



Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

1313 L Street, NW • Washington, DC 20005

OFFICE: (202) 289-7905 • FAX: (202) 289-4203

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Contact Information:

Andrea Browning
Society for Research in Child Development
Office for Policy and Communications
(202) 289-7905
abrowning@srcd.org

Children Who Bully Also Have Problems With Other Relationships

Students who bully others tend to have difficulties with other relationships, such as those with friends and parents. Targeting those relationships, as well as the problems children who bully have with aggression and morality, may offer ideas for intervention and prevention.

Those are the findings of a new study that was conducted by scientists at York University and Queens University. It appears in the March/April 2008 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers looked at 871 students (466 girls and 405 boys) for seven years from ages 10 to 18. Each year, they asked the children questions about their involvement in bullying or victimizing behavior, their relationships, and other positive and negative behaviors.

Bullying is a behavior that most children engage in at some point during their school years, according to the study. Almost a tenth (9.9 percent) of the students said they engaged in consistently high levels of bullying from elementary through high school. Some 13.4 percent said they bullied at relatively high levels in elementary school but dropped to almost no bullying by the end of high school. Some 35.1 percent of the children said they bullied peers at moderate levels. And 41.6 percent almost never reported bullying across the adolescent years.

The study also found that children who bullied tended to be aggressive and lacking in a moral compass and they experienced a lot of conflict in their relationships with their parents. In addition, their relationships with friends also were marked by a lot of conflict, and they tended to associate with others who bullied.

The findings provide clear direction for prevention of persistent bullying problems, according to Debra Pepler, Distinguished Research Professor of Psychology at York University and Senior Associate Scientist at the Hospital for Sick Children. Pepler, who is the study's lead author, calls bullying "a relationship problem."

"Interventions must focus on the children who bully, with attention to their aggressive behavior problems, social skills, and social problem-solving skills. A focus on the child alone is not sufficient. Bullying is a relationship problem that requires relationship solutions by focusing on the bullying children's strained relationships with parents and risky relationships with peers," according to Pepler. "By providing intensive and ongoing support starting in the elementary school years to this small group of youth who persistently bully, it may be possible to promote

healthy relationships and prevent their ‘career path’ of bullying that leads to numerous social-emotional and relationship problems in adolescence and adulthood.”

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 79, Issue 2, *Developing Trajectories of Bullying and Associated Factors* by Pepler, D, Jiang, D (York University), Craig, W (Queens University), and Connolly, J (York University). Copyright 2008 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.