

# **KIDSCAPE SURVEY**

## **Long-term Effects of Bullying**

KIDSCAPE children's charity has conducted the first ever retrospective survey of adults to discover if bullying at school affects people in later life. The survey, funded by The National Lottery, shows that being badly bullied as a child has a dramatic, negative, knock-on effect throughout life.

The extensive survey of over 1000 adults, shows that bullying affects not only your self-esteem as an adult, but your ability to make friends, succeed in education, and in work and social relationships. Nearly half (46%) of those who were bullied contemplated suicide compared with only 7% of those who were not bullied. The majority of the adults reported feeling angry and bitter now about the bullying they suffered as children. Most received no help at the time to stop the bullying and telling either made matters worse or had no effect.

### **THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

The questionnaire was devised and refined with help of leading psychologists, teachers, trainers and university professors working in research. Dr. Dan Olweus, Professor of Psychology at The University of Bergen, Norway and the internationally recognised expert in the field of behaviour management and Dr. Kevin Browne, Forensic Psychologist at the University of Birmingham, were consulted.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 set questions, plus open space to reply in a fuller way if the respondent wished. A significant majority added several pages of details about the bullying and how it had affected them. Some of the participants were self selecting, having responded to requests in the broadcast or print media to take part in the survey. Others were randomly selected in the street, in Victoria Coach station and in other public places. In addition to compiling the questionnaire for adults who were bullied as children, a questionnaire for adults who were not bullied was devised as a control to compare the experiences of both groups.

### **RESPONDENTS**

Of the 1044 adults who took part in the survey, 828 were bullied at school; 216 were not.

### **GENDER**

- 70% of the bullied respondents were women; 30% men.
- 49% of the non-bullied respondents were women; 51% men.

The probable explanation of the larger number of females is that the radio and television programmes on which the survey was mentioned took place almost exclusively during the day. Also, it may be that women are more inclined to share emotional experiences than men. It is unlikely that women were bullied more as children than men. Most bully surveys, including several by Kidscape, indicate that boys are more likely to be bullied. So although the survey could be seen to indicate that girls were bullied more in the past, this is unlikely. Therefore the gender of the respondents should not be taken as representative of the total picture of bullying in by gone days,

We attempted to correct the gender response by advertising in magazines which catered for men and mentioning the survey on radio programmes focusing on male interests. This generated at least 100 surveys, but not enough to redress the balance.

## **AGE NOW**

The participants ranged in age from 18 to 81. The majority of the bullied female respondents were between the ages of 28 and 40. The majority of the bullied male respondents were between the ages of 22 and 40.

## **AGE LEAVING SCHOOL**

Of the 828 respondents who were bullied, the overwhelming majority left school at or before the age of 16, many citing the bullying as the main reason they left school. As one 51 year old man said:

*"I left school when I was 14 because I could not face the torture I knew was waiting for me behind the school gates. I used to be physically ill at the thought of going to school, but my Dad would force me out the door. I would get my books and pretend to go to school, but the minute I turned the corner I was off to a secret place I could hide. I spent most days there until they (the bully gang) caught up with me and then I got a good hiding. My Dad said to stand up to them - easier said than done when they were older, stronger and more cunning than me."*

A 37 year old woman wrote:

*"I knew I would die, either at the hands of the bullies or by my own hand. I left school as soon as I could, aged 16. Although I was bright, I left with no qualifications and ended up in a series of dead-end jobs."*

## **FURTHER EDUCATION**

40% of the bullied respondents said that the bullying had affected their plans for further education. Many wrote that they were afraid that the bullying would continue if they continued their education.

A 29 year old man said:

*"The 5th year bullies at my Comprehensive school went to the college where I wanted to study. I didn't have the courage to be at the same place, so I never did do on to further education. I have always regretted not continuing my studies and feel bitter about it. Who knows how my life would have been different if those boys had not been allowed to make my life such an unending misery."*

A 46 year old woman wrote:

*"The girls who were bullying me all went to a local college to study and I was terrified that, if I went, the bullying would just go on and on. I had to get away from them. I had already attempted suicide because of their taunting and I just couldn't face the idea that it would go on and on. Instead I went to work in a store. I worked in several stores and I am still a cashier to this day. I know I should have had more courage, but years of bullying made me think that I was stupid, ugly and would never amount to much. If someone tells you that often enough, you end up believing it. I did."*

## AGE WHEN BULLYING FIRST STARTED

For the overwhelming majority of the bullied respondents, the bullying started between the ages of 7 and 13. The highest peaks seem to correspond with the ages of children entering secondary school, ages of 11 or 12. A significant minority related bullying starting at a very young age - 5 or 6, as soon as they entered primary school.

## WHY THEY THOUGHT THEY WERE BULLIED

Most adults thought they were bullied because they were:

- shy, didn't answer back
- too short or too tall
- good or bad looking
- not interested in or bad at sports
- too sensitive or cried easily
- parents divorced or died or in prison
- too intelligent or too stupid
- a minority race or religion in their school or neighbourhood
- skinny or fat
- talented in music, art or poetry
- too poor or too rich
- posh or 'lower class' accent
- wrong type of clothes

## HOW LONG DID IT GO ON

On average the bullying reported in this survey went on for between 2 and 6 years. Several respondents were bullied throughout their entire school careers (9 to 11 years), making one man, aged 44, comment that he did not know if:

*"I was a natural victim or if I developed a victim mentality from the bullying I experienced. It is true that I was probably not very socially adept to begin with, but 11 years of bullying certainly did nothing to increase my ability to socialise. I suspect that, had the bullying been promptly dealt with when I was 6, I would have been better at relating to people and being social. 11 years of my life were taken away by the bullies - may they rot in hell."*

A 34 year old woman wrote:

*"I was bullied for 4 years by the same group of girls, from the time I started secondary school until they left. They were two years older than me and I wasn't the only one they targeted. The 2 years after they left the school were my happiest memories. If only it all could have been like that."*

## NUMBERS OF BULLIES INVOLVED

Approximately 18% of respondents were bullied by gangs of bullies who hung around together. Another 59% were bullied by more than one person. The respondents felt powerless against the combined forces of the gang or their numerous bullies. In only a small minority of cases was the bully operating alone. It would seem that the bullies needed one another to persist in their hurtful, cowardly behaviour.

A 27 year old man wrote:

*"The three of them would wait for me after school and ambush me on the way home. I tried leaving school late, changing my route, riding my bike - nothing worked. They always found me and pushed me around."*

Several respondents (2%) mentioned being bullied by teachers, even though the survey was designed to talk about child on child bullying. Most said they remembered teachers who were overly punitive or sarcastic and who hit them. One 70 year old woman said that her math teacher bullied her so badly that she only has to see a column of numbers 'to break into a cold sweat'.

Most people were bullied either by children the same age or older. Unsurprisingly it was rare for someone to be bullied by a younger child. The participants report that, in later life, they often had difficulty making friends with and were wary of people in their own and older age groups, a correlative with the relative ages of their bullies to them.

## SEX OF BULLIES

The respondents were asked if the bullies were the same sex or different sex to them or if they were bullied by both sexes.

61% of the victims were bullied by children of the same sex. 34% were bullied by both sexes; a small number were bullied by only members of the opposite sex. It was very unusual for a boy to be bullied by girls, but girls were often bullied by mixed groups of children.

## TYPE OF BULLYING

### MEN

- 75% were physically bullied
- 85% were verbally bullied
- 30% men were excluded or ostracised

Men frequently reported being physically attacked as children by bullies and were less likely than girls to be ignored or ostracised. This mirrors all the research carried out thus far. The types of physical bullying reported, however were nauseating to read and listen to: broken bones, internal injuries, scaring, operations to remove damaged testicles and kidneys, stabbings, being blinded in one eye, severe beating, being strung up upside down in toilets and almost drowning, being thrown down cliffs, into water and pushed onto the road in front of oncoming traffic, having objects inserted into various orifices, etc. The catalogue of abuse was horrifying.

It was surprising the numbers of men who reported that they were verbally bullied as children by boy bullies. Previous studies have indicated that verbal bullying was almost exclusively the domain of girl bullies. Perhaps younger boys now being bullied are unwilling to admit that they are called names as it may seem more acceptable to be physically bullied than verbally bullied. Either that or boy bullies today just kick and punch without verbally abusing their victims. It seems more feasible, however, that young boys today are just not reporting the verbal abuse.

## **WOMEN**

- 62% were physically bullied (see below)
- 93% were verbally bullied
- 60% were excluded or ostracised

The vast majority of women reported being verbally bullied, while a high percentage talked about being ostracised and excluded. This reflects earlier studies. The shocking finding was that so many younger women reported being violently physically bullied. Slightly over 60% of the respondents said that other girls had kicked and punched them, which is in direct contrast to previous studies of bullying behaviour.

Examining the figures more closely, we find that the reported patterns of bullying by girls appear to have changed over the past 5 to 15 years:

- Women between the ages of 30 and 50 who were reporting bullying that had taken place 20 years or more in the past, described the physical attacks by girls as hair pulling, being tripped over and pushing as the most common kind of attack. Other forms of physical bullying such as being bruised, broken bones, black eyes or being stabbed with objects were not mentioned.
- Women between the ages of 18 and 30 reporting bullying that had taken place in last 5 to 15 years said they had been severely physically attacked by girl bullies. The forms of violence included being stabbed, kicked in the head, having stones thrown, slapping, sticking pencils in arms, hands, legs etc., being deliberately knocked down by bicyclists, broken bones, severe bruising from punching and black eyes and other injuries requiring hospital treatment were mentioned.

The copious written responses from women regarding physical assaults on them as children by other girls were unexpected. The KIDSCAPE Helpline has received a considerable increase in calls regarding girls physically assaulting other girls. We thought this was a totally new phenomenon in the 1990s based on our previous calls and on all available research. What this survey highlights is that the increase in violence by girls to girls is indeed a recent occurrence, but one that seems to be happening over the past 5 to 15 years. Older women who took part in the survey, though mentioning physical bullying were talking about relatively minor events and none took the opportunity to write about more serious assaults.

Based on the data of kinds of bullying men and women endured in the past, the key factors seem to be:

- There has been a changing pattern of physical bullying by girls, one that has been going on since approximately the mid 1980s.
- Severe physically bullying by girls was rare before the 1980s and consisted almost exclusively and pushing and hair pulling.
- In the past 5 to 15 years, girls have been more likely to physically attack other girls causing injury.
- Verbal bullying by girls was and still seems to be the most common form of girl on girl bullying (93%).
- Men reported a very high incidence of verbal bullying (85%) as children by boy bullies.
- Boys were still more likely to be violently physically bullied than girls, even with the reported changing patterns.
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## **DID TELLING HELP**

66% of the victims did tell someone that they were being bullied. Most often they told a parent or a teacher, sometimes a friend.

The results of telling were dismal. 29% of the respondents said that telling made the bullying worse. 50% said it made no difference. **In only 8% of cases, did telling result in help for the victim.**

A 47 year old woman said:

*"When I told the teacher, she called the class together and told them not to pick on me. You can imagine what happened next. I was the butt of every joke, hurtful comment and was ostracised for the next two years. I never told anyone else. What was the point?"*

A 35 year old man wrote:

*"I tried to tell my mum, but she didn't seem to understand. Telling made no difference and I decided not to try again because it would have hurt her to know how bad it was for me."*

A 62 year old man said:

*"The Headmaster called me up to the front of the assembly. He announced that I was the shortest boy ever to attend that school (a private school of good reputation) and that he did not want anyone to harm me. The boys made it their business to ensure that my time in that school was pure torture. Perhaps the Headmaster was trying to help as I had told a form tutor that I was being bullied, but all he did was exacerbate an already difficult situation."*

## **HOW DID THE BULLYING MAKE THEM FEEL**

Men, looking back on their feelings at the time of the bullying were more likely to be angry and frustrated by the bullying than the women. Women were more likely to be depressed,

scared and vulnerable, although both sexes reported all of these feelings in varying proportions.

## HOW DOES IT MAKE THEM FEEL NOW

Men and women reported similar feelings now about the bullying, but they are more angry and bitter now, while the feelings of being scared and vulnerable have subsided.

