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# Fair-Weather or Foul-Weather Friends? Group Identification and Children's Responses to Bullying

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## Abstract

Research with adults shows that negative ingroup behavior can affect identification with the group, but also that the way in which members respond to negative events is moderated by prior levels of identification. Research with children shows that how strongly they identify with a group influences how they react to group-level bullying. The authors integrate these findings by examining how a bullying incident affects children's group identification. Children aged 7–8 and 10–11 years were randomly assigned to either a perpetrator group or a target group. They read a scenario describing a target group member being bullied by members of the perpetrator group. The perpetrator group had a norm of behaving either kindly or unkindly to other children. How strongly children in the perpetrator group identified with their group was influenced by group norm and by initial in-group identification. Identification was higher when the group was normatively kind rather than unkind, but only among children whose initial identification was high.

## Keywords

bullying, social identity, development, identity management, group-based emotions, norms, pride, anger, shame, guilt, action tendencies

The role of social identity processes in bullying among school children has attracted increasing research attention, yet relatively little work has been done on children's identification with peer groups and how this affects and is affected by bullying. The present research focuses on the effect of a group-level bullying incident on 8- and 11-year-olds' identification with the groups involved, and how this is moderated by group norms.

Although studies in which identification is regarded as dependent on group-relevant events are relatively rare, it has been shown that group identification in adults can be an important outcome of intergroup processes and reflects (among other things) how committed individuals are to the group (e.g., Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 2002). An event that has positive implications for group identity (e.g., when the in-group or an in-group member acts in a norm-consistent manner) may lead in-group members to report higher levels of identification (e.g., Kessler & Hollbach, 2005; cf. "basking in reflected glory," Cialdini et al., 1976). Conversely, an event that has negative implications for group identity (e.g., when an in-group or in-group member acts in a counternormative manner or when an in-group compares unfavorably to an out-group) can result in less strong identification with the in-group (Ellemers, 1993; Kessler & Hollbach, 2005; cf. "cutting off reflected failure," Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Similarly, Matschke and Sassenberg (2010) showed that in the face of

negative group-relevant events, group members use individual strategies of exit from or integration with the group, depending on their internal motivation to belong to the group.

Recent social developmental research shows that children also manage their identities in response to social situations. Banerjee (2002) found that children adapted their self-descriptions so as to be perceived as positively as possible by different groups (peer vs. adult) and that this tendency increased with age. There is also evidence that children are aware of the need to maintain a positive social identity in intergroup contexts and manage their social identities accordingly. Rutland, Cameron, Milne, and McGeorge (2005) showed that children attenuated expressions of ethnic prejudice when their in-group's norm against prejudice was made salient by telling them that other group members would learn about their prejudiced expressions. Older children were better able to regulate their prejudice than were younger children. Fitzroy and Rutland (2010) manipulated whether children expected only

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the experimenter (low accountability) or their ethnic in-group classmates (high accountability) to learn of their responses to an intergroup-attitude task that involved assigning positive and negative traits to White and Black children. When children perceived an “anti-prejudice” in-group norm and accountability was high, they exhibited less bias.

These studies show that children seek to maintain a positive social identity and that they therefore take account of group norms—and the need for in-group members to behave normatively—when responding in intergroup contexts. To the extent that in-group identification varies as a result of group-relevant events, it follows that children may respond to events that have implications for the positivity of one’s social identity (such as in-group members acting in a counternormative manner) by managing their level of identification with an in-group.

Bullying is a domain in which concerns for the positivity of one’s in-group are likely to be particularly acute. Ojala and Nesdale (2004) showed that children understood that a bullying in-group member was more likely to be rejected by the group than a group member who played fairly—thereby showing that children are aware that an in-group member who bullies can affect the positivity of the in-group image. Importantly, however, this was only true to the extent that the in-group norm was one of not bullying. When the in-group norm was one of bullying, and the target character bullied, children believed that he was unlikely to be rejected by the group. Moreover, Nesdale, Milliner, Duffy, and Griffiths (2009) showed that liking of the in-group varied depending on whether the in-group did or did not have a norm for aggression. Thus, while bullying per se has implications for social identity, those implications are in turn shaped by whether or not bullying is consistent with in-group norms because the degree to which in-group members’ behavior is norm-consistent also has implications for one’s social identity. We build on this research by examining how a group norm for kindness or unkindness influences children’s in-group identification following an unkind intergroup (bullying) behavior. We expected that for children who shared a group membership with a perpetrator, levels of in-group identification would be affected by whether or not the perpetrator group norm supported bullying behavior.

