When Push Comes to Shove: How Are Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder Coping With Bullying?

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Abstract

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are frequent targets of peer victimization (i.e., bullying). Although the frequency and potential impact of such experiences on students with ASD has been examined, the potential coping strategies implemented by such students are relatively unexplored. This qualitative study examined coping strategies for peer victimization as suggested by 38 students with ASD who do not have cognitive impairment. Participants viewed cartoons depicting characters that experienced various forms of bullying at school and responded to open-ended questions to explore their suggested coping strategies. Thematic analysis yielded three themes: approach coping, avoidance coping, and complexities of bullying. This study provides insight into the coping strategies implemented by students with ASD and possible avenues for school-based intervention.

Keywords

autism spectrum disorder, bullying, coping, qualitative

Bullying, also commonly referred to as peer victimization, is a pervasive problem for children and youth, particularly for those in vulnerable populations, such as those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD; see Schroeder, Cappadocia, Bebko, Pepler, & Weiss, 2017).

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Peer victimization occurs within a relationship that is characterized by a power imbalance and can be defined as repeated aggressive behaviour targeted toward others that is intended to cause harm (Pepler, Craig, & O’Connell, 1999; Rigby, 2002). Students with special education needs, including ASD, often possess low social status within school settings, making them particularly susceptible to peer victimization (Schroeder et al., 2014). Peer victimization is common among children and youth and is associated with many negative outcomes. An international World Health Organization study of about 134,000 participants indicates that one third of children aged 11 to 15 years report occasional peer victimization, while a smaller subset (about 10%) report chronic victimization (Molcho et al., 2009). Longitudinal research supports the latter finding that 5% to 20% of children and adolescents experience chronic peer victimization throughout their education (Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008). Peer victimization is linked to academic difficulties (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010) and internalizing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal behaviours (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010).

Students with ASD are highly susceptible to being bullied in the context of the core impairments of the disorder (Schroeder et al., 2014; Sterzing, Shattuck, Narendorf, Wagner, & Cooper, 2012). ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by impairment of social communication as well as the presence of restricted and/or repetitive behaviours or interests (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Within the school context, the core features of ASD affect a student’s relationships with peers and school staff (e.g., Locke, Ishijima, Kasari, & London, 2010). For example, challenges with conversation and awareness of social cues, in addition to the rigid and/or repetitive behaviours often exhibited by students with ASD, may be perceived as odd by their typically developing peers (Haq & Le Couteur, 2004). Moreover, the social naivete of such students can lead to increased social vulnerability and the potential for manipulation by other, more socially savvy students (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

Students with ASD experience high rates of victimization and are 4 times more likely than typically developing students to report being bullied (Wainscot, Naylor, Sutcliffe, Tantam, & Williams, 2008). Self-reported rates of peer victimization of students with ASD are between 57% and 75% (Kowalski & Fedina, 2011; Little, 2001, 2002), while parent-reported rates range from 46% to 77% (Cappadocia, Weiss, & Pepler, 2012; Sterzing et al., 2012). These rates are higher than students with Cystic Fibrosis (14.3%), Learning Disability (24.2%), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (29.2%), or typically developing students (8.5%; Twyman et al., 2010). Concern with social status and the innate desire for humans to create social hierarchies wherever social groupings exist (Koski, Xie, & Olson, 2015) make elimination of bullying in schools difficult (Milner, 2004). Vulnerable populations, such as students with ASD, provide opportunities for students with “high status” to improve or demonstrate their skills (e.g., various forms of peer victimization) with little risk of retaliation, thus promoting a power imbalance (Milner, 2004). Given the negative outcomes associated with bullying, consideration of supports for students with ASD who are bullied to reduce both the immediate and long-term negative consequences of this form of abuse is essential (Hanish & Guerra, 2002). Specifically, the literature on
coping strategies, which are implicated in the reduction of physiological arousal and psychological suffering when confronted with stressors like peer victimization, is important in understanding how bullying is handled by the victims (Baron, Lipsitt, & Goodwin, 2006).

