Study highlights the power of positive relationships for girls' mental health

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(Medical Xpress)—The experience of being bullied is particularly detrimental to the psychological health of school girls who don't have social support from either adults or peers, according to a new study by Dr. Martin Guhn and colleagues from the University of British Columbia in Canada. In contrast, social support from adults or peers (or both) appears to lessen the negative consequences of bullying in this group, namely anxiety and depression. The work is published online in Springer's *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

Guhn and his team looked at whether the combination of high levels of bullying and low levels of adult as well as peer support have a multiplicative negative effect on children's well-being.

A total of 3,026 ten-year-old school children from 72 schools in Vancouver, Canada, took part in the study and completed questionnaires, which assessed their satisfaction with life, their self-esteem, and their levels of anxiety and depression. The authors looked at whether the ratings for these factors differed, according to the quality of the children's relationships with both adults and their peers and how often they felt victimized.

Overall, girls were more likely to report positive relationships with both adults and peers, higher satisfaction with life, higher self-esteem as well as higher anxiety levels. There were no differences between boys' and girls' reported levels of bullying and depression. However, as many as 1 in 7 girls and 1 in 6 boys felt victimized several times a week, with

verbal and social victimization more commonly reported than physical bullying; cyber bullying appeared to be relatively low.

The authors also found that positive relationships with adults and peers were strongly linked to life satisfaction and self-esteem, whereas bullying was strongly linked to depressive symptoms and anxiety. In addition, victimization was particularly strongly linked to low life satisfaction, low self-esteem and more depressive symptoms in girls who reported low levels of social support from adults as well as from peers.

The authors conclude: "Our findings have implications for promoting children's well-being in school and community contexts, supporting interventions that foster relationship-building skills and simultaneously reduce victimization. In other words, children need more than the absence of risk factors to experience good mental health and well-being."

More information: Guhn M et al (2012). A population study of victimization, relationships, and well-being in middle childhood. *Journal of Happiness Studies*; DOI 10.1007/s10902-012-9393-8

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