**Ostracism among students: Characteristics of the phenomenon and implications for educational counseling**

**Abstract**

Social ostracism has serious consequences for students, but there is a shortage of research-based knowledge on the subject. Towards this end, a retrospective study was conducted with 500 young graduates who clearly remembered a case of social ostracism during their school years and completed a quantitative questionnaire. The study found that ostracism occurs frequently in grades 4-6, that the characteristics of ostracized children are wide-ranging, and that ostracism has consequences for the ostracized as well as the non-ostracized. The consequences for the ostracized relate to depression and changed perceptions of the ability to trust others. Ostracized students, especially young ones, tend not to take action. The study also found that a fairly considerable portion of the parents did not know about the ostracism. The study indicates that ostracism is a severe, disruptive phenomenon in students’ lives, with a potential negative impact on the course of development. The discussion suggests operative measures that an educational counselor might take to prevent and intervene in situations of ostracism.

**Keywords**: Ostracism, social rejection, social status, social-emotional learning (SEL), social competence, social skills

**Introduction**

Social ostracism has severe, far-reaching consequences for students in the short as well as long term. Nonetheless, there is insufficient evidence of comprehensive empirical research on the characteristics of the phenomenon in Israel or around the world. In the present study we sought to address this lacuna. The study focused on the students’ perspective in an effort to understand how they perceive various aspects of the phenomenon, such as characteristics of the ostracized children, forms of ostracism, its present and future implications, and the modes of coping adopted by students, teaching staff, and parents. Data were collected from more than 500 young graduates aged 18-25 who clearly remembered a case of ostracism during their school years, completed a quantitative questionnaire, and provided a retrospective look at the phenomenon years later.

The educational counselor, being responsible for mental health at the school and operating out of a systemic perspective, has a unique role in preventing and intervening in cases of ostracism. This article aims to use an empirical mapping of the phenomenon to derive operative implications for the work of educational counselors.

**Literature review**

***Ostracism and its characteristics***

Ostracism, classified as indirect social violence (Almog-Zaken & Wieler, 2013), is defined as a state in which individuals or groups ignore or exclude a particular individual from a group without explanation or explicit attention (Williams, 2007). It is a universal phenomenon recognized in all human cultures (Williams, 2001). Data on the extent of the phenomenon in Israel, collected in the context of the Meitzav (Growth and Effectiveness Measures for Schools) standardized tests, found that more than 60% of classes reported at least one student who had been ostracized in the past month (Hakim & Shavit, 2017). A recent study that collected data from parents found that 10% of the children who had suffered violence were reportedly victims of social ostracism (Baharav et al., 2020). These students were also found to have a diminished sense of safety.

In terms of age group, a report by Israel’s National Authority for Assessment and Evaluation in Education (2018) found that the percentage of children who reported being victimized by social violence (such as ostracism or rumors) totaled 23% in grades 4-6, 17% in grades 7-9, and 13% in grades 10-11. That is, the rates are higher for the younger age groups. Thus, the phenomenon is more prevalent in elementary school, particularly in grades 5-6 and midway through middle school, and declines in the upper grades of middle school and in high school (Hakim & Shavit, 2017; Katzenelson, 2016). These data are consistent with students’ developmental characteristics. In mid-childhood students become increasingly aware that their identity is closely linked with those around them (Damon & Hart, 1988). As a result, social acceptance becomes central in their lives, and they – rather than the adults – become the decision makers regarding social matters. The importance of acceptance (Siegler et al., 2014) in combination with a certain tendency towards inflexible, egocentric thinking leads to the emergence of phenomena in which groups of children engage in organized social exclusion.

There is no consensus on the characteristics of ostracized students. Hakim and Shavit (2017) argue that there is a link between belonging to a disadvantaged group, such as an ethnic minority or lower social class, and greater exposure to ostracism. For example, they found a negative correlation between susceptibility to ostracism and the education level of a student’s parents, as well as the average education level of the parents in the class. Likewise, they found higher rates of ostracism among students from the lower social class. They also found a link between the likelihood of being subjected to ostracism and lower scholastic achievement in math and English (Hakim & Shavit, 2017). Katzenelson (2016) notes that ostracized children sometimes suffer from a lack of emotional support, and some have difficulty regulating their emotions or differ from others in a certain aspect that threatens the group. According to a focus group of students, those who fall victim to bullying are weak, vulnerable children with low self-esteem (Guerra et al., 2011). In terms of gender, girls report being subjected to ostracism as well as implementing it more than boys (Hakim & Shavit, 2017; Katzenelson, 2016).