Coping has been defined as “a person’s ongoing efforts in thought and action to manage specific demands appraised as taxing or overwhelming” (Lazarus, 1993, p. 8) and has a strong influence on an individual’s physical and mental health, particularly in response to early and extreme stress (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014). Indeed, ineffective and/or maladaptive coping strategies can have long-lasting and detrimental effects on an individual’s social–emotional well-being (Lazarus, 2006).

Coping strategies are commonly classified into approach and avoidance responses (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Approach strategies are actions or behaviours that are taken by an individual to directly alter stressful situations. Examples include active problem solving or social support seeking, when others’ insights and support are sought to address the issue (Fields & Prinz, 1997). Conversely, avoidance strategies are those that enable an individual to manage personal physiological and psychological reactions to the negative stressor (Fields & Prinz, 1997). Researchers have described three avoidance strategies that typical school-aged children often use in the context of peer conflict: (a) cognitive distancing or resistance to thinking about the negative experience, (b) internalizing or emotional reactions directed toward oneself for bringing on the negative situation, and (c) externalizing, or focusing one’s emotions on other people or objects (Causey & Dubow, 1992). Combinations of strategies are often implemented by typically developing individuals, with the selection and application varying depending on environmental and situational demands (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). In general, approach strategies are related to improved psychological outcome when successful at producing the desired change (i.e., stopping the stressor) whereas avoidant strategies can be adaptive for those with less control over their situation, as is the case for students with ASD who experience frequent bullying (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989).

A limited number of studies have investigated how students with ASD cope with peer victimization. One of the first studies on this topic was a qualitative investigation of responses to bullying among 11- to 16-year-old students with ASD (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). The students varied in their responses to bullying, with some participants seeking social support from teachers, friends, and/or classmates. Other students attempted to deal with the victimization by themselves and only sought social support as a last resort. Some resorted to aggression, and many students reported a lack of trust in others and a desire for withdrawal from social interaction. In general, participants’ responses were largely based on whether they believed that the strategy would be effective given their previous experience. Social support seeking was mediated by relationship histories and whether participants felt that there was someone to whom they could turn. Barriers to seeking social support included more severe ASD symptoms, an absence of trust in others, and a preference for solitude. These barriers increased participants’ isolation and, ultimately, their susceptibility to peer victimization. More recently, Bitsika and Sharpley
(2014) examined how 48 boys with ASD and without intellectual disability responded to bullying via a mixed-method approach. The most commonly reported responses were to walk away (56%), ignore (54%), say something back (44%), or avoid the bullies (40%). A smaller but significant percentage of the sample (33%) responded with physical aggression (e.g., hitting, pushing, kicking), and 17% smiled to demonstrate that they were unaffected by the bullying. When asked if they informed anyone about these experiences, 76% of the sample told their parents, 52% told school staff (e.g., teacher, principal, or school counselor), 10% told their siblings, and 15% did not tell anyone. Many participants stated that informing someone about the bullying did not alleviate the associated distress, with 38% of the sample reporting that telling someone “sometimes” or “always” made the bullying worse. At home, many of the students engaged in “withdrawal” responses, with 56% asking parents to not send them to school the next day and 35% trying to forget about the bullying. Overall, the authors of this study concluded that participants did not have effective coping strategies for dealing with bullying.

The current study sought to identify specific coping strategies used by students with ASD, who do not have an intellectual disability, as a precursor to potential future research on the effectiveness of certain strategies. Bullying is a complex problem, and there is limited research investigating associated coping strategies among students with ASD. In the general population, the success of certain coping strategies varies based on a number of factors such as gender, frequency of victimization, and quality of friendships (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). It is likely that the same is true for students with ASD, with strategy effectiveness varying based on both situational and individual factors.

The current study explores the coping strategies that students with ASD generate when confronted/provided with complex/multifaceted bullying situations. We sought to expand the range of coping responses identified in previous studies and provide students with a platform to voice their opinions on this topic via a video-prompted inquiry approach.

