



A secure parent-child attachment can be characterised as one where a child in distress knows he or she will be readily comforted by his parent. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO



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Want to reduce the likelihood of your child being bullied or becoming a bully? It all starts with a good parent-child relationship, a new study finds.

Upper-primary pupils with a more secure parent-child attachment reported being involved in fewer bullying behaviours, either as victims or as bullies, according to a study led by Assistant Professor Cheung Hoi Shan of Yale-NUS College.

A secure parent-child relationship can be characterised as one where a child in distress knows he will be readily comforted by his parent, for instance.

This security and attachment, especially in the early years, serve to discourage children from bullying others and also protect children from being bullied, said Dr Cheung, who has been studying parental attachment since 2008.

One way to explain this is that children who have a positive view of relationships are more socially competent. They also see themselves as being worthy of love and respect, and hence are less likely to feel the need to gain social status through bullying others, said Dr Cheung.

The study, done from 2018 to 2019, included 570 Primary 4 to 6 pupils aged nine to 13 and their parents or guardians.

Of the pupils studied, a third of them reported having experienced bullying behaviours: 23.5 per cent said they were victims while 6.7 per cent said they were both a victim and a bully.

The rest of them (69.8 per cent) reported not being involved in bullying behaviours.

Four types of bullying behaviours were looked at:

- Physical bullying (pushing or shoving)
- Relational (excluding someone)
- Verbal (shouting or saying mean things)
- Cyber (being malicious or spreading rumours online)

Both children and their caregivers provided information to the researchers.

Not only was a more secure parent-child attachment found linked to fewer bullying behaviours, it also led to better emotional well-being and better academic performance.

Dr Cheung said the study aims to find factors that can reduce bullying behaviours.

"Much research has been done on bullying and its negative effects. What we are more interested in is what we can do to alleviate the situation. We were trying to look for protective factors, or conditions to reduce the negative behaviour," she said.

HOW TO BUILD A SECURE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Dr Cheung said a well-researched way to build a secure parent-child attachment is to be sensitive to a child's needs.

When the child is young, it could be as simple as providing comfort in times of distress.

An example of a child with secure attachment could be, if he is hurt at a playground, he knows he can run to a parent for comfort, after which he is soothed and returns to play.

"There is an expectation that someone is able to provide comfort. Then the child feels okay again," said Dr Cheung.

Things to consider include the adult's quality of response.

"Did the parents see the fall in the first place? Were they there to monitor and did they know the child was in distress?" she said.

The next step would be how they responded: Was it quick and helpful? Was it appropriate or did the

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parent come quickly to give the child a smack for being careless?

"When the parent is constantly and consistently sensitive, he (or she) is able to create a secure parent-child attachment," she said.

Conversely, a child with insecure attachment has already formed the expectation that either the caregiver is not available, or even if he goes to the person, he will not get comfort or may receive more stress.

This impression could have been formed from past experiences, said Dr Cheung.

In the past, when the child went to his parents, he was ignored or scolded. Over time, she says, the child learns, "I better not go because it will be worse for me".

For an older child, an authoritative parenting style – where a child can make decisions within the boundaries of what is acceptable – will help to cultivate a secure attachment relationship because the child feels he is respected, added Dr Cheung.

FRIENDS PROVIDE LIMITED SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF BULLYING

While past research showed that having supportive friends could reduce the chances of children being involved in bullying, this study found limited peer support for victims of bullying, said Dr Cheung.

It could be that support from friends pales in comparison with the effects of parent-child attachment, she said.

"In this study, friendship doesn't add any more value to family factors," she noted.

She added that this study underscores the importance of emphasising family support over and above the preventive programmes routinely offered by schools.

She cited the example of how when there are bullying incidents in schools, people may ask what the school is doing to prevent future incidents.

"But the study shows that they should not just be looking at the school, but also at home-school partnerships," she said.

She feels that it is more effective to look at what parents can do to cultivate a relationship that will help children build appropriate social skills before they start school. "It all starts with having a good relationship with parents," she said.

She added that bully-free campaigns run by schools need to be reinforced by parents or guardians.

Dr Cheung said it is heartening to find that the family factor is still very important at the upper-primary age group when it comes to both bullying and victimisation.

"Parents may want to consider this: If I improve my relationship with my child or become more sensitive to my child's needs, would that reduce the incidents of bullying?"

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Coping with bullying

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HELPLINES

MENTAL WELL-BEING

- Institute of Mental Health's Mental Health Helpline: 6389-2222 (24 hours)
- Samaritans of Singapore: 1800-221-4444 (24 hours)/1-767 (24 hours)
- Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
- Silver Ribbon Singapore: 6386-1928
- Tinkle Friend: 1800-274-4788
- Community Health Assessment Team: 6493-6500/1 and www.chat.mentalhealth.sg

COUNSELLING

- TOUCHline (Counselling): 1800-377-2252
- Care Corner Counselling Centre: 1800-353-5800

COUNSELLING AND COACHING

- Focus on the Family: Go to www.family.org.sg/counselling or call 6491-0700 (weekdays, 9am to 6pm)

ONLINE RESOURCES

- eC2.sg
- Tinkle Friend (www.tinklefriend.sg)

While schools train peer support leaders to be "eyes on the ground", these students are often unsure how to respond when they see someone being bullied in reality, says cyber wellness expert Chong Ee Jay. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

Jane Ng Correspondent

Sarah (not her real name), 14, was an average student with a reputation for being snobbish and a show-off.

