Estell et al. 2007). Similarly, fourth and fifth grade students nominated popular–aggressive (tough) students to be among the coolest kids in the classroom (Rodkin et al. 2006). Prinstein and Cillessen (2003) considered that being popular and being perceived to be popular are different phenomena. Considering this phenomenon, being liked occurs at the dyadic level while the perception that someone is popular occurs at the group level (Prinstein and Cillessen 2003). In her research with school aged girls, Eder (1985) suggested popular

students are concerned about friendships with less popular students as this may influence their own popularity.

Regardless of these phenomena, students who bully benefit from their group affiliations (Bukowski 2003) and have been found to be leaders of groups (Estell et al. 2007). Though homophily theory suggests that like students attract (Espelage et al. 2003; Espelage and Swearer 2003; Pellegrini et al. 1999) and aggressive children, including students who bully others, are more likely to have friends who have similar characteristics (Bagwell and Coie 2004; Cairns et al. 1988; Pellegrini et al. 1999; Rodkin 2004), others suggest aggressive students also form groups with non-aggressive peers (Estell et al. 2007; Estell et al. 2008), suggesting groups are likely to be comprised of students who do and do not bully others.

Social power, group status, and reputational support in addition to other group mechanisms such as social contagion, imitation, support for group norms, and diffusion of responsibility have been found to influence bullying behaviors or to facilitate the approval of bullying behaviors of others (Gini 2006a; Rodkin et al. 2006). The importance of social status should not be ignored. Though social status has undeniable intrinsic rewards, and social position in the school and class has been found to contribute to better mental health (Ostberg 2003), it is important that this status is achieved through positive rather than negative behaviors. It is evident that bullying behaviors can contribute to social status in the group and broader peer network through dominance and social superiority. This position is often maintained through the demotion of others (Farmer 2000; Hawley 2003; Salmivalli et al. 1997). Adler and Adler, who have studied the peer group ecology extensively, suggested that popular students who are group leaders have the power to promote and demote students as they please (Adler et al. 1992; Adler and Adler 1995, 1998). Salmivalli (2010) suggested it is usually the group who assigns status to members, making students who bully dependent on those within their peer group to achieve status.

Friendship networks play a vital role during late childhood and early adolescence. The nature of friendships, participation in friendships, level and type of activity, and sense of self of an individual are usually associated with friendship networks

(Adler and Adler 1995). Friendships within the peer group and the influence on bullying behaviors will be explored in this study.

Although there is a body of research about peer group ecology and the relationship to bullying, most studies have used third-person accounts of bullying behaviors—for example, hypothetical scenarios (Gini et al. 2008) and discussions about the behavior of others (Owens et al. 2005; Owens et al. 2000a)—as opposed to discussing personal bullying behaviors with students. Moreover, others have highlighted the need for research that explores the support of the peer ecology for those who bully others (Rodkin et al. 2006). The importance of discussing these issues with those students who currently bully others or who have done so in the recent past will inform the development of relevant strategies to positively utilize the influence of the peer group and, in particular, address how friendship networks positively work to help students stop bullying others. This paper discusses the research question: How do friends influence the desistance of bullying in upper primary school aged students? Specifically, the influence of the evolution of bullying behaviors and how this influences friendship networks will be explored.

The influence of friends in the desistance of bullying is explored using symbolic interactionism, which offers a complementary theoretical framework with additional constructs such as the effect of labeling (Becker 1963), the development and understanding of deviance, and the development of self, which are highly relevant to bullying (Denzin 1974; Rubington and Weinberg 1987). Symbolic interaction also offers substantial theoretical depth in understanding and explaining the interaction between the environment, society, and the individual; how they define the situations they are in based upon interaction; and the development and presentation of the individual's self (Blumer 1969; Charon 2001; Goffman 1959; Reynolds 1993). Using this theory, the self is a continuously changing object that may vary in different situations and is influenced by the social interaction that takes place on a continuing basis with other people (Charon 2001). The ability to view self objectively—to get outside one's self and take the perspective of another; that is, taking the role of others—is especially important (Charon 2001; Mead 1934). Mead (1934) suggests the ability to take the role of others is how self emerges. In particular,

the development of new self-image is important if the children in this study have changed their self-identity from that of being a bully to being a non-bully (Ebaugh 1988; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Reynolds 1993; Schouten 1991; Silver 1996; Strauss 1962; Stryker and Statham 1985).

Dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) is also used as a theoretical framework for this study. The extent to which cognitions of self influence dissonance and a possible change of behavior depends on the type of self-attributes and self-standards that are considered when engaging in a dissonance-arousing behavior. In addition, the more positive self-attributes people have, the less they need to rely on self-justification to resolve behavioral discrepancies (Stone and Cooper 2003).

Social cognitive theory identifies moral disengagement as a cognitive process that allows a person to justify and rationalize their negative actions. For many people, actions are guided by feelings of guilt and shame; however, in the case of moral disengagement, moral control is not activated. Individuals who engage in moral disengagement use practices such as moral justification, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling to justify their actions. Diffusion of responsibility also occurs through actions such as blaming others (Bandura 1986, 1999). Others have found high levels of moral disengagement among school students who bully (Gini 2006b) and among students who display high levels of peer aggression (Pornari and Wood 2010). These students use moral disengagement mechanisms to justify and rationalize their behaviors (Pornari and Wood 2010).

## Methods

Fifty-one grade 7 students (12 years of age) from 15 primary schools in the Perth metropolitan area in Western Australia were purposively selected to participate in this study. These students participated in high-, moderate-, and low-intervention schools from the three-year group-randomized control trial Friendly Schools, Friendly Families (FSFF) bullying intervention research project.

The intervention included the development and implementation of a high-, moderate-, and low-intensity whole-school bullying prevention intervention designed to assess the impact of varying levels of

**Table 1** Friendly Schools, Friendly Families Intervention Summary

| Intervention strategy | High intervention | Moderate intervention | Low intervention |
|---|---|---|---|
| Whole-school manual | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ |
| Baseline data collection report to schools | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ |
| K-7 teacher's manuals | ✔ | ✔ | |
| Learning activities | ✔ | ✔ | |
| Newsletter items | ✔ | ✔ | |
| Project team training | ✔ | ✔ | |
| Whole-school training | ✔ | ✔ | |
| Project coordinator file | ✔ | ✔ | |
| Follow-up project team training | ✔ | | |
| Assembly items | ✔ | | |
| Family communication & activity sheets | ✔ | | |
| Parent presentation | ✔ | | |
| Capacity building strategies | ✔ | | |

intervention and support; for example, although all levels of intervention received a whole-school manual, the manuals varied according to the criteria established for each condition as shown in Table 1. The high intervention included all strategies including capacity building and parent/caregiver involvement. The moderate intervention received professional development for teachers and committee members, and like the high-intervention groups, they were also provided with support, curricular materials, and ideas for whole-school activities. The low-intervention groups received an abridged version of the whole-school manual but were provided with no professional development or ongoing support.

The sample for this study was purposively and randomly selected to ensure approximately similar numbers of students from each intervention condition. Of the 51 students who participated in the qualitative study, 14 were from high-, 22 from moderate-, and 15 from low-intervention schools. The students who were selected to participate in this qualitative component of the study had been involved in almost two years of the FSFF project intervention prior to the qualitative data collection. Quantitative data describing students' self-reported bullying behavior at baseline were used to identify and recruit students for this qualitative study. Bullying behavior was identified by the questionnaire item "how often have you bullied others during this term," adapted from the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus 1996). Students who reported bullying

regularly responded "almost every day," "most days," "once a week," or "every few weeks" when asked how often they bullied other students during this term. Those who reported to bully occasionally responded with "once or twice" to this question.

Of those interviewed, 11 (21.6%) students reported bullying others regularly (every few weeks or more often), 35 (68.6%) reported bullying others occasionally (at least once a term), and 5 (9.8%) reported not bullying when they completed the quantitative questionnaire at baseline. The interviewed group consisted of 31 (60.8%) boys and 20 (39.2%) girls. At posttest, those who participated in the interviews were less likely to report bullying regularly ($n = 7$) or occasionally ($n = 25$) and more likely to report not bullying ($n = 19$) compared to baseline data.

No statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$) were found between the moderating (i.e., intervention level, gender, school size, socioeconomic status), mediating (i.e., been bullied, pro victim score, attitudes towards bullying, peer support, number of good friends, social and emotional health), and contextual (i.e., feel at school, feel at playtime, feel safe at school) variables investigated in the quantitative component of this study among the students in the grade 6–7 study cohort who reported bullying others and the students involved in this qualitative study.

Students participated in a 40-min semi-structured face-to-face interview with the lead author of this paper on school premises during class time. The interviewer

was not involved with implementing the intervention at the school level, hence was not known to the participants. A semi-structured interview guide was developed and tested with two 12-year-old students prior to administration. The interview questions were modified slightly, as more targeted data were required (Minichiello et al. 1995; Strauss and Corbin 1990). The interview commenced with some introductory questions about what students liked doing before moving onto questions about self. A short vignette was then used to facilitate initial discussion about bullying behaviors. Vignettes used gender-specific names for boys and girls to reflect peer group structures at this age (Rodkin 2004). The vignette used for girls substituted the name Tony with Holly and Sam with Suzie:

> Tony is in year 7 and has a close group of friends. However, one Monday morning, things seemed to change. His group of friends seemed unfriendly and abrupt. He tries to catch the eye of his friend Sam, but Sam avoids his gaze. At recess time, he joins his friends late and arrives just in time to hear one of his friends saying something nasty about him. Later that day, the class is playing basketball in phys ed. While the teacher isn't looking, Tony's "friend" Sam hits him in the arm, causing a huge bruise. ("Phys ed" refers to physical education classes.)

The vignette allowed students the opportunity to discuss bullying behaviors from the perspectives of the characters in the vignette. Students were encouraged to make comments about how the aggressive behaviors described in the vignette relate to bullying. Some questions included "what do you think other kids in his class would think about what Sam was doing to Tony," "what do you think might make kids like Sam stop bullying Tony," and "have you ever thought about doing anything like what Sam has done? (Tell me about it.)" Students were asked to define bullying, and the popular definition of bullying developed by Olweus (Olweus 1996; Solberg and Olweus 2003), which is considered the most accepted definition of bullying worldwide (Theriot et al. 2005), was discussed if necessary. Particularly, the repetitive nature of bullying and the power imbalance associated with bullying behaviors was discussed to ensure students reflected on bullying rather than a single aggressive incident. Discussion then moved to a focus on bullying in the third person with questions such as "have you ever heard anyone say something like this," "do you think it is important for some kids to bully others," and "have you ever thought about bullying others" before moving onto discussing bullying in the first person, for example, "have you ever said anything nasty about someone to make other kids not like them."

Data Presentation

Because data were collected from students who had been involved in a 2-year bullying prevention program, it was important to identify the level of intervention their school implemented and the levels of self-reported bullying and of being bullied. These qualitative data are not able to be used to discuss the effectiveness of the intervention; they do, however, add to the richness of the theory development, and findings will be useful for future intervention studies.

All students in the study were allocated a pseudonym. Data were presented with the student "name" followed by the level of intervention, self-reported bullying, and/or victimization in parentheses. Self-reported bullying of others and experiences of being bullied from the quantitative data were collected from students at baseline, posttest 1, and posttest 2. The level of bullying reported in the qualitative study reflected changes in behaviors over these data collection periods. For example, if a student reported bullying regularly at baseline, occasionally at posttest 1, and not at all at posttest 2, these data were presented as *(regular—occasional—no bully)*. If the student reported no changes or changes at only one collection point, data were presented as *(regular bully)* or *(regular—occasional bully)*, respectively. Therefore, all quotes were accompanied with a short student profile, for example: *Emily (moderate intervention, occasional—regular—occasional bully, occasional—no bullied).*

Data Analysis

The theoretical perspectives of symbolic interaction—in particular, definition of the situation (Becker 1963) and the development of self (Denzin 1974; Rubington and Weinberg 1987)—informed the data analysis. Data were coded and placed in categories that emerged from these data and those derived from

the literature. Data management of full transcripts and other relevant text was facilitated by the NUD.IST software package QSR N5 (QSR International 2000). For each participant, themes that emerged in the third and first person were compared (Glaser 1992). Inconsistencies in concepts throughout the interview were also recorded and included as notations in NUD.IST.