**Method**

**Participants**

Thirty-eight children and adolescents with ASD between the ages of 8 and 13 years ($M = 11.26$, $SD = 1.58$) participated in this study. Participants attended Grades 3 ($n = 5$), 4 ($n = 6$), 5 ($n = 6$), 6 ($n = 10$), 7 ($n = 9$), or 8 ($n = 2$). They were predominantly enrolled in a regular classroom ($n = 20$), with some enrolled in a specialized educational environment ($n = 10$) or a regular classroom with some small group instruction ($n = 6$). One participant was in a specialized setting with some regular classroom instruction, and one was homeschooled.

Participants had a previous diagnosis of ASD made by an appropriate licensed professional prior to participating; the validity of this diagnosis was confirmed by the research team via the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule–Second Edition (ADOS-2; Lord et al., 2012). Thirty-one participants (82%) identified as male, which
reflects an expected gender ratio of the ASD population (APA, 2013). All participants were required to demonstrate a verbal intelligence score of 70 or greater on a brief measure of cognitive ability to ensure that they were able to understand and respond to the study’s questions. Participant demographic information appears in Table 1.

### Measures

**ADOS-2.** The ADOS-2 was administered by research reliable administrators to obtain objective evidence of each participant’s ASD diagnosis. The ADOS-2 is a semi-structured, standardized assessment of social-communicative abilities, imaginative play, and restricted/repetitive behaviours, and is considered a “gold-standard” instrument in ASD assessment. Examinee behaviours are documented during the assessment and then coded and summed to create an algorithm for diagnosis. Only Module 3 of the ADOS-2 was administered to participants as it is suitable for children or adolescents with fluent speech. Interrater reliability for Module 3 is strong, as is test–retest reliability and internal consistency. Item-total correlations support the reliability and validity of the ADOS-2 scores; sensitivity and specificity are 91% and 84%, respectively, when differentiating autism and non-spectrum individuals, and 72% and 76%, respectively, when differentiating individuals on the broader autism spectrum and non-spectrum individuals (Lord et al., 2012).

**Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence–Second Edition (WASI-II).** The WASI-II (Wechsler, 2011) is an individually administered abbreviated test of cognitive intelligence for individuals aged 6 to 90 years. It is a reputable choice for the measurement of intelligence as it has been normed on a large and representative sample and shows strong psychometric properties, reliability, and validity (McCrimmon & Smith, 2013). It consists of two domains, verbal comprehension (VCI, consisting of the Similarities and Vocabulary subtests) and perceptual reasoning (PRI, consisting of the Block Design and Matrix Reasoning subtests), and provides a full-scale IQ (FSIQ). The VCI was used to determine each participant’s verbal intelligence.

**Semi-structured interviews.** Interviews were conducted with participants after they viewed three short video clips of bullying episodes adopted from the freely available...
video toolkit *Take a Stand, Lend a Hand, Stop Bullying Now* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). The webisodes (1, 2, and 5) show cartoon characters experiencing various forms of bullying (verbal, physical, social, cyber) within a school environment and represent the complex nature of bullying (e.g., repetitiveness despite telling a trusted teacher, bullying by multiple students, beginning at a new school). After each video, students were asked open-ended questions to obtain their opinions on how the victim could potentially cope with the situation and also how they themselves would cope if they were in the same situation as the character. The interview questions are presented in the appendix.

**Procedure**

The current study is embedded in a larger investigation of bullying of students with ASD. Participants were recruited through community agencies, school divisions, and health offices that provide services to individuals with ASD. In addition, participants from previous research with the corresponding author were invited to participate in the current study. Interested parents contacted the research team to obtain information about the study and attended one or two sessions with their child (approximately three hours total). Informed consent was obtained from parents and verbal assent was obtained from students. The study was approved by the local university ethics review board.

Children first completed the inclusionary measures (ADOS-2 and WASI-II). All participants met the ADOS-2 criterion; participation was concluded for children who did not receive a WASI-II VCI score of 70 or higher. Children who met these criteria were invited to complete the remaining measures for the overall project. Bullying is a sensitive topic and viewing students being bullied (even cartoon characters) has the potential to upset participants. Thus, the research team observed children carefully for any distress and checked in with the participants about their desire to continue viewing the videos throughout this process. Only one participant expressed mild distress by asking for the video to be paused and commenting that he did not like how the main character was treated by the others in the video; when given the option to discontinue participation, he indicated that he wanted to continue responding to the questions.

