

Kids more accepting of peers who try to change undesirable trait than those faulted for it

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A psychology team at Kansas State University is studying how elementary and middle school youths perceive and anticipate interacting with peers who have various characteristics seen as undesirable, such as being a poor student or being extremely aggressive.

Mark Barnett, a professor of psychology, and psychology doctoral candidates Tammy Sonnentag, Edgar, Wis.; Jennifer Livengood, Marshall, Mo.; and Taylor Wadian, Fayette, Iowa; as well as Adrienne Struble, a spring 2011 bachelor's graduate, Lawrence, recently completed a study on this topic relating to fault attribution. It looks at the extent to which children attribute fault to [peers](#) with these undesirable characteristics, and how they anticipate interacting with these peers.

The study, "Role of Fault Attributions and Desire/Effort/Outcome Expectations in Children's Anticipated Responses to Hypothetical Peers with Various Undesirable Characteristics," will be published in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of Genetic Psychology*.

Researchers evaluated responses from 137 third- through eighth-grade students who responded to statements about six hypothetical male peers for the study. Each peer was either a poor student, poor athlete, extremely overweight, extremely aggressive, extremely shy or had symptoms of [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#).

"We led the children to believe that these six [male students](#) from another school had gone through interviews about six months apart," Barnett said. "In the first interview each of the hypothetical students described his problem and said whether he desired to fix it. We then told the students that six months later we brought those same kids back and asked if they'd been doing anything to change their undesirable characteristic, and whether they had been successful in doing so."

Participants were then asked to rate their attitudes toward each hypothetical peer on a five-point scale.

Researchers found that the more the students attributed fault to a peer for his undesirable characteristic, the more they would tease and make fun of him, and the less they would like to help him if he needed assistance.

Of those six characteristics, the kids who were overweight and aggressive were disliked more than those who were a poor student, a poor athlete, extremely shy or hyperactive. Students indicated that more so than for the other peers, the obese and aggressive peers were at fault for having their undesirable attribute and that they lacked the desire and motivation to change it.

"Attributions of fault seem to be very important in children's attitudes and anticipated reactions to peers with undesirable characteristics," Barnett said. "The more they attribute fault to peers for being a poor student, a poor athlete or whatever, the more they dislike them and the more they anticipate responding to them in a negative manner."

Additionally, the team found that girls tended to be kinder than boys to peers with undesirable characteristics -- unless the characteristics were obesity and aggressiveness. For peers with those two characteristics, both girls and boys indicated equal dislike, and both believed these peers were

at heightened fault for their characteristic.

But the team found there is a silver lining for kids who have an undesirable characteristic.

"If the [students](#) think that the child has tried to change, that tends to positively influence how they anticipate interacting with that peer," Barnett said. "They really liked kids who are successful in overcoming their problem, but they also really liked kids who tried and put effort into changing."

Provided by Kansas State University

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