

Ostracism at School

Ostracism or exclusion may not leave external scars, but it can cause pain that often is deeper and lasts longer than a physical injury. ... Again and again research has found that strong, harmful reactions are possible even when ostracized by a stranger or for a short amount of time. Kipling D. Williams

In schools, the focus on bullying often fails to address ostracism (defined here as being ignored or excluded socially; a general refusal by others at a school to include someone). Ostracism can be a face-to-face experience or can occur online. It can be used as punishment or as a form of relational aggression. Researchers have identified three stages: the initial acts of being ignored or excluded, coping, and resignation. The resulting emotional pain is seen as caused by threats to fundamental psychological well-being (e.g., threats to feelings about self and connectedness to others). Research also suggests that some individuals are especially *reject sensitive*.

Besides the impact on individual students (and staff), ostracism can have negative consequences schoolwide.

People Vary in How They Cope

From an **Interview** with Kipling Williams a professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences in Purdue's College of Health and Human Sciences.

Coping can mean the person tries to harder be included. For example, some of those who are ostracized may be more likely to engage in behaviors that increase their future inclusion by mimicking, complying, obeying orders, cooperating or expressing attraction.

They will go to great lengths to enhance their sense of belonging and self-esteem, Williams said.

If they feel there is little hope for re-inclusion or that they have little control over their lives, they may resort to provocative behavior and even aggression.

At some point, they stop worrying about being liked, and they just want to be noticed, Williams said.

However, if a person has been ostracized for a long time, they may not have the ability to continue coping as the pain lingers. Some people may give up.

The third stage is called resignation. This is when people who have been ostracized are less helpful and more aggressive to others in general, he said. It also increases anger and sadness, and long-term ostracism can result in alienation, depression, helplessness and feelings of unworthiness.

Williams is trying to better understand how ostracized individuals may be attracted to extreme groups and what might be the reactions of ostracized groups.

These groups provide members with a sense of belonging, self-worth and control, but they can fuel narrowness, radicalism and intolerance, and perhaps a propensity toward hostility and violence toward others," he said. "When a person feels ostracized they feel out of control, and aggressive behavior is one way to restore that control. When these individuals come together in a group there can be negative consequences.

*The material in this document builds on work done by Theodore T. Caligiuri as a participant with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA in 2023.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA. Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Intervening

A fundamental aspect of an individual's life involves social and emotional development. At school, relationships with peers and adults are critical in facilitating or negatively affecting such development. Promoting and maintaining positive relationships, of course, is a central concern for school stakeholders. Processes that foster close, positive interpersonal relationships at school are facilitative; ostracism is an example of how things can go wrong.

Good connections occur naturally for many students and staff. For some, however, relationships are a problem. Any number of factors in a student's environment or individual development may lead to problems in interpersonal relationships.

When problems such as ostracism (or bullying, truancy, aggression, etc.) are identified, the tendency is to develop interventions that focus on each type of problem behavior separately. However, the effectiveness of doing so ignores the facts that many of the behaviors are interrelated and focusing on them one at a time is an impractical and unrealistic approach.

For schools to effectively address the wide range of barriers to learning and teaching encountered daily, a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports is essential. Embedded into such a system are concerns such as factors interfering with positive social and emotional development and problems such as ostracism.

For example, *classroom and schoolwide interventions* provide daily curricular, extracurricular, and natural opportunities to promote social and emotional development, prevent problems, and respond immediately with special supports as needed. Such opportunities are a key facet of fostering a positive and safe school climate. Interventions can be provided by a variety of school staff and by peers (e.g., peer tutoring and counseling) and are needed from the time each day that students leave for school and return from school. Many students experience ostracism and bullying before school, between classes, during lunch, and after school. Of course, it is the classroom where a student spends the greatest amount of time at school, and this is where emphasis on cooperative and collaborative group project learning can be invaluable in facilitating social and emotional development and ameliorating related problems. Peer tutoring and peer counseling also may help students who are having peer relationship problems.

Because students vary in the ease with which they relate to others, *individual differences* in motivation and development must be considered. Whenever the focus is on a specific student's problems, individual differences call for personalized interventions. And personalized interventions require attending to an individual's perceptions of self and others and the causes of what they are experiencing and what would help makes things better.

The nature and scope of social and emotional development and problems call for schools to work together with entities in the *home and neighborhood*. For example, a school's attention to facilitating home involvement and engagement can include providing information about activities and supports that promote positive social and emotional development, prevent problems, and enable problem solving when problems arise. And school-community connections also can enhance quality, availability, and access to a range of activities and services relevant to facilitating social and emotional development and addressing relationship problems.

Concluding Comments

Clearly, students who are ostracized need schools to focus effectively not only on fostering positive social and emotional development, but also on addressing factors related to relationship problems. To these ends, school improvement policy must ensure there is a system of student/learning supports that fully embeds mental health concerns. Such a system is fundamental to evolving a positive school climate, enhancing learning, promoting whole child development, and advancing social justice.

Two Examples of Recent Research

From: Gökmen Arslan (2021). Social ostracism in school context: Academic self-concept, prosocial behaviour, and adolescents' conduct problems. *Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 38, 24-35.

Abstract: Social ostracism is a serious psychosocial pattern because of its detrimental impact on adolescents' adjustment and school functioning. The objective of present study was to examine whether academic self-concept and prosocial behaviour mediated the association of social ostracism with conduct problems among adolescents. Participants of the study comprised 337 adolescents (48.2% girls), and ranged in age from 11 to 13 years ($M = 11.95$, $SD = .799$). Findings from mediation analysis revealed that social ostracism had a significant effect on academic self-concept, prosocial behaviours, and conduct problems. Academic self-concept and prosocial behaviours also had significant effects on conduct problems. Further, academic self-concept and prosocial behaviour simultaneously served as mediators on the association between social ostracism and conduct problems in adolescents. These results suggest that academic self-concept and prosocial behaviour may help to explain the effect of social ostracism on adolescents' conduct problems and contribute to developing prevention and intervention strategies in school settings to foster healthy development and adjustment among students. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

From: Selda Polat Hüsrevsahi (2021). The reasons for and results of ostracism at schools and recommendations for solutions through teacher experiences. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 17, 202-215.

As in other organizations, there is ostracism also in educational organizations. Apart from the individual consequences of being ostracized, there are also undesirable organizational consequences. Considering the potential of educational organizations to transform individuals, the effect of ostracism on teachers becomes particularly important. The purpose of the study was to examine the reasons for and results of the ostracism that teachers face at schools by the school principals, and the recommendations for solutions to prevent ostracism. The study group of the study, which was structured with the phenomenology design, consisted of 12 elementary and middle primary school teachers who had personal experience with ostracism. The data collected through interviews were analyzed with content analysis. The study revealed that teachers were exposed to ostracism for political, social and/or individual reasons. Ostracized teachers experienced psychological and organizational problems. The teachers stated that preventing ostracism in schools would be possible with a more democratic and fairer organizational culture.

A Few Resources Related to Practices

[7 Tips for Helping Kids Deal With Being Ostracized](#)

[How to Help A Kind Who Feels Left Out & Ostracized By Their Friends](#)

[Addressing Bullying](#)

[20 Collaborative Learning Tips And Strategies For Teachers](#)

[Project-Based Learning \(PBL\) Benefits, Examples & 10 Ideas for Classroom Implementation](#)

[Collaborative Learning Strategies for Fostering Teamwork in the ESL Classroom](#)

[Making Collaborative/Cooperative Learning Effective in Classrooms](#)

[Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions](#)

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