A grounded theory approach was used to code themes that emerged from these data (Becker 1998; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Silverman et al. 1990). Coding was conducted on the basis of context. As theme nodes emerged, they were cross-referenced. Ten key tree nodes emerged from the original 64 tree nodes and 17 free nodes. Saturation was achieved (Glaser 1992) for the key themes. Grounded theory, particularly that described by Strauss, aims to make theoretical assertions that can be tested and verified and is therefore deductive as well as inductive. This systematic approach, in addition to use of working hypotheses, emphasizes the links to the quantitative paradigm (Bluff 2005). Glaser (1992) suggested grounded theory should explain the major variations in behavior with respect to processing the main concerns and ideas of the subjects. As is consistent with these recommendations, theory was modified as new data presented variations in emergent properties and categories.

The interview process was consistent with good practice for interviewing children and young adolescents, which achieved credibility for these data (Wilson and Powell 2001). Comparison of data with the vignette and third-person accounts provided rich data ensuring transferability (Bryman 2004). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed by the lead author against the original tape and field notes within a week of the interview in order to maintain dependability (Bryman 2004). To reduce bias and to enhance conformability, the coding and themes were analyzed by the research group (Wills et al. 2006). The research protocol, interview guide, and consent procedures were approved by the Curtin University of Technology Human Research and Ethics Committee.

## Results

A range of questions were asked in the third and first person to explore why students stop bullying others.
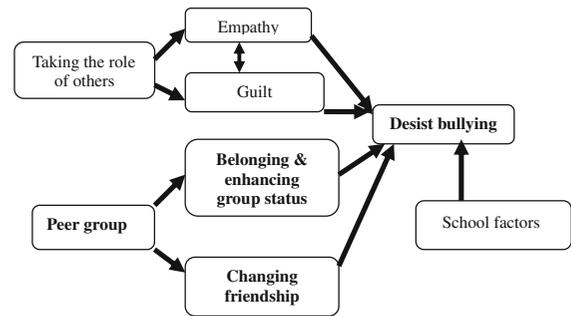


Themes in bold are discussed in this paper

**Fig. 1** Factors influencing the desistance of bullying

Peer group, taking the role of others, and school factors emerged as key themes when students in this study discussed why they or others would desist bullying. Figure 1 describes these themes in more detail. This paper will describe how the peer group can influence the desistance of bullying. This study found no difference in the themes that emerged in relation to the influence of peers in the desistance of bullying by intervention group. Almost all students in this study discussed having a group of close friends. At baseline (quantitative survey), 49 of these participants reported having two or three or more close friends.

Results of this study found if friends were supportive of bullying behaviors, students were unlikely to stop. Conversely, many students suggested that friends may not be supportive, and this would encourage students to consider stopping bullying others. Some students in this study made the decision to change friendship groups because they recognized the negative influence their friends were having on their behavior (Fig. 2).
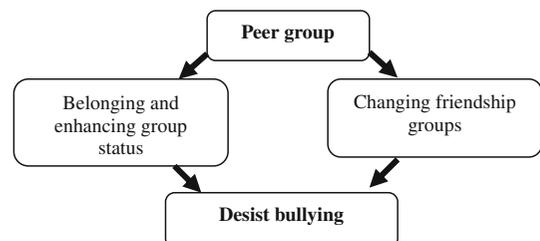


**Fig. 2** Peer group as an influence on the desistance of bullying others

## Belonging and Enhancing Group Status

Almost all students in this study suggested that, at least some of the time, when they bullied others, it was with their friends. However, friends were also influential in desisting bullying behaviors. Campbell's response provides an example:

> Um, like if their friends come up to them and go 'oh, it's like enough that what you're doin' to him' and 'stop it, else you won't have any friends'. (Campbell, male, moderate intervention, occasional bully, occasionally bullied).

Later in the interview, Campbell discussed a personal situation where he had teased and ignored one of his friends. He found the person he was teasing told others, and Campbell found he was excluded from the friendship group. This made him consider his behavior and was the main reason he stopped picking on the other child. Like Campbell, other students also discussed issues of social exclusion that made them consider their behavior. This is reflected in his comments: "Um he was just like telling people not to like me and stuff because like we'd had a falling out and he didn't like me very much so he was telling other people not to like me." Campbell indicated that he stopped his bullying behavior because "like all my friends just go 'don't do it anymore' so I didn't."

