

Study links bullying to depression, other adult ailments

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(PhysOrg.com) -- University of Arizona family studies researchers report in the journal *Developmental Psychology* that high school students whose sexual orientation is at odds with social gender norms often find themselves victims of harassment and, later on in life, with psychological problems.

Two University of Arizona family studies researchers are co-authors of new study that has found that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, or LGBT, youth who do not conform to societal gender norms can have compromised [mental health](#) that is clearly linked to the bullying and harassment they receive in school.

The study will be published in the November edition of the journal [Developmental Psychology](#). It is the first to thoroughly analyze the relationship between the victimization suffered by gender non-conforming LGBT students and their psycho-social adjustment as young adults.

Analyzing data from the Family Acceptance Project young adult survey, Stephen T. Russell and Russell Toomey examined the school-related experiences of 245 LGBT young adults, ages 21 to 25. They found that LGBT young adults who did not socially conform to gender roles as adolescents reported higher levels of anti-LGBT victimization, with significantly higher levels of depression and decreased [life satisfaction](#) in young adulthood.

Toomey, the primary author of the paper, is a graduate research assistant and doctoral student at the UA. Russell is a professor and director of the McClelland Institute in the Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences at the UA. Russell is also the president-elect of the Society for Research on Adolescents.

Their research, they said, shows that the negative impact of anti-LGBT school victimization affects both quality of life and the LGBT young adult's capacity to enjoy life. Most crucially, the findings show that anti-LGBT bullying in school largely accounts for this psychological harm.

The study also calls for schools to take action to address the bullying, violence and social isolation that gender-nonconforming LGBT youth face, including the implementation of education programs for students and faculty members, offering support programs including gay-straight alliances and protecting students through robust nondiscrimination policies.

Said Russell: "There is increasing attention on anti-LGBT bullying in schools. Our research makes it crystal clear that anti-LGBT bullying is a major reason that youth who don't conform to gender rules or expectations have poorer mental health later in life."

Toomey added: "Clearly, gender-nonconforming and LGBT students need protections in schools that are specific to their [sexual orientation](#) and gender identities to interrupt the strong link between bias-victimization and poorer mental health."

By proactively supporting gender-nonconforming and LGBT youth, the authors concluded that schools can change the hostile and harmful environments these adolescents face each day, and prevent future tragedies, such as the suicides of Asher Brown in Texas and Seth Walsh in California and the 2008 murder of 15-year-old Lawrence King.

"Each day we see tragedies directly related to anti-LGBT school victimization," said Caitlin Ryan, director of the Family Acceptance Project. "This study provides clear evidence of the lasting effects of school [bullying](#) related to gender expression and LGBT identity. Schools can no longer turn a blind eye to these problems without being held accountable for the mental health problems these children suffer."

The Family Acceptance Project, based at San Francisco State University, is a community research, intervention, education and policy initiative that studies the impact of family acceptance and rejection on the health, mental health and well being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth.

Provided by University of Arizona

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