One woman, age 34, wrote:

*I am bitter, but also feel great regret. I would have been capable of so much more, had not my school years been so frightening. If I had enjoyed school I might have 'bloomed' into a more confident person. It makes me wish that I hadn't been born, as I have now wasted my life being too scared and nervous to try to succeed."*

A man, aged 24, replied:

*"Yes I am bitter and angry, but also annoyed that nothing was done about the bullying. Teachers had a chance to put it right and I look back partly with bitterness towards them, as well as the bullies."*

## SUICIDE

46% of the respondents contemplated suicide because of the bullying. 20% attempted suicide because of the bullying, some more than once. Compared to the non-bullied group, this is an incredibly high rate. 07% of the none bullied adults had contemplated suicide and 03% had attempted it.

A man aged 35 wrote:

*"After one particularly bad day of bullying, I could stand it no longer. I got a rope and went into the woods to kill myself. I managed to secure the rope and put it around my neck and jump. I blacked out and thought I had finally managed to die. But I came to on the ground and realised that the rope had untied itself. I never told anyone about it and felt a failure because I couldn't even manage to kill myself properly."*

A woman, age 32, said:

*"It was a very childish suicide attempt when I was 12. I tried to drown myself in the bath. Of course I could not hold my breath and ended up choking up lots of water. This happened after a group of girls made me sing and dance while all the other children laughed. I was so humiliated that I decided to kill myself. I have never told anyone about this."*

A 56 year old woman wrote:

*"I tried to kill myself when I was 14 by swallowing every tablet in the bathroom cabinet. My dad found me and took me to hospital. I then spent a long time in a psychiatric unit and suffered irreparable liver damage. I begged my parents not to make me go back to the school. It had and still has an excellent reputation for academics. My dad then took me to another school which was much better. I sometime wonder if my old school has sorted out the problems in the intervening years."*

## HOW HAS THE BULLYING AFFECTED PEOPLE NOW

Men and women report a wide variety of feelings about how the bullying has affected their lives.

Women feel they cannot trust people and are afraid of new situations. They also feel they are easily victimised and are afraid to succeed. Men report similar feelings, but are more likely to feel uncommunicative, shy and be loners than the women. Both men and women feel they have become worse people than they were in school and they did not feel good about themselves at school.

When the adults who were bullied as children are compared to those who were not bullied, the differences are dramatic. Adults who were not bullied are not afraid of new situations or uncommunicative or loners and they feel they are better people than when they left school.

One woman, age 68, said:

*"The bullying has left me with an inability to cope with change or stress, severe depression and agoraphobia. I am afraid of anything new and most people think I am recluse and they are probably right. I only trust myself. The bullying went on for years and years and it has left its mark on me."*

A man, also age 68, reported:

*"I am hypersensitive and raw to slights. I am constantly on the look out for criticism and have the mentality of a perpetual victim. It is as if I am still waiting for those bullies to come around the corner and get me. I tell myself it is ridiculous...."*

## SELF-ESTEEM NOW

Some of the most dramatic results of the survey are evident in the area of self-esteem. Adults who were bullied as children report significantly lower levels of self-esteem than those who were not bullied. 43% report very low, low or below average self-esteem. Only 06% of those who were not bullied report low or below average self-esteem. None reported low self-esteem.

In contrast 43% of adults not bullied say their self-esteem is high or very high compared to 26% of those adults who were bullied.

## MAKING FRIENDS

Difficulty in making friends was one of the outcomes of being bullied. Nearly three quarters of the respondents, 73% reported that they had problems. This compares to 11% of the non-bullied adults.

One 70 year old woman said:

*"I was so unhappy as a child being bullied that I had never really trusted people. I prefer my animals, who never say an unkind word and who can always be trusted."*

A 39 year old man wrote:

*"I cannot make friend with anyone my own age. I think it is because the bullies were in my form. I have always sought out older friends, usually adults, whom I felt safer with - people who had gone past the 'bullying stage'."*

## CONTINUED BULLYING

36% said they were now or had been bullied in further education or at work. In the group of people who had not been bullied as children, only 03% reported bullying either in further education or at work. Still, it was encouraging that 64% of those bullied as children had not experienced further bullying.