However, some students suggested the support of friends may not always be enough to stop the bullying behavior. For example, Chelsea suggested that some of her group of friends bullied others; she had made an effort to try to get them to stop, but they continued their behavior:

> Yeah I reckon they're [kids who bully] just full of themselves and I think that kids that do get bullied are like…. I feel sorry for the kids who do get bullied. I don't get bullied but the kids who bully other children are self-centered. I have to admit I have got friends who do bully other kids…and I told them to stop and stuff but they just keep on doing it…. Yeah, they just do it for the fun of it. (Chelsea, female, moderate intervention, occasional—no—occasional bully, occasional—no bullied).

Her comments indirectly support the theory that proactive aggressive children are more likely to exhibit deficiencies in goal clarification (step three of the social information processing model, Crick and Dodge 1996), which increases the likelihood that they will use aggressive behavior during peer interactions. These children appear to be less concerned about relationship enhancing goals and prefer goals that are instrumental and self-enhancing (Crick and Dodge 1996). This is reflected in Chelsea's comments that these students are "self-centered." Finding bullying "fun" may also suggest a preference for instrumental goals (Crick and Dodge 1996) and supports the suggestion bullying is fun for some students. These comments also reinforce the difficulty of one member of the peer group trying to change the established behavior of several others within the group. The importance of remaining in the group, especially if part of a popular group or clique, is well recognized. Others have found maintaining membership, especially within a popular group, requires effort (Adler and Adler 1998) and may depend on one's behavior within the group and with others (Adler and Adler 1998; Eder 1985, 1995).

Similarly, Paul suggested that both he and his friends bullied others sometimes, though he had tried to talk to them if they got "too nasty." This suggests there is a level at which bullying becomes unacceptable, although the threshold varies for individuals and groups. However, despite this, his friends continued to bully. Although students like Chelsea and Paul disapproved of some of the behaviors of their friends, it is likely this disapproval did not create enough dissonance for them to consider changing friends. This reinforces the power of the friendship group for students of this age and the potential for peer relationships to become unsettled, with individuals within the group being targeted to achieve group conformity.

> Um, if they get too nasty I'll tell 'em to stop. But otherwise if like I say something sometimes they'll laugh at me as well. (Paul, male, low intervention, occasional—regular bully, occasional—regular bullied).

A number of students justified their own bullying by suggesting that, though they did bully, they did not go too far or get too nasty, which may suggest consonance (Festinger 1962). A few suggested they just bullied enough so the person being bullied "learnt their [sic] lesson," which is consistent with moral

disengagement practices that enable the individual to cognitively reconstruct an undesirable behavior into a good behavior (Bandura 1999). These students presented themselves as authorative, respected figures that were empathetic and were acting for the good of the student being bullied. They justified their behavior by implying their bullying was not serious. In doing this, they suggested that while some bullying was acceptable and may enhance status and power, too much bullying was seen to be socially undesirable behavior. These statements suggest a threshold effect exists among some students who bully others. This threshold may also be associated with stereotypes, which are influenced by the peer group, as to what is okay and what is not as is reflected by Adam and Alex's comments below. In developing these stereotypes, students who bully others may be placing the blame on the student being bullied, which is also a construct of moral disengagement (Bandura 1999). In some instances, those being bullied may also be placing the blame on themselves.

> Probably push him, or something…twice or something. (Adam, male, high intervention, regular—no bully, occasional—no bullied).
> Cos, like I don't beat people up until like they hurt, however I just make them learn their lesson like… (Alex, male, low intervention, regular bully, regular—no bullied).

Reflecting the need to appear socially desirable, Alex suggested he and his friends did not bully as much anymore because "[bullying] kinda like got boring" (Alex, male, low intervention, regular bully, regular–no bullied). Despite this, Alex reported bullying regularly at posttest 2.

Creating a threshold for the act of bullying may be a way for some students to achieve their goals and avoid feelings of dissonance (Festinger 1962). In doing this, like Alex, they can achieve power over the student they bully while convincing themselves their behavior is acceptable. According to Mead (1934), people actively perceive, define, and manipulate their environment in order to achieve their goals. The ability to manipulate is also associated with theory of mind (Sutton et al. 1999). These students described bullying to achieve their goal—that is, to assert their dominance over the person being bullied—while maintaining their sense of consonance (Festinger 1962). They used moral disengagement mechanisms

such as moral justification, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling to justify their behavior (Bandura 1999).