We also argue, in line with the findings reported by Doosje, Spears, and Ellemers (2002), that in order to understand the effects of group membership and perpetrator group norm on levels of identification, it is necessary to take *initial* levels of identification into account. Doosje et al. (2002) framed participants’ in-group future in positive or negative terms and measured participants’ initial identification with their in-group. They found that the effect of a negative in-group future on in-group identification was greater for those who were high identifiers initially. Along similar lines, Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (1997) found that only those who were initially committed to a group showed a high level of commitment to the in-group in the face of a group-relevant threat. Moreover, it has been shown in adults that in-group identification moderates the influence of group norms on intergroup behavior such as in-group bias (e.g., Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1997), and how

group members react to group threat (Doosje et al., 2002; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003). For example, Okimoto and Wenzel (2010) found that when group members were presented with an intergroup threat to their group’s status, only high identifiers were willing to seek retribution from the threatening group. In summary, research on adults shows that high and low identifiers respond to negative group-relevant behaviors in different ways.

The importance of group identification (over and above group membership per se) has also been observed in children. For example, Nesdale, Durkin, Maass, and Griffiths (2005) found that children’s ethnic prejudice was positively related to strength of identification with their ethnic in-group, while Jones, Manstead, and Livingstone (2009, 2011) showed that group-based reactions to bullying intensified as a function of in-group identification. Initial levels of identification therefore clearly influence identity management strategies—including group members’ willingness to stick with the group.

## The Present Study

We examined the role of perpetrator group norms on in-group identification with a group that engages in bullying. Children aged 7–8 or 10–11 were randomly assigned to one of the two group conditions: the same group as someone later described as engaging in bullying (the perpetrator group); or the same group as someone later described as being the target of that bullying (the target group). Prior research has established that children of different ages encounter different types of bullying. Beyond the age of 10, children are likely to encounter *cyberbullying*—a form of bullying that employs electronic means to attack targets and whose incidence is increasing (Campbell, 2005). From 7 to 10 years of age, children are likely to experience face-to-face forms of bullying (Scheithauer, Hayer, Petermann, & Jugert, 2006). In order to be consistent with children’s everyday experiences, we used a conventional bullying scenario with 7- and 8-year-olds, and a cyberbullying scenario with 10- and 11-year-olds.

Children’s identification with the group to which they had been assigned was measured before they read a scenario. In this scenario, a perpetrator, supported by his or her group, acts unkindly toward a target, who belongs to a different group, by sending the target an unpleasant text message from the group while walking home from school (10- and 11-year-olds) or by leaving a nasty message in a coat pocket (7- and 8-year-olds). The norm of the perpetrator group (to be either kind or unkind toward others) was also manipulated. Each child’s identification with his or her group was measured after the scenario.

We expected initial identification to moderate the effects of perpetrator group norm on identification in the face of intergroup bullying but only among children who shared a group membership with the perpetrator (and hence to whom the norms applied). More specifically, we expected that children who were high initial identifiers would show higher identification with the perpetrator group in response to the bullying incident when the in-group norm was for kindness (and hence the

bullying behavior was also counternormative) than when the in-group norm was for unkindness, reflecting a tendency to stick with the group in the face of events that call its positivity into question. For low initial identifiers in the perpetrator group, the reverse pattern was predicted. Specifically, a bullying event that is counternormative should lead to especially low levels of identification, as participants seek to distance themselves from the group. Finally, and in keeping with the research described above, we also anticipated that older children would be more likely to manage their identity in a strategic way than younger children.

## Method

### Participants

Parental permission was obtained for 179 (88 Year 3 children,  $M = 8.21$  years,  $SD = .33$ , and 91 Year 6 children,  $M = 10.98$  years,  $SD = .41$ ) to take part. Seventy-six participants were male and 103 were female. They were randomly allocated to one of the experimental conditions.