Ostracism can have different motives. First, it contributes to group cohesion, as it provides group members with a common goal (Williams, 2007). Second, ostracism is sometimes part of a power struggle, with upper-class children exercising it against those near them on the social ladder, in order to establish their own superiority. Towards this end, they might take advantage of an opportunity that alters the balance of power, such as when one of the children quarrels with a close friend (Hakim & Shavit, 2017; Katzenelson, 2016). That is, contrary to the prevailing assumption that it is the strong who attack the weak, researchers believe that in some cases the victim might actually be a socially strong student whose prominence enhances the likelihood of becoming a target of bullying (Faris & Felmlee, 2014). Other children then go along with those instigating the ostracism for fear of being ostracized themselves or out of a desire to be liked by the instigators (Katzenelson, 2016). Ostracism can be brief or extended, carried out by one child, a group of children, or an entire class, and it may take a variety of forms.

These days we also have the virtual dimension. As a rule, social media discourse tends to be polarized and focused on negative messages (Margalit, 2021). Anonymity and the possibility of removing traces of one’s presence increase the feasibility of transmitting aggressive messages. Virtual ostracism is unique in that it accompanies children throughout the day, including at home, and is less visible to adults. The messages disseminated in virtual media, which are documented, are capable of reaching many audiences, disseminating widely, spreading across different spheres, and thereby causing repeated harm to the child (Aragon, 2016; Katzenelson, 2016).

***Responses, consequences, and ways of dealing with ostracism***

Social ostracism is considered unique among aversive phenomena because it threatens basic psychological needs, such as the need for a sense of self-esteem, belonging, feeling in control of a situation, and meaningful existence (Smith et al., 2017; Williams, 2009). For example, high school and university students perceive social media ostracism as threatening their need to belong to a group (Smith et al., 2017). The experience of being ignored by one’s environment causes an individual to feel unwanted and unworthy of inclusion (Wesselmann et al., 2019). Ostracism impairs emotional well-being, cognitive functioning, and social adaptability (Pharo et al., 2011). Cognitive impairment interferes with emotional regulation and impedes delayed gratification, making the individual more vulnerable and sensitive to environmental cues (Williams, 2007). Such reactions on the victim’s part can exacerbate the situation. The harm caused by ostracism can be irreversible and may result in loneliness, mistrust and suspicion of others, and even dropping out of school and suicidality (Katzenelson, 2016).

The literature describes various strategies by which individuals seek to cope with ostracism. Most prevalent among these are efforts to make friends with the ostracizers (e.g., friendliness, helpfulness, and efforts to strengthen relationships), fighting (e.g., aggressive behavior), freezing in place (passivity), or fleeing the situation (e.g., refusing to work with the ostracizing group). A prolonged experience of ostracism can foster a sense of helplessness (Williams, 2007).

There are also strategies for coping with hardship at the *psychological level*. How the ostracism episode is constructed in one’s consciousness can mitigate the importance an individual ascribes to it (Williams, 2007). These strategies are based on an interpretive element, such as the reconceptualization of a situation or redirection of attention. Likewise, it is sometimes possible to find other ways of addressing the needs affected by ostracism. In this context, people in the individual’s environment have an important role to play in the recovery process (Timeo et al., 2019).

The harmful impact of ostracism is not limited to the ostracized children. It affects other children within the same environment as well, undermining their sense of safety, their mood, and their ability to concentrate (Reuveni, 2011). Moreover, children involved in ostracism can develop a sense of guilt about their involvement, be it active or passive (Katzenelson, 2016). In addition, the phenomenon has repercussions for society as a whole, as illustrated by cases of extreme violence (for example in the United States), in which it turned out that the perpetrators had been victims of ostracism on the part of their peers during childhood (Pharo et al., 2011).

***Ostracism and the counselor-teacher-parent partnership***

The social context of ostracism manifests not only at the micro-level, among the students involved, but also at the macro-level – in the school as a whole. The general characteristics of the school and characteristics directly linked to the ostracism, such as policy towards the phenomenon and measures taken by psychologists and counselors, determine the way ostracism is addressed (Leja & Wesselman, 2013).

The educational counselor, as a mental health care professional (Erhard, 2014), has a unique role in preventing and addressing ostracism. Findings indicate that it is very important for counselors to advise teachers on social matters (Tatar & Gozlan, 2000). The counselors’ systemic orientation – which includes consultations with numerous individuals and bodies, such as the school administration, teachers, and parents (Erhard, 2014) – constitutes an advantage. They are familiar with the players involved and can monitor developments as they occur and over time. Moreover, the salience of teamwork these days further highlights the role of the educational counselor in cultivating the connection between learning processes that take place at school and an optimal emotional experience based on social sensitivity (Dor-Haim, 2019). Counselors operate in the students’ natural environment, and therefore seeking their support is seen as less stigmatizing than seeking support outside the school. It can also establish the psychological construct of the experience as less extreme, that is, as part of the school experience. Notably, however, there are also barriers to students approaching the educational counselor in times of distress; emotional distance and fear of confidentiality being breached can impede their ability to share (Gilat & Amiram, 2014).