## Changing Friendship Groups

Several students, both boys and girls, personally discussed changing friendship groups because they realized that if they stayed with that group, they would continue to get into trouble. The ability to recognize the influence of friends and the move to change friendship groups represents a significant development of self. Students who reported changing friendship groups discussed having a good circle of close friends at the time of the interview. The social interaction with others, especially with significant others such as friends, helps in the definition of the situation and ultimately the development of self (Mead 1934). Although some students had actually changed their friends, others like Alex recognized the negative influence of their friends but had not changed groups. This is not surprising given the power of the peer group and the significance of friendship networks during this formative period of life.

> Umm…maybe change my friends so I make better friends, so I don't get in trouble with my other friends and stuff. I can make new friends that won't be in the wrong or do anything to ruin our friendship. (Alex, male, low intervention, regular bully, regular—no bullied).

In comparison, Anthony discussed the benefits of moving away from friends who were a negative influence:

> You just learn your lesson because I had to get a note home. That was when I was hanging out with Kurt (my other friend) and ever since I've stopped hanging out with him I've noticed that I haven't got in trouble like a lot. I've hardly got in trouble because I'm hanging out with my other friend who makes me feel good about who I am and like how I do things and everything. (Anthony, male, moderate intervention, occasional—no bully, no—occasional bullied).

When questioned as to whether hanging out with Kurt had gotten him into trouble, Anthony responded with:

I don't really know, but I think like he influenced me to do stuff. I saw him at the shops one day and he was there and he was with this other friend, and I thought if I was with him that day that would be me squishing hot chips on people's car windows. And I thought oh, if I was with him then I wouldn't have got Prefect. I wouldn't have done all those things I have done now and I'd be squishing chips on car windows; and I wouldn't have that bond with Mum and Dad and my other friends.

Although Anthony had reported only bullying occasionally at baseline in the quantitative study, his discussion during the interview indicated that he bullied more regularly in the past. This discussion reflects a significant shift in how Anthony viewed his old friend and how these feelings had altered his self-perception. The ability to recognize that their current friendship group is a negative influence shows good self-perception in that these students are able to recognize the influence of friends, understand their relationship with their friends in a specific situation, and understand their own actions in the situation. These perceptions allow for the development of self-concept, including self-judgment and identity (Charon 2001).

Adam indicated that he had changed his group of friends because they were always being stupid. The members of this group were also mean to each other. They did not do much except sit around at recess and lunch time. His new group of friends played basketball during breaks at school. He talked about his old group of friends whom he no longer hung out with:

That group's all split up, you see when they're together they're bad and when they're apart they're really good friends, it's just when they're put themselves together. And like this Damien person is like one of my best friends, when he's around them he turns on me. (Adam, male, high intervention, regular—no bully, occasional—no bullied).

When Adam was asked why Damien was nasty to him in front of the other kids in the group, he felt Damien behaved this way to make himself look good in front of the others. Damien may have acted in this manner to enhance his status within the group. Similarly, Paige indicated that she had made new friends because:

Well this girl, she was my friend, she was in my class in year six and she stole from the teacher's desk, stole stickers and stuff. So I'm not friends with her anymore. I've made new friends. I told her I couldn't be her friend because I don't want to get in trouble with her anymore, so I've made new friends from year six. (Paige, female, low intervention, occasional—never bully, occasional—regular bullied).

Paige's formal split from her friend demonstrated her sense of self was such that she felt confident moving away from her friend. Her actions also show good cognitive development, especially in relation to goal setting and attainment. Whereas several students discussed moving away from the group of friends who were bullying as a way to stop their bullying, Justin stopped his bullying by becoming friends with the person who was provoking him. When discussing one of his experiences, Justin indicated that his mother had talked to him about the situation, and this had made him think about what he was doing. Justin was bullying as a form of retaliation. After talking with his mother, he decided to make friends with the friends of the child doing the bullying:

I was being teased a lot by three people. So I made friends with two people (who were teasing me) who were really just following the first person. Then he just realized oh, I've been a real idiot, I haven't really been very nice to you. (Justin, male, moderate intervention, regular—occasional—no bully, occasional bullied).