She was not well-liked and, after a while, a group of five vocal classmates began bullying her, calling her names and using vulgarities.

They spread rumours about her and got other classmates to ostracise her, both in person and in group chats.

The acts escalated over time and became physical when the bullies found opportunities to bump into her or pinch her.

She did not speak up about the bullying; neither did her classmates who knew what was going on, as they were afraid of the bullies.

This went on for two months and came to a head when the bullies posted hurtful comments on tellyn, a messaging app and website that allows users to give and receive anonymous feedback.

Other classmates joined in the online bullying with jokes and demeaning comments, with some mentioning her name.

A few classmates eventually tipped their teacher off about it, and the school started investigating. By this time, Sarah had started to self-harm, showing up in school with cut marks on her arm.

Eventually, she was counselled and sought help from a private psychiatrist.

The bullies were disciplined. Cyber wellness expert Chong Ee Jay, who worked with the school's case management team, said that several measures could have helped the victim.

One is to encourage youth to report a bullying incident rather than be bystanders, said Mr Chong, who is from charity Focus on the Family Singapore.

Another is to arm peer support leaders with practical experience.

He said that while schools train peer support leaders to be the "eyes on the ground", these students are unsure how to respond when they see someone being bullied in reality.

"They need more practice to know what to do in a real situation," he said.

WHEN SHOULD PARENTS STEP IN?

With teenagers spending more time online now, parents should be prepared to step in if they suspect their child is being bullied, said experts. Mr Chong suggests parents look out for tell-tale signs of cyber bullying, such as:

- A sudden change in device use habits, for instance, more time spent on devices
- Deleting of social media accounts
- Asking about blocking others online
- Getting many new online friend requests
- Showing strong negative emotions after social media usage or after school

Children are more likely to turn to adults for support if they feel that it will make the situation better and not worse. Avoid spying on children unless there is a safety concern as it may encourage children, especially youth, to further hide their activities.



MS JERRINE KHONG, who has done research on cyber bullying

- Decreased self-esteem, often observed through verbal expressions like "life is meaningless"
- A change in daily routines and habits, for example, meals and sleep patterns
- Avoiding communication with family members and friends

He added that denying children access to technology to avoid the bullies does not make the bullying go away. "Teenagers may feel frustrated that they are the victims and yet are being denied privileges."

Ms Jerrine Khong, who has done research on cyber bullying, said parents should assess if there are any safety concerns, and focus on making their child feel heard and supported.

"Children are more likely to turn to adults for support if they feel that it will make the situation better and not worse," she said.

Parents may need to monitor their child's online activities or use parental control software for younger children, she added.

"Avoid spying on children unless there is a safety concern as it may encourage children, especially youth, to further hide their activities," she said.

TEACH CHILDREN TO PROTECT THEMSELVES

If the child is being cyber bullied, Ms Khong advised parents and children to take these steps:

- Stop what you are doing. Do not respond or retaliate
- Block the cyber bully or restrict communications access

- Save the evidence. Record all instances of cyber bullying, for example, messages, images or comments
- Tell a trusted adult about the incident. Report to the content provider, for example, website, application or game

Ms Carol Loi, founder of social enterprise Village Consultancy, which provides digital literacy education, said parents can talk about bullying preemptively.

"There could be family conversations about whether the children have seen anyone who was bullied and what their thoughts were," she said.

She said parents should emphasise that any form of bullying is not acceptable, and neither is joining in when another child is being bullied. One way is to point out that those who bully often want attention, so ignoring the person is useful, she said.

Another way is to encourage and remind children to focus on their strengths instead of allowing negative thoughts to overwhelm their minds, added Ms Loi.

For younger children, she suggested parents role-play with them to practise how to manage various scenarios that may happen, so as to build up the child's confidence.

"This will help them show calmness and confidence if they need to interact with the bully," she said.

She gave an example of how she role-played with her daughter, now a teenager, when she was in primary school.

Ms Loi, role-playing the bully:

"You are so fat or ugly or smelly or stupid."

Her daughter: "Yah, so?"

HELP YOUR CHILD FEEL SAFE AGAIN

Role-play could also help if bullying has already taken place, said Ms Ann Hui Peng, director of student service at the charity Singapore Children's Society.

One way is to arm children with appropriate conflict resolution and assertive communication skills by getting them to act these out.

"Not only does it help them remember the skills learnt, but it also builds their confidence as they get to apply the skills across different scenarios and settings," she said.

Another important step is to get the child to identify a support network of safe and trusted adults around them.

Three key conditions must be met: the adults are accessible and willing to listen, they believe what the child says and they are able to protect the child.

Finally, it is vital to work towards restoring and repairing the relationship between the victim and the bully, or "it will be hard for the victims to feel safe returning to school", said Ms Ann. She suggested cooperating with school personnel and collectively working towards repairing the involved children's hurt feelings and restoring their damaged relationships with one another.

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