

# Childhood bullying increases the propensity to self-harm during adolescence

May 28 2013

---

A new study has proven that being bullied during childhood directly increases the likelihood of self-harm in late adolescence.

The analysis, led by researchers from the University of Warwick in association with colleagues at the University of Bristol, highlights that being bullied at primary school age can cause enough distress to significantly increase the risk of self-harming in later adolescence.

Almost 5,000 participants in the Children of the 90s study were assessed for exposure to [bullying](#) between seven and ten years of age and later asked whether they had engaged in self-harm at sixteen to seventeen years.

Self-harm behaviours may stem from a desire to relieve tension or communicate stress, and in the most extreme cases may represent a suicidal intent in the individual.

The study found that 16.5% of 16-17 year olds had self-harmed in the previous year, and 26.9% of these did so because they felt as though they 'wanted to die'. Those who were subjected to chronic bullying over a number of years at primary school were nearly five times more likely to self-harm six to seven years later in adolescence.

Professor Dieter Wolke of the University of Warwick explained, "It is further evidence for doing away with the myth that bullying at a young age can be viewed as a harmless rite of passage. I'd like to see clinicians

routinely asking children about bullying – from name calling to more physical acts of abuse.

The importance of this [early intervention](#) should not be understated. If we were able to eliminate bullying, while other exposures remained constant, there would be a potential to prevent 20% of all self-harm cases."

Dealing with bullying at an early age can reduce suffering for the individual but also long term costs for society.

The research, published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, took great lengths to control the study for previous exposure to an adverse family environment; such as domestic violence, parental style or existing childhood mental health problems.

With such controls in place, the outcomes of the study can be used to help identify clear links between being bullied at a young age and self-harm in teenage years; whether that be through an increased risk of depression or by exacerbating the effects of a harmful family environment.

The results also showed that girls were, overall, more likely to engage in self-harm and develop depression symptoms. This supports the common belief that girls are roughly twice as likely to experience problems of this nature, particularly where that means turning their distress inwards, that is, to self-harm.

Professor Wolke added, "Many children suffer in silence and never speak out about being bullied. While bullying also increases the risk of depression, many adolescents in our study self-harmed without being depressed – so it is important that when children or [adolescents](#) show signs of self-harm or indications of non-specific symptoms (such as

recurrent headaches, stomach aches, avoidance to go to school), we consider bullying as a possible cause and provide them with support."

**More information:** "Being Bullied During Childhood and the Prospective Pathways to Self-Harm in Late Adolescence"

[www.jaacap.com/article/S0890-8 ... \(13\)00183-4/abstract](http://www.jaacap.com/article/S0890-8... (13)00183-4/abstract)

Provided by University of Warwick

Citation: Childhood bullying increases the propensity to self-harm during adolescence (2013, May 28) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-05-childhood-bullying-propensity-self-harm-adolescence.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.