Justin's comments show signs of dissonance and a range of emotions including feelings of guilt and empathy. Guilt is considered a reflexive role-taking emotion that is directed towards oneself while empathetic role-taking emotions are evoked by mentally placing oneself in another's position and experiencing how they would feel. Empathy ties the individual, at least momentarily, to that person (Shott 1979). The recognition that friends are an influence on bullying behavior provides an example of a complex social interaction. Justin's actions show good social and communication skills. Symbolic interaction theory recognizes that individuals are influenced by action that unfolds over time as they try out acts in different situations then interpret their definition of what significant others do (Charon

2001). Justin demonstrated the ability to define the situation in this process to try different strategies. Ultimately, he was able to see the most positive strategy was to make friends with two of the students who were teasing him. His actions demonstrated he had the social skills, communication skills, and self-concept to be able to act and interpret situations effectively and to his benefit. Other students who changed friendship groups also were able to define the situation and assess their options. These students determined that the most beneficial action in their cases was to change their group of friends. School or home factors may have also influenced their decision making. For example, some students discussed getting into trouble at school as being a motivator for changing friends, whereas others had discussed the issue with parents.

## Discussion

This study found that peers and especially friendship networks within groups were influential in desisting bullying. Social norms and the need to conform to the peer group were influential. However, for students who desisted bullying, this was a positive influence; that is, their peer group encouraged them to stop their bullying behavior. Some students recognized the negative influence of peers, and for some, this encouraged them to change friendship groups. One of the constructs of social cognitive theory suggests that individuals are most likely to model behavior of others with whom they identify (Bandura 1986). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the individual's perception of other people's judgment is significant in the development of self concept (Cooley 1970). Furthermore, children and adolescents appear to be influenced by what peers in their current friendship group do more than by their own previous behavior (Salmivalli et al. 1998). Within-group norms have been found to influence support for bullying, specific bullying behaviors, and presence while bullying happens (Duffy and Nesdale 2009). The pressure to conform to the group is also considered important for maintaining and enhancing group membership (Adler and Adler 1998). Consistent with these theories, friends played an important role in influencing bullying behavior in this study. If friends did not support the bullying, then students

were more likely to stop. Friends were also found to help a few students who bully with behavior management problems such as anger. This support of friends made these students think about their behavior and, for some, helped them desist.

Some students changed friendship groups to facilitate their own desistance of bullying. These students recognized their friends were a bad influence and changed their friendship group, which represents a significant development of self (Mead 1934). Both boys and girls in this study reported changing friendship groups, which suggests that at 12 years of age, some students showed considerable maturity and insight. Given the salience of the peer group for students this age (Rodkin 2004; Rodkin et al. 2006), this was likely to be a difficult decision. These students discussed positive changes in their bullying behaviors when they moved friendship groups. A few students acknowledged the negative influence of friends but had not changed groups, reinforcing the difficulty this poses for some children this age.

Students who changed friendship groups did so because their goals could not be met by remaining with this group. These students wanted to get better grades at school, to not get into trouble, and/or wanted parental and/or teacher approval. For some, the acknowledgement that this was their last year of primary school and the desire to achieve well academically and socially contributed to this decision. This behavior represents a significant change to these students' sense of self and enhances their ability to form a new identity, which may be important as they move onto secondary school. Reputation bias is important for peer acceptance (Hymel 1986), and these students may have been aiming to positively change their reputation during this transition period. In doing this, these students showed the ability to view self objectively and to see themselves as others would (Charon 2001; Mead 1934). The strength and importance of the power of the group in initiating, persisting, as well as desisting the bullying of others implies a need to foster membership of positive peer groups and to use the peer group to discourage bullying.

When interpreting these data, several limitations to the study should be considered. As the sample was selected from schools that had already completed a bullying prevention intervention, there is the

possibility that some responses may have been influenced by social desirability, enhanced as a result of the intervention. The inclusion of the vignette and questions that could be answered in the third and first person, a funneling repeat method of interviewing designed to put students at ease, and re-asking similar questions in different ways were adopted to address this issue. Students may have become more sensitized to the aims of the study as a result of their involvement. However, collecting data from students who had been involved in high-, moderate-, and low-intervention groups reduces the threat of intervention effect (Bryman 2004). Students who participated in the study were aware the interview was about bullying. Though some knowledge of the topic is essential for ethical reasons, this may also have led the responses (Iphofen 2005). The data analysis method utilized a categorical approach that may have lost some of the contextual relationships that are captured by narrative approaches. Thus, the data analysis process creates a bias in understanding. However, saturation was reached for all of the key themes that emerged from these data.

