

# 'Cool' kids in middle school bully more, psychologists report

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Bullying, whether it's physical aggression or spreading rumors, boosts the social status and popularity of middle school students, according to a new UCLA psychology study that has implications for programs aimed at combatting school bullying. In addition, students already considered popular engage in these forms of bullying, the researchers found.

The [psychologists](#) studied 1,895 ethnically diverse students from 99 classes at 11 Los Angeles middle schools. They conducted surveys at three points: during the spring of seventh grade, the fall of eighth grade and the spring of eighth grade. Each time, students were asked to name the students who were considered the "coolest," the students who "start fights or push other kids around" and the ones who "spread nasty rumors about other kids."

Those students who were named the coolest at one time were largely named the most aggressive the next time, and those considered the most aggressive were significantly more likely to be named the coolest the next time. The results indicate that both [physical aggression](#) and spreading rumors are rewarded by middle school peers.

"The ones who are cool bully more, and the ones who bully more are seen as cool," said Jaana Juvonen, a UCLA professor of psychology and lead author of the study. "What was particularly interesting was that the form of aggression, whether highly visible and clearly confrontational or not, did not matter. Pushing or shoving and gossiping worked the same for boys and girls."

"The impetus for the study was to figure out whether aggression promotes social status, or whether those who are perceived as popular abuse their social power and prestige by putting other kids down," she said. "We found it works both ways for both 'male-typed' and 'female-typed' forms of aggression."

The research is published online in the prominent [Journal of Youth and Adolescence](#) and will be appear in an upcoming print edition of the journal.

The study implies that anti-[bullying](#) programs have to be sophisticated and subtle to succeed.

"A simple message, such as 'Bullying is not tolerated,' is not likely to be very effective," Juvonen said, when bullying often increases social status and respect.

Effective anti-bullying programs need to focus on the bystanders, who play a critical role and can either encourage or discourage bullying, said Juvonen, who has conducted research on bullying since the mid-1990s and serves as a consultant to schools on anti-bullying programs. Bystanders should be made aware of the consequences of spreading rumors and encouraging aggression and the damage bullying creates, she said.

Juvonen's current research is federally supported by the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Juvonen and her colleagues reported in 2003 that bullies are popular and respected and are considered the "cool" kids.

The rumors [middle school students](#) spread often involve sexuality

(saying a student is gay or sexually promiscuous) and family insults, she said.

Like middle [school students](#), Juvonen noted, non-human primates also use aggression to promote social rank (although gossiping is obviously limited to humans).

Co-authors of the new study are former UCLA psychology graduate student Yueyan Wang and UCLA psychology doctoral student Guadalupe Espinoza.

In previous research, Juvonen and her colleagues have reported that nearly three in four teenagers say they were bullied online at least once during a recent 12-month period, and only one in 10 reported such cyber-bullying to parents or other adults; that nearly half of the sixth graders at two Los Angeles–area public schools said they were bullied by classmates during a five-day period; that [middle school](#) students who are bullied in school are likely to feel depressed, lonely and miserable, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to further bullying incidents; and that bullying is pervasive.

"Bullying is a problem that large numbers of kids confront on a daily basis at school; it's not just an issue for the few unfortunate ones," Juvonen has said. "Students reported feeling humiliated, anxious or disliking school on days when they reported incidents, which shows there is no such thing as 'harmless' name-calling or an 'innocent' punch."

Juvonen advises parents to talk with their children about bullying before it ever happens, to pay attention to changes in their children's behavior and to take their concerns seriously.

Students who get bullied often have headaches, colds and other physical illnesses, as well as psychological problems.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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