As for educators, a study conducted in Israel found that they perceive ostracism as a mechanism by which students control and monitor the social classes. They also view it as a means by which a peer group rebukes students whose behavior does not conform to the accepted norms among the community of children (Habib, 2020). Studies examining the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of bullying and their perceptions of the action required by the teacher indicate that teachers who believe that bullying is a normative phenomenon tend to intervene less (Garner, 2017; Hektner & Swenson, 2012). In terms of addressing the phenomenon, teachers report a variety of measures that usually involve turning to external sources (Habib, 2020).

Children who are experiencing ostracism tend not to share their distress with their parents, presumably because they believe that their parents do not have the power to help them or because they do not want to worry their parents (Katzenelson, 2016). Indeed, a study examining parents’ perspectives on school violence found that ostracism is an emotionally charged issue that preoccupies parents; they perceive it as a state of emergency whose eradication warrants extreme measures (Baharav, 2020). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) highlights skill sets that should be systematically cultivated *both at home and at school*. One of these is relationship skills, which include the capability to engage in healthy, cooperative, and caring relations, to resist social pressure, and to resolve conflicts effectively (Albright & Weissberg, 2010). The literature offers principles for promoting cooperation between teachers and parents in social-emotional learning (SEL), including emphasis on shared responsibility for children’s optimal development and on open communication, with both the home and the school serving as points of intervention (Garbacz et al., 2015). In the context of ostracism, the partnership between teaching staff and parents should be cultivated in order to prevent the phenomenon and thwart it when it surfaces.

**The research question and research genre**

In light of the severe and far-reaching consequences of ostracism, the present study is aimed at developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by focusing on the students’ perspective. This is a retrospective study in which young adults were asked to recall an incident of ostracism that occurred during their school years and respond to a research questionnaire. Previous studies addressing social rejection have also adopted a retrospective perspective (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2006; Oshrat-Fink, 2018). This research genre has unique advantages. Young adults can clearly remember an experience of ostracism, while also adopting a retrospective perspective of its consequences and of the manner in which school experiences are psychologically constructed (see, e.g., Bekerman & Tatar, 2005). Accordingly, the research question is: Based on the perspective of young adults, how do students perceive the phenomenon of social ostracism at school? A mapping of the characteristics of ostracism will be used to derive operative implications for educational counseling aimed at preventing and addressing this severe phenomenon.

**Research method**

***Study population***

The sampling was guided by two principles: first, the collection of data from a large number of participants who had experienced ostracism, thus making it possible to reach well-founded generalizations and conduct comparisons between groups; second: reliance on a representative sample. Accordingly, the sample was selected in two stages. The first stage involved sending a questionnaire to a representative sample of 700 members of Israel’s Jewish population aged 18-25. Of this group, 504 responded that they clearly remember an incident of ostracism from their school years, and these respondents constituted the final sample. We selected people who had graduated from school only a few years previously because they have a complete retrospective of their time in school, from a fairly recent perspective, so their memory of the experience is relatively strong. The average age is 21.7 with a standard deviation of 2.1.

The participants were divided into two groups depending on their connection to ostracism: the *research group*, which included 160 participants who had been ostracized during their school years, and a *comparison group* of participants with differing connections to ostracism during their school years: ostracizers (N=44); those who knew about the ostracism but participated very little or not at all (N=270); and those who knew about the ostracism only at a later stage (N=30).

**Characteristics of the participants by group are presented in Table 1**

**Table 1 here**

**Research tool, research process, and ethical aspects**

For the purposes of the study a questionnaire was compiled to examine the perceptions of young adults regarding the phenomenon of ostracism in school. The respondents were asked to recall a case of social ostracism that had occurred during their school years and to indicate whether they were among the children ostracized, the ostracizers, or those who knew about the ostracism.

The process by which the questionnaire was constructed is as follows: First, we mapped the areas to be included in the questionnaire, drawing on the literature review of ostracism in schools. Next, we formulated statements for each of the areas included in the mapping. Both these steps were carried out by the study’s researchers – an educational counselor and a psychologist, both with extensive experience in the education system. The areas identified, with examples of the types of questions, are as follows:1. Characteristics of the ostracism (e.g., the class in which it took place and its duration), 2. Characteristics of the ostracized child (e.g., scholastic, psychological, and physical characteristics) and characteristics of the group in which the ostracism took place, 3. The forms the ostracism took (e.g., exclusion from social activities), 4. The causal factors attributed to the ostracism (e.g., desire for control, jealousy), 5. Effects of the ostracism (e.g., difficulty forming relationships, anxiety, loneliness), 6. Modes of coping with the ostracism on the part of the child (e.g., informing the parents) and at school (e.g., informing the counselor). The third step involved validation of the questionnaire by two experts, one in the field of educational counseling and another in the field of school violence. The researchers had lively discussions, and the feedback was incorporated into the questionnaire. The questionnaire was disseminated online anonymously during the months of January through March, 2021.