**Results**

Transcription of the interviews occurred after each participant completed their participation. Thematic analysis was used to explore themes within the data. The process of thematic analysis consisted of five steps; interested readers are directed to the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) to familiarize themselves with the process. The first author was responsible for the initial coding and development of themes. The process began with the researcher making initial notes and then proceeding to line-by-line open coding. Initial thoughts regarding potential themes were recorded and the process of coding remained flexible and dynamic as additional interviews were analyzed. After all of the interviews had been coded, segments of interviews were retrieved and written with
codes to further develop code groupings. Further grouping and code re-establishment aided in the development of themes, and the resulting themes were then named and defined. A second coder then independently coded all of the qualitative data and derived themes; high intercoder reliability was achieved (97% agreement). These two researchers then discussed and resolved any discrepancies.

The qualitative questions explored participants’ views on how children who are victimized could address and cope with the situation and, subsequently, how they themselves would respond if they were in the same situation as the cartoon character in the video. Thematic analysis indicated three primary themes (each with several subthemes): (a) approach coping strategies, (b) avoidance coping strategies, and (c) complexities of bullying. A description of each theme, including sample quotes, is provided below and presented in Table 2.

**Theme 1: Approach Coping Strategies**

This theme included active methods to changing the situation, including strategies that may be maladaptive (e.g., physical aggression/revenge). The vast majority of responses fell under this theme and were thus further categorized into four subthemes: (a) telling a teacher or another adult, (b) stand up/say something, (c) problem solving, and (d) externalizing behaviours.

**Subtheme 1: Telling a teacher or another adult.** The most common response under the approach coping theme involved seeking social support from an adult (e.g., teacher, parent, and/or principal). Overall, 103 such responses were provided across the three different webisodes viewed by participants. Some participants reported that they would try to solve the situation on their own at first and if unsuccessful, they would then tell an adult. Others indicated that telling someone would make them feel better, while acknowledging that it would not change the situation. Three participants acknowledged the severity of bullying and suggested involving the police, and only four participants suggested turning to friends for support/help. In addition, two participants suggested informing the bullies’ parents.

**Subtheme 2: Stand up/say something.** Another common response was to stand up to the bully. However, some of the students stated that their “comebacks” had the potential to further entice the bully to continue bullying. Other students reported that they would threaten the bully in an effort to address the situation. Finally, some students offered strategies similar to those taught to adolescents in “Social Stories” (a popular social skills building resource; Gray, 2004) as well as in an empirically supported social skills intervention for students with ASD (e.g., responding to teasing with a quick retort such as “Whatever!”; Laugeson & Frankel, 2011).

**Subtheme 3: Problem solving.** Only seven students suggested problem-solving techniques when faced with peer victimization. Responses within this subtheme indicated some degree of resilience and entailed efforts to maintain the peace with creative and
Table 2. Summary of Themes for Coping Strategies for Peer Victimization as Identified by Child Participants.

