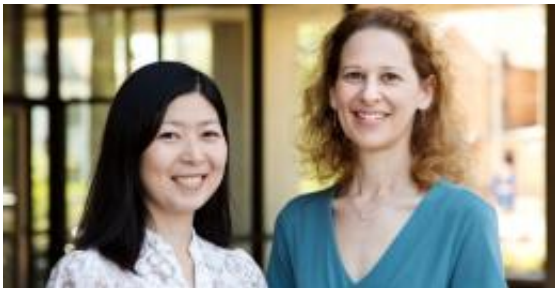


Anti-bullying efforts should be tailored to victims' needs, study shows

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A child's temperament, sex and the type of bullying they experience all influence whether the child subsequently becomes depressed or more aggressive after being victimized, indicates a study by graduate student Niwako Sugimura, left, and psychology professor Karen D. Rudolph. Photo by L. Brian Stauffer

(Medical Xpress) -- Girls with poor self-control become as physically aggressive as the average boy when they're bullied, suggests a new study by psychologists at the University of Illinois.

Whether victims become more aggressive or mired in self-blame and despair after being victimized is influenced by their temperament, gender and the type of bullying they experience. Intervention programs need to be sensitive to these differences and provide resources and strategies tailored to victims' individual needs, said the study's co-authors, graduate student Niwako Sugimura and Karen D. Rudolph, a professor in the department of psychology.

The researchers tracked 283 second-graders' psychological adjustment for a year, examining how temperament and sex influenced bullying victims' subsequent development of aggression or depression. The children and their teachers were surveyed about the children's victimization by peers, and their overt and relationally aggressive behaviors toward others. Overt bullying includes physical assaults and verbal taunts or threats; relational bullying is intentionally excluding a child from a group or spreading rumors about them.

Parents also completed questionnaires about their children's moods and feelings that corresponded with [depressive symptoms](#) and reported on two traits pertaining to their children's temperaments – [inhibitory control](#) and negative emotionality.

“Inhibitory control is like self-control,” Sugimura said. “Kids with poor inhibitory control have trouble stopping themselves from doing something too quickly or they don't think before they act. Negative emotionality refers to how easily kids become angry, frustrated or sad. Children with high negative emotionality not only become angry or sad easily, they also stay upset longer.”

Not all children with high negative emotionality are depressed, although they may be more likely to become depressed than other children when they face a severe problem such as bullying, Rudolph said.

In the study, [girls](#) with high negative emotionality who had been bullied overtly or relationally were more likely to show depressive symptoms a year later. However, boys with high negative emotionality showed more depressive symptoms regardless of the amount of bullying they experienced, while boys with low negative emotionality showed depressive symptoms only in response to relational bullying.

“We know that there is a genetic component to some of these traits, so it

might be that boys with high negative emotionality are predisposed to depression,” Rudolph said. “And it doesn’t matter what their experiences are; they’re just more likely to be depressed. However, boys with low negative emotionality were not predisposed to depression, so they were more reactive when they were bullied and became depressed.”

Contrary to the researchers’ expectations, girls – not boys – with poor inhibitory control were more reactive to overt and relational victimization and were more likely to display heightened aggression later on, becoming as physically aggressive as the average boy.

Sugimura and Rudolph weren’t certain why, but theorized that girls with low inhibitory control may be particularly impaired in their abilities to regulate their behavior. Or because overt aggression is less common among females, girls may view it as a greater threat and affront, prompting them to react violently.

“What they might be doing is trying to defend themselves when they’re bullied and trying to regain status within their group,” Sugimura said. “And because they have poor self-control, they might rely on kicking and hitting instead of trying to solve the problem.”

Responding aggressively to bullies tends to incite – not prevent – further victimization, triggering a cycle of violence, studies have shown. The researchers want to figure out ways to interrupt that cycle, developing interventions that protect victims against some of the emotional outcomes and to keep them from becoming more aggressive.

Although recent media attention on bullycides – youth suicides believed to have been caused by bullying – and school shootings by bullying victims have prompted mandates for anti-bullying curricula in schools, few of the programs have shown much efficacy with children in the U.S.

“Most of the programs focus on intervening at the level of preventing something bad from happening, but we also need to work on skill-building and teaching kids emotional competence skills,” Rudolph said. “Of course, it’s important for schools to prevent bullying from happening in the first place, but if kids respond to bullying more effectively, this also might reduce [bullying](#) eventually. If you teach kids with poor [self-control](#) or high negative emotionality how to think before they act and to deal with emotions effectively, you’re increasing the positive skills that they can rely on; this may help prevent some of the negative cycles that evolve.”

The study, available online, has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*.

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