

# New study looks at how young adolescents respond when their friends are bullied

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(PhysOrg.com) -- When supporting a friend who has been victimized by a bully, young adolescents respond with a range of advice and actions. Girls most often suggest telling an adult or confronting the bully to try to understand the conflict, while boys are more apt to minimize the seriousness of the incident or, to the other extreme, encourage aggression toward the assailant, according to a new psychological study at the University of Maine.

Understanding young [adolescents'](#) responses to the bullying of their peers and what those responses say about the quality of children's friendships is the first step in determining how best to help victims, according to UMaine Doctoral Research Fellow Amy Kaye. The most effective peer responses, including the differences between what boys and girls say and do to victimized friends, could inform intervention efforts.

Kaye and other researchers have studied the importance of friendship in children's lives. Even one friend can make a difference for victimized youngsters, especially if that friend provides companionship and problem-solving help in times of crisis.

The UMaine study is one of the first to examine whether the way in which middle school students respond to support-seeking friends is associated with their positive and negative peer experiences, including friendship quality, [conflict](#) in friendship and victimization.

Middle school is a major transitional period for children, and emotions

run high. Shifts in peer groups and new friendships — including romantic relationships — create a broader spectrum of interactions, emotional reactions and pressures, which increases opportunities for bullying.

“Bullying is at its peak during this time,” says Kaye, a fifth-year graduate student from Hampstead, N.H., in the Psychology Department’s Clinical Ph.D. Program.

Kaye first conducted focus groups with middle school students to discuss the kinds of things they might do if they saw a friend being bullied. Based on the students’ responses, she and UMaine psychology professor Cynthia Erdley developed a questionnaire that was administered to 120 sixth- through eighth-graders to examine what they would do and how they would advise their victimized friends. The students were presented with bullying scenarios.

Kaye found that the more positive adolescents’ friendship quality, the more likely they were to advise their victimized friends to protect and distract themselves (being sure they were never alone and encouraging participation in a fun activity), tell an adult or confront the bully. Those with strong friendships also took it upon themselves to protect and distract their friend, and confront the bully.

Children who had been victimized themselves were more likely to respond to a bullied peer with aggressive suggestions for action, Kaye says. Such a response gets to their own level of anger.

Overall, girls’ responses to victimized friends focused on broad emotional support, while boys’ responses tended to focus on [aggression](#) and minimizing — saying, in essence, the bullying incident was not a big deal and one should try to forget about it, taking a dismissive stance.

Responses also were different when the victimization was overt (verbal

and physical abuse) versus relational (social exclusion, spreading rumors). In cases of overt victimization, both [girls](#) and boys were more likely to respond with more emotional support. In relational situations, friends were more likely to distract the victimized peer and minimize the experience.

“We were surprised to hear that they saw that as an appropriate way to respond to their peers,” Kaye says. “Minimizing often happens when people — friends, parents, teachers — don’t know what to say. We found that minimizing was associated with the conflict that goes along with negative experiences in a friendship.”

In contrast, broad, supportive responses — “I’m here for you” — are associated with more positive friendship experiences.

While neither response constitutes constructive problem solving, such minimizing responses and suggestions to be aggressive toward the bully have the potential to do the most harm, Kaye says.

“What consistently emerged in focus groups and follow-up studies was that the two responses were associated with negative experiences in friendships — conflicts between the victim and supporter,” Kaye says.

Society’s view of bullying has undergone a major shift in the last two decades, Kaye says. “Even school officials used to think that students had to go through this to learn to have friends and deal with people,” she says. “Through research we now know that this is not a rite of passage, that victims of bullying are often clinically depressed, anxious, lonely and attempting suicide.”

And while bullying has a long history, it has never been more detrimental than it is today. “With new forms of technology, a new category of bullying has emerged that allows it to be even more pervasive. Now children can’t leave school and leave bullying at school. With technology, at home they’re still bullied. They can’t escape it any more,” says Kaye,

who is presenting her findings at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, March 31-April 2 in Montreal.

“This is not a rite of passage that children have to go through,” says Kaye, who is headed into a one-year predoctoral clinical internship at the Milton Hershey School in Pennsylvania, a residential school for at-risk youth ages 4 to 18, where she will be involved in therapy and assessment, and crisis management services. “Some children are dealing with it nonstop, day and night. Through research, we’re hoping to help with prevention and intervention efforts.”

Provided by University of Maine

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