

Youths' well-being linked to how well they conform to gender norms

August 8 2012, By Karene Booker

(Medical Xpress) -- Regardless of their sexual orientation, teens who do not fit behavioral norms for their gender are not as happy as their gender-conforming peers, finds a new Cornell study published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (41:611-621).

The findings suggest it may be the effects of not conforming to gender stereotypes, rather than [sexual orientation](#), that drive the increased mental health risks found among non-heterosexual youth. Although being a feminine boy or a masculine girl is often related to sexual orientation, until now, the separate effects of gender expression and sexuality on mental health had not been untangled.

"We need to rethink how sexual orientation relates to health. Too much emphasis has been put on a non-heterosexual orientation itself being detrimental," said Gerulf Rieger, lead author and Cornell postdoctoral associate, who conducted the study with Ritch C. Savin-Williams, professor of human development and director of the Sex and Gender Lab at Cornell's College of [Human Ecology](#).

For their research, Rieger and Savin-Williams analyzed data from 475 rural [high school students](#) who participated in a survey about their sexual orientation, preference for male-typical or female-typical activities, and psychological well-being.

The researchers found that the non-heterosexual youth in the study were more likely to violate [gender norms](#) for behavior, feelings, activities and

interests, but so did some heterosexual youth. The effect of being a feminine boy or a masculine girl was similar regardless of sexual orientation -- both childhood and adolescent gender nonconformity were negatively linked to well-being. The effects on mental health, however, were small, which the researchers say may explain why most same-sex oriented individuals experience few [mental health problems](#).

"Perhaps some adolescents are harassed not so much because they are gay," said Savin-Williams, "but because they violate 'acceptable' ways of acting. If so, sexism may be a more pervasive problem among youth than homophobia."

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Provided by Cornell University

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