| Theme                          | Description                                                                 | Sample quotes from interviews                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Approach strategies            | Active methods to change the situation directly                              | “If it keeps happening something is wrong and you need to tell an adult and try to sort this out”
|                                |                                                                             | “Tell coach, principal, or call police if it got really out of hand.”
|                                |                                                                             | “Tell my mom because then my mom can do something about it and I can sit back and relax”
|                                |                                                                             | “I’d stand up to them by saying ‘stop that or something bad will happen to you’ in a mean voice”
|                                |                                                                             | “I’d probably go up to bully and tell him to stop, and then if he didn’t I’d just keep bugging him to stop”
|                                |                                                                             | “Uh . . . I would talk to her (the bully) to see if we could solve it”
| Avoidance strategies           | Passive approaches and/or methods to avoid the bully/bullying               | “Well if it’s a one-time thing, if it happens once and never happens again . . . I think you’re pretty good to, it’d be, you just kind of ignore it”
|                                |                                                                             | “I might try to ignore. Cause then maybe the bully would realize that he or she wasn’t getting an effect on me . . . and then probably stop”
|                                |                                                                             | “I would just try to keep away and find a really far away locker from them.”
|                                |                                                                             | “I would probably just live with it.”
|                                |                                                                             | “If I were KB I would try and sit far away from the bully”
|                                |                                                                             | “Tell my mom maybe we should move to a new place.”
|                                |                                                                             | “Say maybe: I’m getting bullied should I go to a different school?”
| Complexities of bullying       | Coping responses to bullying are complex and dependent upon the situation and other factors, sometimes resulting in confusion as to an appropriate course of action | “Well . . . she probably could have told the teacher, but it could turn into a fight. If it’s really bad they may just say ‘No!’ . . . ya it depends on how bad the bully is”
|                                |                                                                             | “Well ignoring wouldn’t work cause it would make her look kind of stupid”
|                                |                                                                             | “I’d tell em’ to shut up . . . and then I’d get in trouble probably/maybe or they would . . . cause usually when I say something back to the person, I say it louder, and then I get in trouble”
|                                |                                                                             | “Like, not really nothing. Actually like . . . I’m not sure”
|                                |                                                                             | “I don’t know. Once something is on the Internet it’s always there” |
mature ways to befriend the bully. However, some responses could be considered overly optimistic (e.g., attempting to connect with the bully as opposed to dwelling on the situation).

**Subtheme 4: Externalizing behaviours.** Eleven students suggested externalizing strategies (e.g., getting angry, physical aggression, and/or revenge) to cope with the bullying that, while potentially allowing for emotional release during times of stress, are likely not effective means by which to cope with victimization. Interestingly, some students suggested unrealistic and vengeful responses. For example, one student provided insight into how they would seek revenge on the bully in gym class during a game of dodgeball.

**Theme 2: Avoidance Coping Strategies**

This theme captured more “passive” responses in that the students sought to avoid the stressor instead of seeking to change their situation. Two subthemes were derived, including ignoring or doing nothing and walking away/staying away (including changing schools).

**Subtheme 1: Ignoring.** Fifteen participants suggested ignoring as a strategy. As part of this approach, two participants recognized the difference between once-off aggression versus repetitive bullying, suggesting that ignoring is effective when it is a one-time occurrence but not necessarily if it occurs repeatedly. Five participants simply suggested to “not listen” or “ignore it.” One student reported that he would “probably just live with it” whereas another student reported that he would “wait for the bullies to go away.”

**Subtheme 2: Walk away/stay away.** Twelve participants suggested walking away from or avoiding the bully, either as an initial response or after other strategies were ineffective. Four students suggested running away from the bully, hiding, moving their lockers, and/or leaving the school for that day, potentially reflecting the lack of safety that they feel at school. An additional three participants suggested changing schools as an option.

**Theme 3: Complexities of Bullying**

This theme portrays the complexities of bullying and the subtleties that make coping with victimization difficult for students with ASD. Two subthemes were identified: (a) barriers to strategies and (b) uncertainty.

**Subtheme 1: Barriers to strategies.** Twenty responses by 11 participants reflected barriers to certain strategies and the challenge of determining a straightforward solution. Participants indicated that bullying may persist despite telling a teacher, suggesting that simply
telling an adult or someone in authority may not address the situation effectively. In addition, several participants highlighted the potential consequences of seeking support from others (e.g., could get made fun of for telling; the problem could get bigger).

**Subtheme 2: Uncertainty.** Some responses indicated hesitation, frustration, and an inability to provide an idea for what to do when faced with bullying. Eleven participants reported uncertainty regarding which responses or strategies would be effective in addressing the situation. Interestingly, one participant spoke to the reality of cyber-bullying by indicating that derogatory statements made online are often lasting or permanent, and so it is difficult to respond to such an uncontrollable situation.