**Results**

***Characteristics of the ostracism***

The distribution of the frequency of ostracism incidents by grade was calculated separately for the research group and the comparison group. A chi-squared test did not find a significant difference between the two groups, and therefore the following graph shows the distribution for the entire sample.

**The distribution of ostracism incidents is presented in Graph 1**

**Graph 1 here**

The graph shows that ostracism occurs most frequently in grades 4-6: 57% of the reported incidents occurred in those three grades.

***Duration of the ostracism***

**The distribution of ostracism incidents by duration is presented in Table 2**

**Table 2 here**

The table shows that ostracism is a fairly lengthy event: about 60% of participants reported that the ostracism lasted several weeks or longer. Participants who were ostracized report a longer period of ostracism than participants who were not ostracized, as indicated by a chi-squared test (*χ2* (6) = 12.9, p < .05): 67% of ostracized participants, as opposed to 45% of the comparison group, report incidents of ostracism lasting at least several weeks. Twenty percent of the participants in the research group reported incidents of ostracism lasting a year or longer!

***Characteristics of the ostracized child***

To examine whether there are agreed-upon characteristics, the questionnaire presented participants with a list of characteristics and asked them to indicate whether these describe the ostracized child.

**Table 3 presents the percentage of participants who, for each characteristic, believe that it describes the ostracized child. Most of these characteristics have negative connotations.**

**Table 3 here**

The table shows that no single characteristic describes the ostracized child among more than 50% of the participants. That is, it is not possible to create a profile of the ostracized child on the basis of the defined characteristics. The findings also indicate that participants in the research group are less inclined than their peers in the comparison group to think that the ostracized child is characterized by low social skills and low social status.

***Forms of ostracism***

Participants were presented with a list of behaviors employed against ostracized children and asked to indicate, for each one, whether it formed part of the ostracism they remember.

**Graph 2 presents the percentage of reported incidents of each behavior.**

**Graph 2 here**

The graph shows that the two most prevalent forms of ostracism were not speaking with ostracized children (two-thirds of the cases) and not inviting them to participate in group activities (sixty percent of the cases). In addition, violence against ostracized children was not uncommon: it occurred in more than 50% of the cases. Online ostracism occurred less frequently than face-to-face incidents. The findings also reveal that participants who were ostracized as students generally reported more incidents of behavioral forms of ostracism being employed against them than did comparison group participants.

A comparison between the two groups using a chi-squared test found that participants who had been ostracized reported higher incidences of the following behaviors: violence against the ostracized child (χ² (1) = 7.27, p < .01), exclusion from social events (χ² (1) = 6.82, p < .01), exclusion from social media activities (χ² (1) =18.04, p < .01), and online violence (χ² (1) =6.32, p < .05).

***Causes of ostracism***

Participants received a list of possible factors that could lead to an incident of ostracism and were asked to assess the impact of each factor on a scale of 1 to 5. A higher number indicates a higher degree of causation.

**Table 4 presents the degree of causation attributed to various factors leading to ostracism**

**Table 4 here**

Table 4 indicates that the causes of ostracism are more closely tied to qualities of the ostracizers – a need for control, power motivation, and aggression. Jealousy of the ostracized children, too, is not an insignificant factor. The findings also show that participants who were ostracized attribute more influence to each of the causes of ostracism than do comparison group participants.

***Implications / consequences of ostracism***

To examine the long-term consequences of ostracism on ostracized children, we asked participants to indicate whether they currently feel the impact of ostracism for each of the symptoms presented to them. In addition to symptoms of impaired mental health, the list also included “resilience.”

First we calculated the percentage of participants who reported the effect of at least one symptom, which was found to be 62% in the ostracized group, as opposed to 34% in the comparison group. **Then we calculated the percentage of participants who report each symptom, and the results are presented in Table 5.**

**Table 5 here**

The results presented in Table 5 show that the most frequently reported symptoms among those ostracized were as follows: mistrust (40%), loneliness (32%), social anxiety (31%), and difficulty forming relationships (30%). For each of the negative symptoms, with the exception of guilt, ostracized participants reported a higher incidence than those who were not ostracized. It is interesting to note the relatively high percentage of ostracized participants who reported having developed resilience following their ostracism.

