

Child in school class can be bully, victim and defender at the same time

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Primary school pupils are sometimes the bully, the victim and the defender all at the same time. That is because groups of friends exist within a school class where a child usually defends its own group, is sometimes regarded a bully by another group and is sometimes bullied by yet another group. Children can sometimes occupy several roles at once because they are often involved in different relationships that are still subject to change. These are the conclusions of sociologist Gijs Huitsing in his PhD research into bullying behaviour that he will defend on 4 December at the University of Groningen.

Huitsing investigated the behaviour and the relationships of hundreds of [primary school pupils](#) (5-12 years old) in the Netherlands, Finland and Switzerland with the help of social network analysis, a method that provides detailed insights into the relationships between individuals in a group. Previously social network analysis was mainly used to investigate positive networks such as friendship relationships. Huitsing has now used the technique to study negative networks as well: relationships between children who reject or bully each other.

Power differences

The older the child, the more often power differences play a role in bullying behaviour, concludes Huitsing. Younger children bully each other reciprocally more often – 'today I bully you and tomorrow you bully me' – and power differences scarcely play a role in this. Among

older children, bullying behaviour is often less reciprocal and it becomes more fixed who [bullies](#) more often and who is the victim more often. Children who are bullied are nearly always the victim of a bully from their own class or one class higher. A bullied child is rarely the victim of a bully from a lower or much higher class.

Teachers and pupils disagree

Teachers and pupils differ in their observations of bullying behaviour. It is noticeable that teachers report less bullying behaviour between boys and girls than the pupils do and instead see more bullying [behaviour](#) between girls than the pupils. Pupils themselves say that both boys and girls bully and that girls mainly bully each other. Children and teachers often agree that a certain child is being bullied or that it bullies other children but they do not necessarily state the same victim-bully relationships. They agree more on how the bullies are and less on who the victims are.

Defending is sometimes risky

Studying networks over a longer period of time reveals that a child who defends a victim of bullying runs the risk of becoming bullied themselves, says Huitsing. Something similar applies for a [child](#) who defends a bully: defenders of bullies sometimes become bullies themselves when they decide to give the bully 'a helping hand'. Bullies support and defend each other and the same is true for victims. With the network data it is clear that hardly a single primary school pupil is not involved in bullying in one way or another. Most [children](#) are involved in one or more victim-bully relationships and that is more often the case for boys than for girls.

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