### Design

The study had a fully between-subjects factorial design, where the three factors were the *perpetrator group's norm* (kindness or unkindness), the *group membership* of the participants (shared with the target [target group] or shared with the perpetrator [perpetrator group]) and *age group* (8-year-olds or 11-year-olds). The dependent variable was in-group identification.

### Materials

**Dot estimation task.** Children were ostensibly allocated to one of the groups on the basis of a dot estimation task (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). In reality, allocation was random. Children were introduced to the activity, and subsequently shown five slides, each displaying between 20 and 100 yellow dots on a blue background. Each slide was projected for 3 seconds on a whiteboard. Participants were asked to record their responses.

**Group allocation slips.** Membership of each group was indicated by the statement that "Your guesses tended to be too low. Most children in [X's] group also tend to make guesses that are too low. [X's] group are an [active/fun-loving/bright] group of [girls/boys], who [enjoy listening to music together/watching DVDs together/ playing games together]." The descriptions were accompanied by a drawing of the group and were devised so as to encourage participants to identify with their group.

**Response booklet.** Each booklet started with some practice questions and there then followed a 3-item measure of initial in-group identification: "I am glad to be in my group," "It is important to me to be in my group," and "I feel very close to others in my group" ( $\alpha = .60$ ).

Following this, scenario characters were described. They were attending a school similar to the participant's own school. The

scenarios provided information about two groups, about named members of the target group, about one named member of the perpetrator group, and about an incident that could be construed as bullying—a negative message sent from the perpetrator group to the target, "We hate u, [child's name]." The message was the same across the two age groups. Names of the scenario characters were chosen such that no child at the school went by them.

**Eight-year-olds.** Girls read a scenario about a walk home from school made by Melanie's group and Jenny's group. During this walk, the target finds a note in her pocket from Jenny's group. Boys read the same scenario, but with "Melanie" and "Jenny" replaced by "John" and "Pete."

**Eleven-year-olds.** Girls read a scenario about a walk home from school made by Melanie's group and Jenny's group. During this walk, Jenny, supported by other members of her group, sends an unkind text message to a named member of Melanie's group. Boys read the same scenario, but with "Melanie" and "Jenny" replaced by "John" and "Pete."

Perpetrator group norm was manipulated by varying information about the typical behavior of the perpetrator group, such that in the kindness norm condition, children read that the group was known for being kind to others, whereas in the unkindness norm condition, they read that the perpetrator group sometimes teased other children. The scenario ended by making it clear that the target was upset.

Scenarios were followed by the remaining questionnaire items. Most items took the form of statements. Children were asked to indicate (by placing a tick) their response on 5-point scales, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) (older group) or from "1—(NO) to 5—(YES)" (younger group).

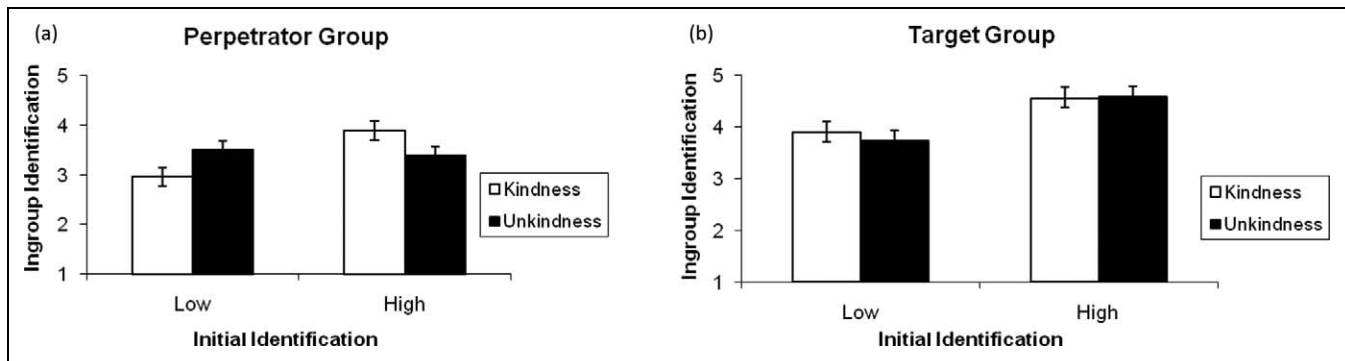
The first set of items related to the behavior described in the scenario, starting with manipulation check items about the story characters' group affiliations (e.g., "Which group was [perpetrator] a member of?") and asking respondents to report their own group membership. There was also a check concerning the norm of the perpetrator group: "[Perpetrator]'s group is *always* kind to other children."

