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Boy-girl bullying in middle grades more common than previously thought

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Much more cross-gender bullying - specifically, unpopular boys harassing popular girls - occurs in later elementary school grades than previously thought, meaning educators should take reports of harassment from popular girls seriously, according to new research by a University of Illinois professor who studies child development.

Philip C. Rodkin, a professor of child development at the U. of I.'s College of Education, said that while most bullies are boys, their victims, counter to popular conception, are not just other boys.

"We found that a lot of male bullies between fourth and sixth grade are bullying girls – more than people would have anticipated – and a substantial amount of that boy-girl, cross-gender bullying goes unreported," he said.

Rodkin, who along with Christian Berger, a professor at the Universidad Alberto Hurtado in Santiago, Chile, published the paper "Who Bullies Whom? Social Status Asymmetries by Victim Gender" in the most recent issue of the *International Journal of Behavioral Development,* said cross-gender bullying hasn't been fully explored because of the ways researchers have thought about the social status dynamic of bullying in the past.

"Bullies are generally more popular than their victims, and have more power over their victim, whether it's physical strength or psychological power," Rodkin said. "Researchers have taken it for granted that a bully

will also have a higher social status than their victims. Based on our research, that's not necessarily the case."

The classic bullying paradigm follows what Rodkin calls the "whipping boy" syndrome: the powerful, popular bully tormenting an unpopular victim. (Think Biff Tannen bullying George McFly in "Back to the Future.")

Over the course of his research, which included surveys of 508 fourth and fifth graders from two elementary schools in the Midwest, Rodkin found that boys who bullied other boys fit the classic pattern. But he also found a number of cases where an unpopular boy bullied a popular girl.

"In those cases where it was a boy picking on a girl, the bullies were regarded by their classmates as being quite unpopular," Rodkin said. "They were not alpha males, and they were probably more reactive in their aggression compared to the classic bully."

Could the explanation for the high proportion of boys bullying girls simply be that it's part of the clumsy transition we all make into adolescence?

"You could say it's normal behavior for kids – what's been called 'push-and-pull courtship' – a result of learning about the birds and the bees," Rodkin said. "But the fact that these unpopular boys were very aggressively targeting girls subtracts from the idea that it's normal."

Despite being perceived by their classmates as being "popular," bullies also are nominated by their peers as being among those liked the least.

"Bullies are always aggressive, and they're never likeable," Rodkin said. "For a generation of research, being popular was equated with being liked. Popularity is an extremely important dimension of social life in

any social structure, whether it's kids or adults, but ultimately it's a gauge of whether others think you have social influence, not if you're likeable. Popularity doesn't necessarily translate into what kind of person you want your child to become."

Paradoxically, a bully's victims are also disliked.

"Both bullies and victims are highly disliked by their peers," Rodkin said. "There's a stigma attached to being aggressive, as well as to being weak. Both qualities are looked down upon."

Rodkin believes that exploring the bully-victim social dynamic is fruitful in that it will allow for a more complete representation of children's social environments for parents and educators.

"Just because a kid is popular," he said, "doesn't mean that they're problem-free or nothing bad is going on. There are a lot of dangers for girls and boys over middle childhood and adolescence, dangers that could continue in relationships between men and women later in life."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign