

Study shows bullying affects both bystanders and target

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(Medical Xpress) -- Maybe it was the hefty eighth-grader pushing the skinny sixth-grader out of a seat on the bus, or perhaps it was a group of cheerleaders making fun of an overweight girl. Most of us can remember witnessing acts of bullying at school. But we may not realize that bullying in schools is detrimental not only to the kids who are the targets, but to the bystanders who observe it as well.

“[Bullying](#) may interfere with children who witness it acquiring a sense of safety and affiliation with others, both of which are crucial human needs,” said Associate Professor of Counselor Education JoLynn Carney, whose research with Professor of Counselor Education Richard Hazler focuses on the effects of bullying on bystanders. “Bullying can also cause people who witness it to demonstrate physical stress symptoms of increased heart rate and perspiration as well as high levels of self-reported trauma even years after bullying events,” she said.

Carney and Hazler employ a variety of approaches to study the effects of bullying on [bystanders](#). In one study published in the Fall 2011 issue of the *Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, they used the School Bullying Survey, which Hazler developed with other colleagues, to survey 91 sixth-grade students from a rural Midwestern school about their exposure to bullying. The survey is a 28-item paper-and-pencil measure, including items assessing general demographic information, such as age, sex, grade in school, and race, and specific items related to being a bully, a target of bullying, and/or a witness to bullying during the current academic year.

The researchers found that all students surveyed had been exposed to repetitive bullying, either as a target or as a witness. They also found that the ability of children to trust others was significantly related to less bullying exposure and more witnessing of interventions by others.

“Study results support the concept that bullying is associated with the damaged relationships and social mistrust that diminish the sense of faith in people and society, because trust was higher for students who had been exposed to less bullying,” said Hazler. “Traumatic life experience is one of the strongest factors that reduce trust in other people and study results suggest that a similar effect for school-age children may be related to the trauma caused by bullying.”

Carney and Hazler also investigated how exposure to bullying at school is associated with students’ anxiety levels and adrenocortical activity at a time preceding lunch when anxiety about potential bullying would be expected to be higher.

First, the researchers measured the general anxiety levels of the students using the Multidimensional Anxiety Scale for Children (MASC), a 39-item self-report instrument that asks questions about physical symptoms, such as “My heart races or skips beats;” social anxiety, such as “I worry about what other people think of me;” separation anxiety/panic, such as “The idea of going away to camp scares me;” and harm avoidance, such as “I stay away from things that upset me.” Next, they measured the students’ salivary cortisol levels, which indicate a stress reaction of the body via hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal activity.

Examining both the MASC data and the salivary data, the team found that the amount of combined bullying exposure from victimization and bystanding was related to lower cortisol levels at a time, just before lunch, when the potential for bullying was about to increase. The results are published in the March 29, 2010 issue of the *Journal of School Violence*. “This study is groundbreaking in that it demonstrates that there

are physiological impacts related to being exposed to bullying that relate to physical symptoms and influence behavior, as well as potential future physical and social implications,” said Carney.

According to Carney and Hazler, the general theme emerging from their research is that bullying doesn’t just affect victims. “Everyone is impacted,” said Hazler, “both in school and outside of school, and the influences can be life-long. Our research emphasizes the widespread impact of bullying and implies the need for individual and group interventions to more effectively deal with the problems.”

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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