Bullies Pick on Unpopular Kids, Study Finds

By Jeanna Bryner, LiveScience Managing Editor
posted: 25 March 2010 12:08 am ET

Bullies choose their victims wisely, targeting kids who are unpopular and less likely to be defended by their peers, a new study finds.

And in elementary school, which this study focused on, kids are only interested in what their same-gender peers think. So boys will target classmates who are not well-liked by other boys, regardless of what the girls think.

Past research has shown that gays and lesbians as well as those who are socially awkward are more likely to be victims of bullying.

The new finding that bullies are so strategic in their affairs means eradicating the behavior will take a savvy program, said lead researcher René Veenstra, professor of sociology at the University of Groningen. While the study was based in the Netherlands, Veenstra said there's no reason the results shouldn't apply to the United States and elsewhere.

The results, which are detailed in the March/April 2010 issue of the journal Child Development, have implications for reducing bullying. An estimated 15 percent of kids around the globe are victims of bullying which can lead to depression, anxiety, loneliness and other negative consequences, the researchers say.

Bullies also have grim outcomes, with research showing in the long-run they have more substance abuse problems and higher levels of delinquency, Veenstra said.

**Who's who in the classroom**

Veenstra and his colleagues had about 480 students, average age of 10.5 years, from 26 different Dutch elementary schools answer questionnaires about their classmates.

The students noted which kids were their friends, those they disliked and who bullied whom. For instance, students indicated whether they themselves or others were victims or instigators of
different forms of bully behavior and victimization, such as: excluding or ignoring; calling names or laughing; hitting, kicking, or pinching; taking things; throwing things.

Both boys and girls were more likely to accept same-gender classmates than other-gender classmates. And boys were more often nominated than girls as perpetrators of bullying toward both boys and girls.

"They aren't interested in the opinion to the whole classroom, only those in their in-group," Veenstra told LiveScience. "In elementary school the in-group is often people from the same sex. Boys are interested in the opinion of other boys in whether they choose the right target or not, and girls are interested in what other girls think."

Bullies tended to target same-gender individuals who were rejected by and had low acceptance from their same-gender classmates. So when boys bully boys, it didn't matter whether girls approved or disapproved. The same went for girl bullies.

In that way the bullies could gain status by dominating other kids while also stay in the good graces of the in-group.

When they did taunt girls, boys chose victims who weren't well-liked by other boys, regardless of the victim's status among girls. Girls did the same in their bullying of boys. But there was one caveat. While male bullies were never rated low on acceptance by male or female peers, when girls bullied boys they were more rejected by both genders. The researchers aren't sure the reason for the gender difference.

**Complex behavior**

Veenstra paints a picture of bullying as a strategic affair involving more than just the bully and victim. For instance, assistants help out the bully, while defendants help the victim, and bystanders stand on the sidelines.

"Bullies do it so strategically that if there is not a good program at the school nothing will change. They won't change their behavior by themselves, because it gives them a lot of advantages," he said. "You really need a good program that changes the attitude of all the kids in the classroom that makes clear to children that if they want the bully to stop they all have to be part, take joint action."

He added, "They have to understand if they assist or reinforce the bully or are just bystanders that is what drives the bullying."

Those who want to nip bullying behavior in the bud should also take gender into account.

"To understand the complex nature of acceptance and rejection, it's necessary to distinguish the gender of the bully, the gender of the target, and the gender of the classmates who accept and reject bullies and victims," Veenstra said.

- Study Reveals Why Kids Get Bullied and Rejected
- 10 Most Destructive Human Behaviors
- The History of Human Aggression
Sterculius wrote:

"Bullies Pick on Unpopular Kids"

Well...DUH!

I'm so glad studies are funded to find out the obvious.

Seeqer wrote:

Wow, bullies pick on unpopular kids? What a shock. I never would have guessed.

mbski wrote:

How can I get in on this?? I could make millions...what other obvious studies can we do? hmmm....let see...Men like sex! Fat people eat too much! Smoking is bad! Not changing your socks leads to stinky feet! C'mon, LiveScience...please stick to real scientific research....

DeanUnick wrote:

There is a new weapon used by bullies. I believe this article does just touch upon it and may explain some of the anomalies.

We usually think in terms of fists, physical violence, being the enforcer. My three previous commentators may be just so. But in 'enlightened' school districts there is a new and effective 'fist' that is routinely employed. The 'fist' is the administration that is trained to come down swiftly and hard on all perceived bullies.