The final paragraph of the scenario, describing the bullying incident, was then repeated. Following this came items measuring judgments of the behavior, of the intentions of the characters, and whether the behavior of the named bullying character and of the perpetrator group could be classed as bullying. The wording was designed to be accessible to the child participants.

In-group identification was measured using a 5-item scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ) based on the work of Barrett et al. (2007), Cameron (2004), and Leach et al. (2008), example items being "I am glad to be in my group," "It is important to me to be in my group," and "I feel very close to others in my group." Further questionnaire items related to measures that are not relevant to the current study.

### Procedure

The study was conducted in school classrooms, one class at a time. A teacher was always present. Experimental sessions



**Figure 1.** Estimated marginal means for the three-way interaction between perpetrator group norm, group membership, and initial identification. Error bars represent 1 standard error.

began with an explanation that the researcher was interested in finding out about children's friendship groups. The activities in which children would take part if they wished to help with the study were described, and children were reminded that their participation was voluntary.

Children were then ostensibly allocated to one of the groups on the basis of the dot estimation task. Participants were told that their responses to the dot estimation task would be used to place them in one of the two groups. The researcher then exchanged each participant's response slip for one assigning them, at random, to a particular (gender-consistent) group.

Each pupil was then given a copy of the scenario and questionnaire booklet relevant to his or her gender and age group and asked to work through it. Participants were given 30–40 minutes to complete this. Some children were assisted in scenario and questionnaire reading, so as not to exclude those with reading difficulties. Before the questionnaire was completed, the researcher highlighted her interest in pupils' opinions about the story. It was stressed that answers would be kept confidential and not read by staff at the school.

At the conclusion of the session, which lasted approximately 1 hour, participants were debriefed about the research and the reasons for the deception concerning allocation to groups. Any questions were answered by the researchers, and pupils were reminded of positive strategies for dealing with any experiences of bullying. Participants received a pencil as a thank you for their participation, and each participating school received £50 in the form of book vouchers.

## Results

### Data Screening

The data were first screened for missing values and outliers. Two outliers on initial identification were removed prior to further analysis. Following the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991), means-centered scores were used throughout.

### Comprehension Checks

Twelve children failed to identify correctly the author of the message, and 26 children failed to identify correctly the group

to which the target belonged. These children were randomly distributed across experimental conditions, and excluding them did not lead to qualitative differences in results. All participants were therefore retained for the main analyses.

### Perpetrator Group Norm Manipulation Check

A three-way (perpetrator group norm  $\times$  group membership  $\times$  age) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the perpetrator group norm manipulation check revealed only a significant main effect of perpetrator group norm,  $F(1, 162) = 49.26, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .233$ . Those in the kindness norm condition perceived the perpetrator group to be kinder than did those in the unkindness norm condition ( $M_s = 3.72$  and  $2.26, SD_s = 1.37$  and  $1.36$ , respectively).

### Was the Behavior Seen as Bullying?

Sixty-nine percent of the younger participants either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement, “[Perpetrator] is a bully;” the corresponding figure for the older group was 81%. Sixty-eight percent of the younger group either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement “[Perpetrator]’s group are bullies;” the corresponding figure for the older group was 67%.

### Effects on Identification

We predicted that there would be an effect of perpetrator group norm on in-group identification among children in the perpetrator group and that this would be moderated by initial identification with the group. To test this hypothesis, we performed a 2 (Group membership: perpetrator group or target group)  $\times$  2 (Perpetrator group norm: kind or unkind)  $\times$  2 (Age group: 11 years vs. 8 years)  $\times$  initial identification (measured and used as a continuous predictor) ANOVA. This analysis revealed several lower-order effects, all of which were qualified by two higher-order interactions. The first was between group membership, perpetrator group norm, and initial identification,  $F(1, 150) = 4.88, p = .029, \eta^2_p = .032$ . This was decomposed by examining the simple effects of perpetrator group norm at

different levels of group membership and initial identification. The simple effects are illustrated in Figure 1.

