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Association between depressive symptomatology and bullying behaviour in school children: A cross-sectional study in Galle, Sri Lanka

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Background: Bullying negatively affects mental and physical health of both victims and bullies. It is a growing public health issue in Sri Lanka.

Objective: To examine the association between bullying and depressive symptoms among early adolescent school children in Galle municipality area.

Method: A descriptive cross-sectional study (n=576) was conducted in six selected schools in Galle municipal area. Adolescent Peer Relationship Scale which was validated in Sri Lanka and was used to assess bullying behaviour and victimization. CES-D depression scale which was validated in Sri Lanka was used to measure depressive symptomatology. Data were analyzed by SPSS 25.0 version. Chi square was used to assess associations. Ethical approval was obtained from Ethics Review Committee, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, University of Ruhuna.

Results: Mean age of the participants was 12.9±0.8 years. Overall prevalence of bullies and bully victims were 3.8% and 92.3% respectively. The prevalence of mild, moderate, and severe depressive symptomatology among the participants were 55.0%, 27.0%, and 18.0% respectively. A higher percentage of students with severe depressive symptomatology (99.0%) were subjected to bullying compared to the students with mild (92.4%) and moderate (98.7%) level of depressive symptomatology (p<0.05). Further, students who have had severe depressive symptomatology were more likely to get exposed to verbal bullying (98.1%) compared to those students with mild (89.3%) and moderate (94.1%) level of depressive symptomatology (p<0.05). Similar observations were noted for social (98.1% vs 74.1% and 92.3%) and physical (97.1% vs 75.4% and 87.2%) bullying (p<0.05). Students who have had severe depressive symptomatology were more like to be bully-victims (97.1%) compared to students with mild (89.3%), and moderate (96.2%) level of symptomatology (p <0.05).

Conclusion: Exposure to bullying behaviour is associated with depressive symptoms in early adolescent school children in Galle. It is essential to explore personal and environmental factors related to bullying behaviour and depressive symptoms in this target group to guide on preventive actions.