

Video-modeling, bullying and autism

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Bullying among school-aged children brings important repercussions to the mental health and academic lives of affected individuals. Patients with autism have an increased risk of bullying, in view of two striking features: difficulty in socialization, which reduces the ability to create strong friendships; and the presence of stereotypies, which makes the behavior of these individuals markedly different in the view of the others. In addition, bullying becomes more serious involving these patients in that these individuals often present inappropriate reactions with aggression or emotional dysregulation. There are several bullying intervention programs that focus their actions on remediation of damages caused by the situation itself and not on the victim's response. These programs often have variable and inconsistent results. In order to find an alternative management to this situation, a group of researchers from Claremont Graduate University (USA) published an intervention study on six autistic youngsters aged 9 to 13 years, of both genders, using a video modeling method. This method values the assertive verbal response to aggression, which achieves several objectives, such as: (1) avoiding passivity in the reaction, which can contribute to victimization; (2) increase the power of the victim, since the act of bullying presupposes an imbalance of forces between the peers; (3) surprise the aggressor, who does not expect a response from the victim; and (4) be socially acceptable as a form of reaction to repeated assaults. In this study, autistic youngsters are exposed to videos in which three types of bullying are exemplified by actors: verbal, physical, and exclusion. In a second moment, the same videos are presented, but with a different outcome, composed of assertive responses to the aggression. Finally, autistic youngsters are tested for real situations of the three types of bullying and their responses are evaluated. It should be noted that autistic children are also encouraged to tell their parents what happened. The results show that autistic children have been able to capture the content of the videos and transpose them into real life. What was most interesting was that the speeches were not simply repeated but adapted to the context experienced in the bullying test situations.

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Autism spectrum disorder is a prevalent condition in children of school age. Currently, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that one in every 59 children is within the spectrum of the disorder. It is four times more common in boys than in girls. Its risk factors include: parents with advanced age, genetic syndromes such as Down syndrome X-Fragile syndrome and tuberous sclerosis; and prematurity / low weight. According to DSM-V, its cardinal symptoms include social interaction deficit and repetitive / stereotyped behavior. There are no additional tests to confirm this clinical condition and the diagnosis is based exclusively on clinical criteria. There is no curative treatment for the disorder. Medications can help control symptoms such as restlessness, insomnia and compulsive behavior. The core of the treatment consists of behavioral therapies focused on the cardinal symptoms of autism (eg, social skills training). Children with autism have great difficulty in socializing, which can be aggravated in situations of bullying^{1,2}. It should also be noted that autistic children are more likely to be victims of bullying than children without this condition. There are studies demonstrating that these patients usually suffer aggression even by their siblings³. The prevalence of bullying among autistic patients is estimated at 40%. Coping with this problem is not a simple task and several techniques have been developed for proper management. A recent publication highlights the important role of training in theory of mind (ToM) in reducing mothers' bullying victimization complaint. Theory of mind (ToM) consists in the cognitive understanding of other people's mental state and, likewise, predicting their behavior. Autistic children have a deficit in mind theory, which raises the risk of suffering and / or perpetrating acts of bullying. The study reported here brings another alternative for the management of bullying situations that can be used even by children without other diseases. Video modeling methodology has already been used in other situations in patients with autism, such as communication instructions, and has great potential to teach verbal, assertive and non-violent responses to conflict resolution. Another positive point is its potential for dissemination in regions with low socio-economic index, as is the case in the interior of Brazil. Finally, one point that needs to be reinforced is the importance of children informing their parents about verbal and / or physical aggressions, since they do not always know what goes on in the school environment, and this measure can facilitate decision making.

References

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