***Coping with the ostracism***

Modes of coping with ostracism were examined in relation to three subjects: the ostracized child, the ostracized child’s parents, and the school. We present only the findings of the research group because participants in the comparison group did not know about many of the ostracized children’s modes of coping (e.g., whether they told their parents). Comparison group participants were also asked about modes of coping with ostracism, but a large percentage of them, roughly half, responded that they did not know.

***The ostracized child’s modes of coping***

**Table 6 presents the incidence of the ostracized child’s modes of coping as reported by the study’s participants**

**Table 6 here**

Table 6 shows that close to 40% of the children did not take any measures to cope with the ostracism. Among the modes of coping children did employ, the most frequent was the formation of social relationships in other environments. The table further indicates that less than half of the children informed their parents or relatives of the ostracism.

***Parents’ modes of coping***

The findings indicate that 39% of the parents did not know about the ostracism and another 10% knew but did not take action. That is, about half of the parents took no action whatsoever in response to the ostracism. Measures that parents did take included approaching the school staff (35%), approaching other parents of students in the class (24%), and approaching the children who led the ostracism (14%).

***The school’s modes of coping***

Only 38% of the participants who had been ostracized during childhood reported that their school intervened. In addition, a total of 14% reported that they received treatment at school, and 16% reported that they received treatment outside of school.

***Relationship between background characteristics of the ostracized children and aspects of the ostracism***

We calculated the correlations between three background characteristics of the ostracized children – sex, age, and stream of education – and three aspects of ostracism – intensity, consequences, and coping. For the purposes of statistical analysis, the measurements of these aspects were calculated as follows: Intensity was calculated as the percentage of behaviors directed against ostracized child, out of all behaviors listed in the questionnaire (see Table 3). A high score indicates more intense ostracism. The measurement of consequences was calculated as the percentage of symptoms reported by the respondents, out of all symptoms listed in the questionnaire (excluding resilience) (see Table 5). A high score indicates a stronger psychological impact of the ostracism. Coping was calculated as a percentage of the measures taken by the ostracized child, out of all measures listed in the questionnaire (see Table 6). A high score indicates more active coping on the part of the ostracized child. The results are described below.

***Sex of the ostracized child***

We conducted an independent samples t-test to compare girls with boys for three measurements of ostracism.

A significant difference was found with respect to the consequences of ostracism (t(158) = 1.97, p < .05), with girls reporting a higher incidence of negative symptoms that developed as a result of the ostracism (average = 23.53, s.d. = 16.12) than boys (average = 15.73, s.d. = 10.85). No significant differences were found between the sexes in terms of intensity of the ostracism or coping with it near the time of its occurrence.

***Age level of the ostracized child***

To examine the correlation between the child’s age and the measurements of ostracism, the 12 grades were grouped into three age levels: (1) Children – grades 1-3; (2) Pre-adolescents – grades 4-6; and (3) Adolescents – grades 7-12. A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to compare the three age levels in terms of the three ostracism measurements.

Age level was found to have a significant effect in terms of coping with ostracism (F(2,157) = 2.87, p < .05), with adolescents in middle or high school reporting a higher degree of active coping (average = 44.86, s.d. = 27.24) than pre-adolescents in grades 4-6 (average = 34.00, s.d. = 22.32) or children in grades 1-3 (average = 35.75, s.d. = 21.65).

***Stream of education***

The education stream was found to have a significant effect in terms of the intensity of ostracism, with children in the ultra-orthodox stream reporting less intense ostracism than children who attended religious or secular schools

The education stream was found to have a significant effect in terms of the intensity of ostracism (F(2,157) = 2.94, p < .05), with children in the ultra-orthodox stream reporting a lower degree of intensity (average = 38.94, s.d. = 18.11) than children in the state-religious education stream (average = 45.37, s.d. = 28.81) or state education stream (average = 48.66, s.d. = 24.40). The education stream was not found to have an effect on the consequences of ostracism or on how children coped with it.

**Discussion**

The study, based on the perspective of 500 young graduates who clearly remembered an experience of ostracism during their school years, was intended to examine how students perceive social ostracism, to map the phenomenon, and from the mapping to drive implementable implications for educational counseling.

In terms of objective characteristics such as sex and age, the study found a close correspondence with the literature (Hakim & Shavit, 2017; Katzenelson, 2016; National Authority for Assessment and Evaluation in Education, 2018). The phenomenon is prevalent in grades 4-6, in accordance with the centrality of social status at this age and the tendency of these children towards egocentric and inflexible thinking. Likewise, the finding that girls are ostracized more than boys (at a ratio of 60:40, in contrast to an equal ratio in the population at large) accords with earlier findings. Girls also reported more negative consequences of ostracism.