Further analysis revealed that the interaction between perpetrator group norm and identification was marginally significant for the perpetrator group,  $F(1, 74) = 3.50, p = .065$  but not for the target group,  $F < 1$ . Simple effects analysis revealed that for children who were relatively strongly identified ( $M + 1 SD$ ) with their group prior to the bullying scenario, there was a simple effect of perpetrator group norm within the perpetrator group,  $F(1, 150) = 4.33, p = .039, \eta^2_p = .028$ . In keeping with our predictions, perpetrator group members in the kindness norm condition identified more with their group in the face of the intergroup bullying than did those in the unkindness norm condition ( $M_s = 4.26$  and  $3.60$ , respectively). The effect of perpetrator group norm was also marginally significant in the perpetrator group among children whose initial identification was relatively low ( $M - 1 SD$ ),  $F(1, 150) = 3.39, p = .068, \eta^2_p = .022$ . These children showed higher identification after the bullying incident when the perpetrator group norm was for unkindness compared to when it was for kindness ( $M_s = 3.31$  and  $2.72$ , respectively) in contrast to the pattern among those whose initial identification was high.

The second interaction was that between age and identification,  $F(1, 150) = 5.66, p = .019, \eta^2_p = .036$ . This was examined by considering the simple effects of age at different levels of identification. The effect of age was significant at low ( $M - 1 SD$ ),  $F(1, 150) = 12.24, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .075$ , but not at high,  $M + 1 SD, F < 1$ , levels of identification ( $M_s = 4.23$  for 8-year-olds and  $4.18$  for 11-year-olds,  $SE_{diff} = .72, p = .746$ ). Pairwise comparisons showed that the difference in estimated means between the 11-year-old and 8-year-old age groups at low identification was significant,  $M_s = 3.79$  and  $3.05$ , respectively,  $SE_{diff} = .21, p = .001$ . Thus, among children who had low initial identification with their group, children aged 8 identified more strongly with their group in the face of intergroup bullying than did those aged 11.

## Discussion

We investigated the effect of a bullying incident on children's in-group (peer group) identification as a function of their membership of a perpetrator group or target group, and the perpetrator group norms. We found, as predicted, that the impact of these factors on identification was moderated by children's initial identification with their group. Specifically, there was an effect of perpetrator group norm among perpetrator group members, but not target group members, and the direction of this effect depended on initial levels of identification. In-group identification was higher when the perpetrator group norm was for kindness than when it was for unkindness but only among children whose initial identification was high. In contrast, in-group identification was lower when the perpetrator group norm was for unkindness than when it was for kindness among children whose initial identification was low.

## Identity Management

It could be argued that it is not necessary to explain the present findings as a norm-contingent reaction to the bullying incident. Rather, the between-condition differences may simply reflect participants' reactions to the group norm rather than to the incident itself. Thus, high initial identifiers identify less when the group norm is for unkindness because it is less desirable to be a member of such a group than one in which the norm is for kindness. However, this explanation cannot account for the opposing pattern that emerges for low initial identifiers, who identified more with the perpetrator group when its norm was for unkindness. The overall pattern of results cannot therefore be explained as a reaction to the group norm per se; rather, it is more satisfactorily explained as a reaction to the bullying incident and as being shaped by the perpetrator group norm and participants' initial level of identification. Specifically, we suggest that this pattern represents a strategic response to an incident that has implications for the image of the group, the precise meaning of which is framed by group norms.

Thus, the manner in which children react to a bullying incident depends on the norm of the group, and specifically whether it is consistent or inconsistent with that bullying incident. In turn, high and low identifiers react differently depending on the norm-consistency of the event. In other words, our findings demonstrate that strategic reactions to negative in-group behavior (e.g., bullying) can include affiliation to the in-group (Ellemers, 1993; Kessler & Hollbach, 2005; cf. Cialdini et al., 1976; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980) but also—crucially—that such strategic reactions depend on norm consistency and on initial levels of identification (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997). High identifiers stuck to the group in the face of norm inconsistent behavior; low identifiers did not.

