

New findings on bullying, victims and disliking in adolescence challenge previous assumptions

April 2 2013, by Kathryn Ware

(Medical Xpress)—Thousands of children are bullied each day, but new University of Virginia research shows that they are not disliked universally by their peers. Indeed, victims may not be the most popular students at school; though they may have interpersonal and behavioral difficulties, many are not disliked by classmates.

A new study by Christopher Hafen, a research scientist at U.Va.'s Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, or CASTL, based in the Curry School of Education; Brett Laursen, his dissertation adviser and a [psychology professor](#) at Florida Atlantic University; and Jari-Erik Nurmi and Katariina Salmela-Aro of the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, suggests that [victims](#) of bullying are not disliked by most peers, but rather strongly disliked by those identified as [bullies](#).

"This is the first study to go beyond the typical assumption that adolescents who are victims of bullying are disliked, and look to understand where this dislike originates," Hafen said.

Researchers set out to learn whether dislike directed toward victims of bullying is reported by most of the victims' peers. They examined two possibilities related to bullying: Are victims rejected because most peers dislike them, or are victims rejected because bullies dislike them at a higher level? The study included 359 boys and 340 girls enrolled in 10th grade in 13 public schools in Finland.

During the study, the students were asked how often they bullied others, how often they had been bullied, their [problem behavior](#), their degree of school burnout and their academic grades. In addition, students nominated three same-grade schoolmates with whom "you least like to spend your time," which helped researchers understand disliking.

"By capitalizing on a comprehensive set of nominations, we were able to unpack the source of the majority of these nominations as being from bullies in the school," Hafen said. "This has the potential to add validity to existing programs that look to build the social skills of victims so that they can form and maintain friendships with others."

The researchers conclude that the problems of the victims stem largely from experiences with bullies and not with the larger peer group, which provides hope for prevention and intervention.

The results were "very promising," said Hafen. "We found that victims were not disliked by the majority of their peers. While being a victim was associated with a higher likelihood of being disliked, the nominations they received were disproportionately a function of nominations originating from the actual bullies."

He said the results found in Finland likely were applicable in the U.S.

"In this case, the history of research on bullying and victimization in the U.S. and Finland are very similar and often find very similar results," Hafen said. Though he allowed that "it is always good practice to establish the consistency of results across samples," he said he is confident this pattern is likely to be similar to U.S. adolescents. Possible solutions in Finland and the U.S., Hafen said, might include pairing the victims with children who have well-developed social skills to provide opportunities to boost self-worth, ease interpersonal concerns and increase motivation to maintain peer relationships.

Action steps should be taken to remind the victims that they are not alone or a social outcast, and ultimately to push them toward community and discourage withdrawing from friend groups, he said.

This study and noteworthy findings are summarized in a [CASTL Research Brief](#) and available online.

Provided by University of Virginia

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