In contrast to the intuitive perception of the victim as weak, vulnerable, or different from others (Guerra et al., 2011), the study’s findings indicate that one cannot sketch a particular profile. Among ostracized students one does find some who are characterized by low social status, but one also finds students with high scholastic achievements and other characteristics. As such, the study’s findings caution against stereotypical thinking in this regard. Ostracism is an inclusive phenomenon that students with diverse characteristics might experience. This finding relates directly to counselors, educators, and teachers, as key figures in coping with social ostracism: it is important that they be aware that even students who deviate from the stereotype of the ostracized child might be victims in need of help.

The psychological consequences were found to affect both the ostracized and the non-ostracized students. As for the ostracized students, beyond the consequences identified in the literature relating to impaired social adaptability, depression, and anxiety (e.g., Faris & Felmlee, 2014; Pharo et al., 2011), the study also points to a perceptual change – an undermining of basic trust. It has already been established that during the experience of ostracism, a victim becomes vulnerable and sensitive to environmental cues (Williams, 2007). The study’s findings point to a long-term consequence reflecting a change in the victim’s interpretation of social interactions. This aspect corresponds with the fact that one-fifth of those ostracized reported that their ostracism had not been an isolated event, but rather an experience that lasted a year or even longer. In addition, in terms of coping, a fairly considerable proportion of those ostracized (40%) did not report taking any kind of action, which corresponds with the mode of coping described in the literature as freezing (Williams, 2007). Lack of action can exacerbate feelings of stress on the part of those ostracized because it intensifies their sense of having no control over a threatening incident. It could even, therefore, result in an experience with traumatic dimensions. As such, ostracism is a disruptive phenomenon, with a potential negative impact on the course of development.

Furthermore, the study found that a fairly considerable portion of the parents (40%) did not know about the ostracism. This finding is particularly acute as it means that parents were unaware of such a difficult experience in their children’s lives. There are several possible reasons why children might not inform their parents of the ostracism. First, they may be afraid of upsetting their parents, embarrassed, and therefore wary of exposing their shame. One should bear in mind that some parents tend to react judgmentally, even if unconsciously so, to unpleasant events involving their children. Parents might convey the message that the child is responsible for the situation, or convey disappointment, even through facial expressions or intonation. In addition, children might fear that informing their parents could lead to the latter’s (unwanted, in the child’s view) involvement, for example speaking with the parents of other children in the class. The immediate consequence of parents’ not knowing about the ostracism is a lack of support from the child’s most significant source of support, exacerbation of the child’s loneliness, and an increased risk of developing emotional symptoms such as anxiety or depression.

A complementary explanation relates to emotional aspects of which the child is not conscious. Ostracized children might employ the defense mechanism of silence (along the lines of mechanisms familiar from cases of trauma). That is, they put the difficult event out of mind and thus refrain from discussing it. This mechanism can potentially hamper the healing process. It has been found that adopting a descriptive view of an ostracism incident (i.e., looking at it as an observer) can exacerbate an individual’s feelings of shame and impede processing of the event. Instead, it is recommended that individuals adopt their own view, “relive” the incident and thus process it emotionally (Lau et al., 2009).

The study found another inter-personal characteristic of ostracized children, namely, their increased tendency to amplify the negative characteristics of the ostracizers. This characteristic, too, might serve as a defense mechanism against psychological collapse, in the sense of “it’s not me, it’s them.” It allows ostracized individuals to keep negative characteristics at bay and preserve their self-perception. The strategy is a familiar means of emotional regulation, allowing one to infuse positive meaning into a negative situation (Timeo et al., 2019). Its incidence among young adults implies that it is an adaptive coping mechanism that ostracized individuals maintain over the years. This aspect may be reflected in the large number of ostracized study participants who reported having developed resilience as a result of their ostracism.

For non-ostracized students, the main consequence is evidently feelings of guilt. These feelings arise when individuals feel that they do not meet the criteria of an inner, guiding voice and therefore are “not okay” (Kaniel, 2016). The feelings of guilt associated with ostracism might be related to developmental stages involving moral judgment, particularly the transition from the stage characterized by obedience to the rules of social consensus, to the stage of understanding that rules can change (Piaget, 1983). This finding reinforces data from an earlier study, which concluded that bystanders also suffer negative consequences from bullying (Reuveni, 2011).

**Operative suggestions for educational counseling**

Next we list a number of points worth emphasizing in the work of educational counseling in order to prevent and address ostracism. First, there are known *barriers to students approaching the educational counselor* (Gilat & Amiram, 2014). As a consequence, and given the sensitivity of ostracism, certain students might completely refrain from approaching the counselor in such cases. To prevent this, one may draw on suggestions offered by Gilat and Amiram (2014), such as providing students with information based on the counseling available at the school, in the form of an “orientation kit” that explicitly addresses the issue. In addition, the counselor can conduct a survey to identify students’ needs, thereby proactively identifying incidents of ostracism. Another approach is to work with “bystander” students and encourage them to involve adults in cases of bullying (Midgett et al., 2016).