This research extends Nesdale, Miliner et al.'s (2009) finding that group members liked their group less when it had a norm for aggression, compared to when it had no such norm. In a separate study, Nesdale et al. (2008) showed that groups with a norm for inclusion are liked more than those who have a norm for exclusion. In the present study, we compared norms for kindness versus unkindness and showed that in-group liking (i.e., high-initial in-group identification) is maintained by group members even where the behavior is norm inconsistent. In other words, it is not simply the case that "nicer" groups are liked more; when group members are highly identified with a group and the group norm was one of kindness, they liked the group even after learning that some of its members had acted unkindly. This reaction might be driven by members' sense of high investment in the group, and a willingness to brush off, or even to turn a blind eye to, "out-of-character" events. When it came to low-identifying group members, however, when a normally kind group was described as acting unkindly, members who had low-initial identification with the group identified less with their group. Perhaps, low identifiers are more pragmatically or instrumentally concerned with whether they should be affiliated with the group at all, and thus display low identification when faced with norm

inconsistent behavior. The processes that mediate the different reactions of high- versus low-identifying group members according to the norm-consistency of a group-relevant event were not examined here and represent an avenue for future research.

**Age.** There was also evidence that the bullying incident influenced younger and older participants' identification with the in-group differently to the extent that they had low-initial identification with their group. Among low-initial identifiers, younger children identified more strongly after reading about the incident than did older children. Any interpretation of these findings remains speculative. This pattern may have emerged because older children were already highly identified with their school and felt less need than their younger counterparts to get involved with a group. However, it is worth bearing in mind that for ecological validity reasons, there was a confound between age and bullying method (11-year-olds read about text message bullying; 8-year-olds read about verbal bullying). It is therefore possible that the age effects reflect this difference in method. Further research is needed to determine the reason for age effects in identity management when it comes to bullying.

Overall, the present study provides support for a social identity approach to bullying and paves the way for further research examining the group-level factors that underpin it. Drawing on work by Ellemers and colleagues (e.g., Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers et al., 1997), one could manipulate group-relevant factors, such as the ease with which children can switch between friendship groups, the relative status of these friendship groups, and children's positions within these groups (e.g., wanting to join vs. peripheral group member vs. prototypical group member) to determine how these affect the extent to which they identify with a target group.

### Practical Implications

The present findings suggest that anti-bullying interventions should consider the perpetrator group norms. First, there is evidence that peer group norms affect responses to bullying. Encouraging children to be critical of peer group norms (with a view to bringing them into line with school norms emphasizing cooperation) might be one avenue for intervention. This seems particularly important given that perpetrator group norms interact with identification with the group.

The key finding, however, is that—paradoxically—when the group has positive norms regarding how to treat other children, members who identify with the group will show commitment to the group when a group member acts inconsistently with these norms. Further research and intervention could focus on the conditions under which high identifiers seek to maintain prosocial norms by challenging negative in-group behavior (cf. Stott, Adang, Livingstone, & Schreiber, 2007, 2008).

### Conclusions

Our findings support the idea that children's responses to a bullying incident can take the form of differential identification

with an in-group implicated in the bullying. These responses are shaped not only by their group membership but also by the norms of the perpetrator group. The specific effect of perpetrator group norms, in turn, depended on initial levels of in-group identification. This suggests that children's responses to bullying are not simple; rather, they are nuanced and strategic, reflecting dynamics that have previously been studied only in adults. Meeting the challenge of bullying therefore requires interventions that are equally nuanced and sensitive to the social identity concerns of those involved.

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### Note

1. This incident of bullying, while not necessarily an example of repeated intimidation, is nonetheless consistent with the definition of bullying provided by Nesdale and Scarlett (2004, p. 428), stating that bullying is "the delivery of aversive stimuli to weaker, less powerful persons." Further, the target is shown to be upset. The majority of children in our study saw this incident as one of bullying.

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