## Implications for Schools

The power of peers, whether it be in the initiation and persistence of bullying or more positively in the desistance of bullying, as described in this paper, has important implications for school-based programs. The findings of this study highlight the importance of implementing strategies to enhance the positive influence of prosocial students; to focus on the development of self; and, importantly, to reduce the social status achieved by some through bullying others.

Specifically, the positive influence of prosocial peers in encouraging students to desist bullying should be fostered. Schools need to be supported to adopt comprehensive whole-school universal bullying prevention programs with some specific selective and indicated strategies. Where possible, selective strategies to avoid contagion effects (such as grouping of students and targeted activities), should be conducted in the context of the whole classroom to avoid discrimination and further marginalization. Including a mix of four to six prosocial students in a group with one to two antisocial students has been

found to positively influence social and problem-solving skills (Vitaro et al. 1999).

Some students in this study recognized the negative influence their friends had on their behavior and changed friendship groups. Changing friendship groups represented a significant development of self and also a threat to self, as self is defined as an object that is an aspect of mind via projected role taking of others (Mead 1934). Classroom and whole-school strategies that work on development of self have the potential to result in confident students who are better able to consider the influence of their friends and act accordingly. Anthony's comment "that could be me squishing chips on people's cars" highlights the ability of students to recognize the negative influence of peers.

Changing the social status afforded to some students through their bullying behaviors is complex but can be addressed by a range of strategies that work to change whole-school attitudes towards bullying. Dissonance was a key factor in desisting bullying in this study. Classroom activities can provide opportunities for students to explore social processes including modeling of positive social norms, cooperative activities, and empathy (Gini et al. 2008) to enhance feelings of dissonance about bullying behaviors.

Reducing tolerance of bullying among students, teachers, and parents is also of paramount importance in reducing social status afforded to those who bully others. All students need to understand the ramifications of bullying and be encouraged to see they can make a positive difference. The responses of the peer group to bullying as active or passive bystanders can play an influential role in changing attitudes towards bullying in the school. Though research has found students to be generally supportive of those who are bullied (Randall 1995; Rigby and Slee 1991), prosocial students who defend those who are bullied are likely to be well liked and popular (Caravita et al. 2009), and though about half of students in some studies (Rigby 1996) do try to intervene, others remain uninvolved, as they may be fearful of the consequences. Students' involvement can be predicted by the social norms of their peer group (Rigby and Johnson 2006). Some students have been found to support the student(s) who bully either overtly or covertly, as they consider this may be beneficial to their own power and status within the school

community (Burns et al. 2008). Others found bystander involvement was more likely to remove any blame for the behavior from the victim whereas no involvement was more likely to be considered a way of silently colluding with the bully as opposed to a neutral reaction (Gini et al. 2008). Universal programs that focus on the positive influence that active and passive bystanders can have on modeling and rewarding prosocial behaviors need to be implemented. The Finnish bullying prevention program, KiVa, identifies the need to target bystanders. Focusing on changing school and class norms through universal programs is significant in effecting these positive changes. Evaluation of the KiVa program has found increased empathy toward those who are bullied, self-efficacy related to defending bullying, and peer support for those who are bullied (Salmivalli 2010).

The positive rewards in terms of peer group status that bullying provides some students cannot be ignored (Burns et al. 2008). Programs need to address issues of how social status achieved by bullying rewards some students and to disrupt the social dynamics that support these behaviors (Farmer 2000). Normative support for some students who bully others should be further investigated (Rodkin et al. 2006). Strategies within interventions should acknowledge the power of the group and the reputational support provided to some students who bully (Rodkin et al. 2006). If bullying continues to offer intrinsic rewards and feelings of dissonance are not perpetuated, students will continue to seek this power and status. However, the findings of this study suggest that the peer group can positively influence the bullying behaviours of some students and hence work to effect positive changes within the school community. Modifying the attitudes of some key students within the peer group is likely to affect normative changes to others. Influential students within the school community have an important positive role to play in positively changing the school ethos and ultimately reducing bullying.

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