

Who defends bullying victims? A study analyzes adolescents' behavior in this regard

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A research team at the University of Cordoba studied the behavior of those defending adolescent victims of bullying and its relationship to the student's social and regulatory adjustment and perceptions of popularity among peers.

Bullying is defined as a set of aggressive and immoral behaviors repeated over time and in which an imbalance of power is created between aggressors and their victims. Many of these situations of bullying occur in the presence of other schoolchildren, who adopt different roles, either enabling the aggressor, defending the victim, or simply keeping out of it.

In these cases, defense behaviors can be decisive in reducing the consequences of or preventing those immoral dynamics generated within groups. Until now how these defense behaviors can change over time, and their connection to elements that shape the social dynamics of the classroom, had not been explored.

With this dual objective, researchers in the Department of Psychology at the University of Córdoba Eva Romera, Ana Bravo, and Rosario Ortega, members of the "Coexistence and Violence Prevention Studies Lab," in collaboration with Christian Berger, a researcher at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, carried out a [longitudinal study](#) with 3,303 adolescents in which they identify how defense behaviors change over time and their association with degrees of adjustment to norms, peer groups, and structures of popularity within them.

Striving to dispel the idea that being a defender of bullying victims, or not, is a static role, "we explored different trajectories that would help us understand defense behaviors: those who always defend victims, those who never do, and, above all, why they begin to defend them, or why they stop doing so," explained Professor Eva Romera. Her results confirm that these change trends highlight the importance of discarding the classic idea that defense plays a static role over time.

After four waves of data collection through questionnaires completed by the students over two academic years and multigroup analysis using a complex methodology combining the analysis of personal relationships

with growth curves, "we found four trajectories to describe the defense: one that remained stable at high levels of defense, another that drops, another that increases, and another group that remains at a low level of defense all along the trajectory," explained researcher Ana Bravo.

According to Romera, "The results of the study are encouraging. Most adolescents (84%) defend victims of bullying in a sustained way over time. There is also a percentage of schoolchildren who had not defended victims, but began to do so (5%) over time."

Defending victims: A personality that is socially and normatively adjusted and self-perceived as popular

"The results of the study show that social networks have inherent restorative power. The defense group is strong and stable," said Professor Rosario Ortega.

To understand what occurs and to encourage the promotion of defensive behaviors, the UCO study analyzed the associations between the different victim-defense trajectories in relation to three other variables involved in the management of relationships with peers: normative adjustment, social adjustment, and students' self-perceived popularity.

Normative adjustment entails ethical and responsible behavior. "If you're normatively adjusted, it's because you respect others," said Romera. Social adjustment involves being integrated into the group. Finally, self-perceived popularity refers to the adolescent's own perception of his [social position](#) and influence within the group.

"We observed that the first group (stable in highly defensive behavior) was also stable in terms of these three social dynamics, perceiving themselves as normatively, socially, and popularly adjusted," continued

Bravo.

"Those who stopped defending victims, in turn, showed a tendency to not adjust to social norms; and those who began to defend victims started to feel more integrated into the group and in a position of influence, which allowed them to do something to change the situations of bullying suffered by their peers."

Thus, "to increase this defense it is necessary for the adolescent to feel that their context is cohesive, that they are part of a group that must be cared for and protected, and that also features a certain leadership and legitimacy," added Romera.

"We find that these results, in addition to opening up new research questions, are very encouraging, as they allow us to continue supporting educational proposals based on the ethics of care, which we are working on through different projects at schools, such as the CuidaMe (TakeCareOfMe) program," concluded Ortega.

In short, this work demonstrates that defense [behavior](#) is linked to socio-moral balance and the relevance of that ethical principle of care, which can curb bullying. This opens up lines of research that will seek to identify, for example, the causality of those [defense](#) behaviors. What motivates adolescents to defend these victims?

The study is [published](#) in the *Journal of School Psychology*.

More information: Ana Bravo et al, Trajectories of defending behaviors: Longitudinal association with normative and social adjustment and self-perceived popularity, *Journal of School Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jsp.2023.101252](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2023.101252)

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