**Discussion**

This is one of the only studies to examine the strategies that youth with ASD consider when confronted with bullying. These include both approach and avoidance behaviours and represented a variety of tactics within each category. Many of these strategies are reactive in nature and may be effective in the short-term; few strategies were pro-active or involved planning for a long-term solution (i.e., active problem solving). It may be that the discussion of bullying with students with exceptionalities must strike a balance between short- and long-term goals and strategies.

Interviews also confirmed the major complexities that youth with ASD experience when considering how to problem solve about bullying. The thematic analysis yielded similar coping strategies as previous research (e.g., approach and avoidance; Fields & Prinz, 1997) and produced consistent findings to Humphrey and Symes (2010) in that suggested coping responses were variable and dependent upon each student’s unique perspective, experience with victimization, and past experience with responses to being bullied. Consistent with previous research, participants in the current study indicated that some coping behaviours may actually worsen the bullying, and as a result, they are often at a loss when considering which actions to take (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2014). In addition, the relative lack of responses suggestive of seeking of social support from peers is consistent with research findings that students with ASD tend to occupy low social status and have few friends. As with the general population (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002), many students with ASD struggle with determining what to do when confronted with such a highly stressful interpersonal situation. Moreover, it may be that the participants’ problem-solving strategies are less effective as these students have less control over their situations and are frequently victimized (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). Complicating this matter further, many youth with ASD struggle with executive functioning, emotion regulation, and social skills, all of which support effective coping with bullying (DeRosier, 2004; Mahady Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000; Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2005). It is also important to recognize that solving issues of bullying in schools must extend beyond the strategies that a child must rely upon, as the genesis of bullying and the potential solutions for this form of abuse are relational and contextual in nature.
This study is also novel given the kinds of materials used to scaffold the inquiry. Instead of simply asking students to describe what they would do when they are bullied, the current study used videos of realistic bullying situations. There are many advantages to this methodological approach. First, as noted by Flanagan and colleagues (2013), “Children might identify with fictional characters and bullying situations both at a cognitive and emotional level and gain insight more easily than talking directly about their own experiences” (p. 699). In addition, the cartoons depicted multifaceted scenarios in which characters were bullied. For example, one video depicts a character, who is small in stature, plays the tuba, is bullied by multiple higher status students, and who tells his teacher. Another video shows a character who is starting at a new school, is the new kid with no social support/friends (similar to students with ASD), and does not want to tell her mom about the bullying.

Despite the potential realism depicted in the cartoons, a limitation to the current study is that there is a difference between the video-prompted enquiry approach and actual problem solving in a moment of peer victimization when distress and confusion may occur. Indeed, the current study indirectly evaluates coping strategies, and participants were not directly asked to report on what others (e.g., parents/teachers) could do to help solve the problem, with the understanding that individual and contextual interactions highlight the true complexity inherent within a bullying event. In addition, it may have been easier for students to fantasize about their responses to being bullied given that the current study showed videos of cartoons rather than a more realistic medium. Future research is needed to bridge the gap between what students with ASD say they will do when confronted with bullying and what they actually do to assist in building skills that can be used in the moment to promote safety and resilience. Indeed, the participants’ actual implementation of strategies in their everyday lives was not ascertained and the effectiveness of these approaches could not be determined.

Overall, this study provides important new information on coping strategies suggested by students with ASD in the context of being bullied. The results indicate that students acknowledge that bullying is complex; certain coping strategies might be more successful for some students over others depending on the context/situation/social status of student. The results also indicate that many students suggest approach strategies; however, many of the strategies may not successfully address the situation and few participants reported engaging in effective problem-solving tactics.