In terms of *the counselor’s work with the teaching staff*, it is important that counselors discuss the issue with the staff, emphasizing prevention through the cultivation of a positive classroom atmosphere. It is advisable that teachers operate in accordance with proactive principles that contribute to moral classroom management (Tal, 2010), for example by engaging students in a discussion on long-term social objectives of the class, such as the moderation of aggression (Yariv, 2018). It is important to raise students’ awareness of the consequences of ostracism and encourage them to propose strategies themselves for prevention and intervention. In the current era it is of particular importance to help students develop the ability to conduct themselves with reduced dependence on adults (Dor-Haim, 2019).

Regarding the sensitivity involved in dealing with ostracism, Almog-Zaken and Wieler (2013) cite Einav Lock, director of Senior Psychology Counseling Services at the Ministry of Education, who advises using tools that shift the discussion towards imaginary stories and scenarios. Such activities help students address the issue, overcome egocentric thinking vis-à-vis those ostracized, take the latter’s perspective into account, and develop empathy towards them. In terms of intervention, it would be advisable to provide teachers with protocols for addressing social rejection and ostracism (see, e.g., Alkobi et al., 2019, Binshtok, 2011), incorporate the issue into teacher training programs, and combine theoretical studies with practical experience.

As for *dealing with parents*, it is important that educational staff discuss the phenomenon with them and raise their awareness of it. In line with the study’s findings, it is recommended that parents receive information about the prevalence of ostracism among young children and the inclination towards passive coping specifically within this age group. Accordingly, parents need to be particularly vigilant with young children.

In addition, discussions with parents can focus on how to cultivate a supportive and accepting dialogue at home, one that allows children to share what is bothering them (without fear of a judgmental response). It may be suggested to parents that they address the issue with their children naturally, for example, by taking an interest in the child’s social experience at school or by reacting to information on ostracism that appears in the media. Currently the issue is quite prominent in the media, with celebrities sharing their childhood experiences of ostracism. This is a welcome development because it facilitates channels of communication and helps alleviate the shame surrounding the issue. Ostracism does not have external signs, which makes it hard for adults to identify its occurrence (Pharo et al., 2011). It is therefore important to help parents identify signs of distress in their children, such as changes in behavior and interests, withdrawal, and expressions of sadness. An open dialogue with parents will also help “bystander” students develop action strategies and share their experiences with adults. It is important to speak with parents about the value of responding to social violence even when it does not directly target their children.

Another aspect of consultation with parents involves examining how they mediate the experience for a child who falls victim to ostracism. The psychological construction of this difficult experience can have implications for the significance the child ascribes to it (Williams, 2007), and figures in the child’s life have a role in this regard (Timeo et al., 2019). It is important that parents support ostracized children, emphasize that the ostracism is not their fault, encourage their sense of social adaptability (e.g., by cultivating alternative social relationships until the problem is solved), and instill hope in them. If they identify problems related to social skills, it is advisable that they consider seeking professional help.

**Limitations and suggestions**

One limitation of this study stems from its exclusive reliance on the student’s perspective. Because social ostracism involves parents, educators, and counselors as well, there is value to having future studies extend the range of perspectives. In addition, it would have been useful to employ a qualitative methodology, enabling a deeper understanding of the reasons, modes of coping, and consequences of ostracism. Another limitation of the study is its focus on the Jewish population. It is important to examine ostracism in various sectors, and particularly the Arab sector, where the incidence is high (Hakim & Shavit, 2017; National Authority for Assessment and Evaluation in Education, 2018).

There is a need for proactive programs that reinforce the partnership between educational staff and parents as a matter of routine in the context of social-emotional learning (SEL) (Garbacz et al., 2015). By its nature, a partnership aimed at addressing complex social issues can elicit emotional and irrational feelings on both sides. Educational staff and parents might therefore perceive a partnership to address ostracism as rife with power struggles, and they could find direct, open, and assertive communication difficult (Korem, in press). Accordingly, further research is needed to examine the complexity and means to implementation of parent-teacher partnerships for addressing ostracism.

Ostracism is a phenomenon that disrupts students’ lives and has difficult, long-term consequences. In this article we sought to map the characteristics of the phenomenon and, on this basis, to offer operative suggestions for educational counseling. We hope that this information will be useful for anyone seeking to fight and eradicate this phenomenon.

