

Psychological bullying hits just as hard

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School bullying doesn't have to leave physical bumps and bruises to contribute to a hostile and potentially dangerous school environment. Behavior that intentionally harms another individual, through the manipulation of social relationships (or 'relational aggression'), is just as significant a concern for adolescent psychosocial development and mental health, according to Dr. Sara Goldstein from Montclair State University and her colleagues from the University of Michigan.

Their study, published this month in Springer's *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, shows that adolescents exposed to high levels of relational aggression perceive their school to be less safe, and are less pleased with the general social atmosphere of the school. Adolescent boys who are exposed to relational aggression are also more likely to carry a weapon to school. This is not the case for girls.

A total of 1,335 African American and European American adolescents, aged 11 – 19 years, from a public school district in Detroit, Michigan, took part in an Internet survey which looked at how relational aggression at school is associated with adolescents' perceptions of, and participation in, a hostile school environment.

Respondents were asked about their direct experience of being victims of both relational aggression (e.g. How often in the last month have students told stories about you that were untrue" How often in the previous month did students not include you in joining in what they were doing"), and overt aggression. Respondents were also asked about their experience of witnessing both relational and overt aggression.

Most of the research to date looking at aggression in schools has focused on physically and verbally harmful behaviors, such as hitting, pushing, and name calling. This study looks at how other forms of aggression that target victims' relationships and peer standing can lead to school-related problems. Contrary to other work in this field, it also looks at the effect of witnessing relational aggression, rather than simply focusing on victims. There is already strong evidence to link relational aggression with social anxiety, loneliness and depression, peer difficulties and substance use.

The authors conclude that the impact of school aggression is such that it calls for "creative means to (a) detect relational aggression, and (b) address it in a manner that respects adolescents' need for autonomy over their peer relationships but also discourages relationally aggressive behavior."

Source: Springer

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