Importantly, supportive adults (e.g., teachers, principals, and parents) could be educated on how to help children or youth who approach them when bullied (Hong, Neely, & Lund, 2015). These children or youth are often vulnerable and how a teacher or parent responds could negatively impact the child (and the child’s social reputation). For example, teachers who go straight to the source (e.g., the bully) could actually place the victimized child at further risk. Hong and colleagues (2015) have developed steps for reducing peer victimization among students with ASD, including instruction in behavioural strategies through video modeling, social stories, and role-play. They also suggest that teachers and parents can teach students with ASD how to report potential bullying incidents (modifying
reporting procedures as necessary based on the student’s cognitive and language ability/effectiveness). In addition, they indicate that the use of a systematic monitoring system by teachers and parents can be an effective tool for the identification and subsequent coping of victimization among students with ASD.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools, which aim to foster empathy and understanding of individual difference among peers, are one approach to promoting acceptance and reducing bullying in schools (Greenberg et al., 2003). School psychologists can play an important role in monitoring such programs and troubleshooting with teachers about issues that may arise. Although it is important to teach students how to cope effectively with peer victimization, it is also the role of school personnel, including school psychologists, to promote positive school climates and build empathy and understanding for all students. In the current study, some of the participants’ responses reflected a lack of safety at school (e.g., leaving the school for the day or changing schools). Similarly, Bitsika and Sharpley (2014) found that more than half of their sample asked their parents not to send them to school the next day. With students with ASD being increasingly included in mainstream classrooms, it is essential to promote positive school climates and build empathy and understanding for all students. As such, school psychologists can also conduct school-wide screening for bullying and/or school climate regarding bullying. Such information can support school psychologists’ efforts to promote positive school climates (e.g., target bullying through school-wide interventions, promote social–emotional development and positive peer relationships, promote positive student–teacher relationships, and emphasize the importance of home–school collaboration.

There is also the potential that evidence-based interventions that work to assist children with ASD to cope with interpersonal stressors through cognitive and behavioural means could be tailored to build skills specific to bullying experiences. For instance, there is considerable research to show that cognitive behaviour therapy, provided in both group (e.g., Reaven, Blakeley-Smith, Culhane-Shelburne, & Hepburn, 2012) and individual (e.g., Wood et al., 2009) formats is efficacious in addressing anxiety in youth with ASD. Common across these interventions is a focus on improving emotional awareness and complexity, assertiveness training, relaxation strategies, cognitive restructuring, in vivo practice, and positive reinforcement. There is also evidence for their application within the school context (Fujii et al., 2013). In addition, evidence-based cognitive behavioural social skills programs often incorporate specific modules on safety and bullying into their manualized approaches, often focusing on ways for youth to identify and elicit help from others when experiencing victimization (Beaumont & Sofronoff, 2008; Laugeson et al., 2012). The efficacy of these interventions to reduce the frequency or impact of bullying has yet to be examined and an important area of future research.

In sum, the results of this study provide important insights into coping strategies for victimization of students with ASD. Such students are frequently bullied yet often lack the social awareness and/or support to deal with this behaviour effectively. Future research could build on the results from the current study by exploring the
effectiveness of the various coping strategies suggested by students with ASD in the context of bullying, with the ultimate goal of informing interventions to enhance their coping skills and overall well-being.

Appendix

Open-ended interview questions

- Link: http://www.stopbullying.gov/kids/webisodes/index.html
- Webisodes: 1, 2, and 5

Webisode 1: “KB’s First Day”

- How do you think KB should handle Cassandra’s rude comments?

  ○ Do you think [insert participant’s response(s)] will work?

- Is there anything else that KB could do in this situation?

  ○ How well do you think [insert participant’s response(s)] will work?

- Put yourself in KB’s place for a moment, what would you do if you were KB?

  ○ Do you think [insert participant’s response(s)] would work?

- Why or why not?
Webisode 2: “Milton’s Dreams Are Dashed”

- How do you think Milton should handle this situation of being “picked on”?
  
  o Do you think [insert participant’s response(s)] will work?

- Is there anything else that Milton could do in this situation?
  
  o How well do you think [insert participant’s response(s)] will work?

- Put yourself in Milton’s place for a moment, what would you do if you were Milton?
  
  o Do you think [insert participant’s response(s)] would work?

- Why or why not?

Webisode 5: “KB Recalls Her Day”

- What do you think KB should do?
  
  o Do you think [insert participant’s response(s)] will work?
• Is there anything else that KB could do in this situation?

○ How well do you think [insert participant’s response(s)] will work?

• Put yourself in KB’s place for a moment, what would you do if you were KB?

○ Do you think [insert participant’s response(s)] would work?

• Why or why not?

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