The case of a persistent bully, from victim to perpetrator

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Credit: Mikhail Nilov from Pexels

The new kid, the class clown, the popular kid, the troublemaker, or the loner. We all know children and young people who may be labeled in this way. In fact, many of these stereotypes have been depicted in

Hollywood films.

But if your child falls into one of these categories, new University of South Australia research shows that not only may they be at risk of being bullied, but they perhaps, could be engaging in bullying others themselves now or in the future.

In a unique case study published in *Pastoral Care in Education*, researchers at UniSA's Center for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion have explored the lived experiences of a self-identified persistent bully—a voice that is scarce in literature—to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that may contribute to this anti-social aggressive behavior. The case study was an adult, preservice teacher who voluntarily shared his school-life experiences of bullying for the research.

Through a qualitative, exploratory case study, researchers identified three important social and behavioral "turning points" that served to steer a child toward bullying others, and eventually sustained his bullying behavior. These turning points included:

1. Peer rejection and a lack of belonging.
2. Striving to belong through bullying.
3. Social positioning, status and reputation achieved through bullying.

Each year in Australia, 543,000 perpetrators instigate more than 35 million bullying incidents and almost 25% of students (about 910,000) experience bullying while at school. About 24% of victims are "bully-victims"—both victim and perpetrator of bullying.

UniSA researcher and education expert, Dr. Deborah Green, says the study highlights the acute need to address bullying by focusing and

understanding the individual and their motivation.

"Bullying has been researched globally for decades, yet one in four children are still bullied in schools. This equates to more than one incident of bullying every week in every school around Australia," Dr. Green says.

"The trauma associated with bullying is felt both immediately and long after students have completed school, even up to 20 years later. The estimated costs associated with bullying are $2.3 billion.

"Clearly, traditional interventions and sanctions are not working for some students, so it's vital that we look for alternative solutions, particularly for those who persist in bullying others.

"In this study, we've investigated a rarely-heard voice—that of the bully—which revealed some very insightful findings about how and when his behavior changed. We call these turning points as they indicate when a change in behavior occurs. They also represent opportunities for intervention.

"Through this case study, we see how each turning point created a chain reaction of behaviors and responses which ultimately shapes the bullying trajectory, reinforcing the emerging bullying behavior until it was persistent.

"Sadly, although not uncommonly, this child started out as a victim of bullying. Then in an attempt to connect with students he began acting up, demonstrating bullying behaviors to others.

"Ironically, this generated a sense of social standing within his peer group, which led him to detention where he forged a friendship group—the 'detention kids'—and a heightened sense of status and

belonging.

"Like all of us, he wanted to feel connected and like he belonged; he wanted a friend. But at each turning point, this need was filled by negative behaviors, rather than positive ones.

"In the end, the only way he knew to engage and connect with his peers was through bullying."

Dr. Green says that this study highlights the need for teachers, counselors, and well-being leaders to reflect on the individual needs of young people who are engaging in persistent bullying and support them in what may have led to this behavior.

"We encourage teachers and counselors to be aware of peer dynamics and social structures of their classes, so that they can better understand and respond to social issues" and call for "this to be further embedded into initial teacher education training," Dr. Green says.

"The negative impact of social rejection on a child's well-being must be recognized sooner, always remembering that the bullying may have started not to inflict harm, but to fill an innate need to connect with others.

"Early intervention and individualized and proactive preventative approaches should foster acceptance, recognition, safety and belonging.

"For some students, bullying appears to be adaptive, meeting an individual's social goals of belonging, status and identity. If we can interrupt the cycle of bullying, we could prevent significant and often lifelong harm for victims and those who engage in bullying."

More information: D.M. Green et al, Persistent bullying and the

influence of turning points: learnings from an instrumental case study, *Pastoral Care in Education* (2023). DOI: 10.1080/02643944.2023.2247399