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**Tables and Graphs**

**Table 1: Characteristics of the participants, in two groups, by percentages (N=504)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Ostracized** | **Not ostracized** |
| Sex | Girls | 62 | 45 |
|  | Boys | 38 | 55 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Education | Elementary | 5 | 5 |
|  | High school | 76 | 82 |
|  | Academic | 19 | 13 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Education stream | State | 60 | 54 |
|  | State-religious | 21 | 17 |
|  | Ultra-orthodox | 19 | 29 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Type of education | Regular | 98 | 99 |
|  | Special | 2 | 1 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Country of birth | Israel | 96 | 96 |
|  | Other | 4 | 4 |

**Graph 1: Distribution of ostracism incidents by grade in which they occurred (percentages)**

**Table 2: Distribution of ostracism incidents by duration, in percentages (N=504)**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Duration of ostracism** | **Ostracized**  **(N=160)** | **Not ostracized (N=344)** | **Total** |
| Hours | 7 | 5 | 6 |
| Days | 25 | 40 | 35 |
| Weeks | 24 | 23 | 22 |
| One month | 6 | 7 | 6.5 |
| Months | 18 | 14 | 15.5 |
| One year | 6 | 5 | 5 |
| More than a year | 14 | 6 | 10 |
| Total |  |  | 100 |

**Table 3: Characteristics of the ostracized child, in the two groups**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Characteristic** | **Ostracized**  **(N=160)** | **Not ostracized (N=344)** | **Chi-squared** |
| Poor social skills | 15 | 38 | \*\*13.58 |
| Low social status | 33 | 52 | 6.63 |
| Unpleasant social behaviors | 9 | 41 | \*\*27.30 |
| Physical characteristic such as height/weight | 21 | 22 | 0.03 |
| Unattractive physical appearance | 27 | 21 | 0.98 |
| Low athleticism | 17 | 20 | 0.13 |
| Disability | 4 | 10 | 2.76 |
| High scholastic achievements | 47 | 46 | 0.08 |
| Low scholastic achievements | 12 | 20 | 2.38 |
| New immigrant | 7 | 8 | 0.05 |
|  |  |  |  |

\* P < .05 \*\* p < .01

**Graph 2: Incidence of various forms of ostracism, in percentages**

**Table 4: Degree of causation attributed to various factors leading to ostracism**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Ostracized child** | | **Non-ostracized child** | | Chi-squared |
|  | Average | Standard deviation | Average | Standard deviation |  |
| 1. Aggressive behavior on the part of the ostracizing children | 3.28 | 1.33 | 2.88 | 1.26 | \*\*\*3.20 |
| 2. Struggle for power on the part of the ostracizing children | 3.34 | 1.32 | 3.10 | 1.27 | \*1.89 |
| 3. Desire for control on the part of the ostracizing children | 3.74 | 1.24 | 3.42 | 1.26 | \*\*\*2.71 |
| 4. Jealousy of the ostracized child on the part of the ostracizers | 3.21 | 1.48 | 2.31 | 1.33 | \*\*\*7.21 |
| 5. The ostracizing children did not have close friends | 1.98 | 1.25 | 1.97 | 1.18 | 0.90 |

\* P < .05 \*\* p < .01

**Table 5: Repercussions of the ostracism for the child’s mental health in both groups**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Symptom** | **Ostracized (N=160)** | **Not ostracized (N=344)** | **Chi-Squared** |
| Mistrust | 40 | 11 | \*\*58.28 |
| Loneliness | 32 | 7 | \*\*53.40 |
| Social anxiety | 31 | 6 | \*\*54.90 |
| Difficulty forming relationships | 30 | 7 | \*\*43.28 |
| Sadness | 22 | 14 | \*3.49 |
| Difficulty forming romantic relationships | 16 | 3 | \*\*39.31 |
| Guilt | 15 | 23 | 2.72 |
| Suicidal thoughts | 8 | 3 | \*6.52 |
| Dropping out of school | 7 | 3 | \*5.20 |
| Violent behavior | 7 | 2 | \*6.22 |
| Resilience | 37 | 12 | \*\*44.10 |

\* p < .05 \*\* p < .001

**Table 6: Incidence of the ostracized child’s modes of coping with the ostracism, as reported by the study’s participants (N=160), in percentages**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Mode of coping** | **Reported** | **Not reported** |
| The ostracized child ignored the ostracism | 37 | 63 |
| The ostracized child formed social relationships in other environments | 53 | 47 |
| The ostracized child told parents or relatives about the ostracism | 47 | 53 |
| The ostracized child told other children about the ostracism | 40 | 60 |
| The ostracized child told teachers about the ostracism | 39 | 61 |
| The ostracized child organized the ostracism of other children | 5 | 95 |