## CONCLUSION

This is the first time adults have been questioned about their experiences being bullied as children and how this might have affected their lives. KIDSCAPE planned to include 300 people in The National Lottery funded research, but found that many more people wanted to take part, so that the total numbers reached over 800, plus over 200 people who were not bullied. This brought the numbers to over 1000 people taking part.

Some of the conclusions are not surprising. For example, bullying is obviously not a new problem, but one that has affected people for generations. The oldest respondent was 81, but as with the rest of the people who took part, time had not dimmed the memories. The feelings of fear had diminished, but not the anger and bitterness at the unfairness of what the children suffered.

Contrary to some popular opinion, bullying does **not** help children to cope better with adult life. In fact it has the opposite effect. Adults who were bullied as children tend to have problems with self-esteem, feelings of anger and bitterness, suicidal thoughts and attempts and difficulty relating to people. Many were afraid of new situations and felt shy and easily victimised. Over half of the men and women said they are loners, while less than 20% felt they were better people now than when they left school.

Compare this to those adults who were not bullied and you can see the dramatic differences.

Adults not bullied as children generally have high self-esteem, are not loners, make friends easily and definitely feel they are better people now than they were at school.

The duration and severity of the bullying was heartbreaking. People wrote volumes about bullying that had gone on for years, causing them untold misery. They left school early because of it. Many had health problems and were bullied in later life because they had no self worth. The bullies' harsh messages stuck with them and shaped them. When they tried to get help as children, only 7% were given any help that stopped the bullying. For the rest, telling either made no difference or made the bullying worse.

The lessons for us today are clear. If we allow bullying to go on, we are condemning another generation of children to the same sort of problems that most of the adults in the survey told us had happened to them. These adults had some recommendations for us. Many said that children should be given counselling to help them overcome the effects of the bullying. Others told us that the 'trendy' idea that bullies should not be blamed and suffer no consequences to their actions, made them furious. *"Bullies need to apologise and make amends" wrote one woman, aged 54. If they (the bullies) do not do this, they will just grow up thinking they can do anything they want and become big bullies"* She knew because she was working for a bully boss.

The vexed problem of bullies who are teachers was raised by 16 of the respondents. *"Tell children to go to another teacher or their parents."* One man said, *"teacher bullies are the worst because everyone seems to turn a blind eye to them. Yet they have the power to make your life even more of a misery than the pupils. One signal from my PE teacher and I was bait for the mob. For five years he bullied me and so did everyone else. I hated, correction, still hate him to this day."*

It should be kept in mind that this survey is the tip of the iceberg. Many people suffered worse bullying than those who took part in the survey. They have had nervous breakdowns. They have succeeded in their suicide attempts.

It should also be noted that some people have overcome the bullying that happened to them. They were determined to succeed and did. They did not allow the bullying to stop their education. One man said that he got so angry about the bullying that he became an aggressive and highly successful business man. *"I may not be a better person than I was back then, but I certainly am a success in my job and I owe it all to those boys in the sixth form. I hope they are having a miserable life."*

They probably are. Professor Dan Olweus from Bergen University in Norway, in a long-term study found that boys who were bullies were twice as likely as their peers to have criminal convictions and four times more likely to be multiple offenders. Typically convictions were for aggression and violence and were often alcohol-related. (Olweus) In a survey of Young Offenders conducted by KIDSCAPE, it was found that 92% of the Young Offenders had engaged in bullying behaviour while at school. (Elliott and Kilpatrick)

The message is simple. Bullied children and bullies alike are badly affected when bullying is allowed to thrive. Bullying must never be tolerated.

*"I'm 34, self-employed, married with two children. I have an adoring husband, beautiful children, a job I love and a nice home. Yet there is always this lingering fear that I don't deserve my home, that my husband and children don't love me, that my friends are only nice to me to my face because they want something from me and that they run me down behind my back. This is the legacy I have inherited from bullying."*

Elliott, M. and Kilpatrick, J. 1999, 'KIDSCAPE Survey of Young Offenders, 1994' in How to Stop Bullying: A KIDSCAPE Training Guide.

Olweus, D. 1997, 'Bullying/victim problems among school children' in Rubin and Pepler, The Development and Treatment of Childhood Aggression.) November 1999