This article is one of several that I have seen that implies or thinks in terms of early and consistent disciplining of the 'bully'.

But I have seen where that same swift 'justice' IS the fist used by the perpetrator. The true bully today can, and often is the complainer. The sweet little innocent, may indeed be the current wielder of the new 'fist'.

The researchers noted an anomaly concerning the social acceptance of girls bullying boys. I contend that this 'reverse effect' may be exactly the departure from the expected.

There ain't no easy solutions. The big beast of my school days, is not always as it seems. I am glad at least this researcher found anomalies. Relook at the data and you may find the 'victim', in these few cases, is actually the bully making life miserable for the labeled 'bully' serving consecutive suspensions.

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dgilsdorf wrote: posted 25 March 2010, 6:51 am ET

A big thank you to DeanUnick, the only person who successfully demonstrated the reading and thinking skills needed to comment on the whole article, rather than just the title.

If the first three posters would care to demonstrate evidence of some amount of education by reading the article, apologizing for ignorant snap judgments, and posting something that matters, I will be back later to see it.

Livescience, you are partly to blame for this because of your choice of title. Lame. A better title might have been, "Bullies show strategic savvy in choosing targets". As this kind of problem shows up on this site a lot, perhaps you need an editor whose main job is to craft brief but accurate titles for the articles. This has gotten silly. Titles should not be bringing out the anti-science trolls in such large numbers so often.

As to the obvious excuse, "At least these people are visiting the site, so they are getting some science in their lives . . . " If they never read the articles, the only point to this is generating more hits on a website. And while that is the basis of revenue for websites (more hits = more people seeing ads = more value added to the ads), perhaps it is time for a rethink even on that. If the extra hits generated by this nonsense are people who do not even read far enough to see the ad copy, their hits here are wasted. And if people who DO read diligently are driven away by troll-ism, the ads miss part of their intended audience.

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Rylas wrote: posted 25 March 2010, 10:17 am ET

Aside from the blatantly obvious title, the article seems to be pointing out a lot of common sense. How do you make yourself look better? You have two options: Perform well, or highlight someone else who does worse. Let's give kids more credit for being smarter. Do scientist think only adults can figure out how to manipulate social settings to gain status?

Are kids behaving any differently than adults? Not really.

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flipacoin wrote: posted 25 March 2010, 11:14 am ET

A boyscout that takes a swiss army knife to school or a boy will take a plastic gun made of leggo's will get kicked out of school but...when a bully wails away on some defenseless kid's head...well then we must try to understand them. What we should do is call it what it is. ASSAULT AND BATTERY. We should teach punks at a early age the ramifications of their actions. If we don't do it when they are young, then police, judges, and prison systems where someone named Bubba will teach them the in's and out's of prison life. So is it kind to wait...or nip it in the bud? We should shame them and take freedoms away. They should be confined in a small room during lunch, recesses and class trips. Then when it is time to go back to class, they should sport an orange jumpsuit for the day. Also maybe daddy and mommie should visit them when
their brats are in their small secluded rooms. "OOOoooh that might terrorize him/her and cause a bad self image...waaa!" Here. Here's your stupid sign and a orange jumpsuit for ya! Had to vent. I'm outta here!

ather wrote:
No way. Yte another funded study to prove what any idiot could figure out. Any girl bullies are rated lower than boy bullies because it's unlady like. We wnat sweet caring nurturing girls. Not agressive girls.

Wanna stop bullying? Grow some balls. Start suspendign for name claling. A bully who targets bascially the whole school, not just oen or two kids, must be expelled. Any attacks are assualt and must be treated as such. Cop time. There is nothing to understand. Bullies have a problem, and coddling them and telling them it's not their fault justifies it, and encourages it. Lock these kids in an asslyum till theyir mentally cured. Teacher must get actively involved, not write you off for constantly complaining. Those types need to receive a pink slip, and maybe child abuse charges.

Because constant bullying requires a once and for all solution. And sadly, many kids think that solution involves a gun. No more bullies means no more bullying. And to far too many, that's the best way to eiliminate bullies.

Ap07373 wrote:
Add this one to the long list of "yea no kidding livescience" articles on this site.

shedmyskin wrote:
don't worry this study wasnt funded with tax payer dollars. It was funded by Captain F'n Obvious

Showing 1-10 of 18 comments