

Bullying in 11-12-year-old preadolescents with a poor Theory of Mind

Lars Clemmensen^(1,2) Anja Munkholm^(1,2), Martin Rimvall^(1,2), Charlotte U. Rask⁽³⁾, Mette Væver⁽⁴⁾, Jim Van Os^(5,6), Anne Mette Skovgaard^(1,2), Pia Jeppesen^(1,2),

¹Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Centre, Glostrup, Copenhagen, ²Faculty of Health Science, University of Copenhagen, ³Research Clinic for Functional Disorders and Psychosomatics, Aarhus, DK ⁴Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen ⁵Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, United Kingdom, ⁶Department of Psychiatry and Psychology, Maastricht University Medical Centre, The Netherlands.

Background

Theory of Mind (ToM) is the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others, and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions that are different from one's own. This ability is important for healthy social relations and might be related to bullying. The present study investigates if preadolescents with a poor ToM more often are involved in bullying than others.

Methods

A preliminary, cross-sectional study of a subsample of 779 children (48% boys) investigated as part of the 11-12-year follow-up of a birth cohort of 6090 children born in Copenhagen County (the Copenhagen Child Cohort, CCC2000). Assessments: ToM was assessed using 'The ToM Storybook', poor ToM being defined as a score in the bottom 10%. Bullying was assessed with The Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire which measures physical, verbal and relational forms of bullying.

Results

Nearly a fourth (24.6%) of the children (N= 192, 95 boys and 97 girls) were involved in bullying, either as bully (N =35, 4.5%), victim (N=117, 15%) or both (N=40, 5%). The mean ToM score was 19.2 (SD 4.3 Range 7-30) with a moderate internal consistency between the 24 questions (Cronbach's alpha = .66). There were no significant gender differences in either bullying or ToM score. Involvement in bullying was significantly more prevalent in the group with a poor ToM (41.9%) than in the remaining sample (22.8%, $\chi^2(1, N=779) = 13.093, p < .001$). Estimates for specificity were high (93%) but low for sensitivity (16%).

Conclusion

Poor ToM is associated with a doubling in the rate of involvement in bullying. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study causality cannot be assessed but the results indicate that children's involvement in bullying may be due in part to a poor ability to correctly interpret another person's intentions or emotions.