

# Humour styles and bullying in schools: Not a laughing matter

May 2 2013, by Keele University

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There is a clear link between children's use of humour and their susceptibility to being bullied by their peers, according to a major new study released today by Keele University.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and supported by academics at the University of Strathclyde and Oxford Brookes University, the research examined the links between how 11-13 year olds use [different styles](#) of [humour](#) and the problem of bullying in schools.

The findings reveal that children who use self-defeating forms of humour – eg. self-disparaging language / putting themselves down to make other people laugh - are more likely to be bullied than those who use more positive forms of humour. The study also found that peer victimisation led to an increase in the use of self-defeating humour over time, showing that victims of bullying are often trapped in a [vicious cycle](#), where being bullied deprives them of the opportunities to practice positive humour with [peers](#) and leads them to rely on self-defeating humour, perhaps as a way to get others to like them.

Dr Claire Fox, lead researcher from Keele University, said, "What our study shows is that humour clearly plays an important role in how children interact with one another and that children who use humour to make fun of themselves are at more risk of being bullied. We know that this negative use of humour is a nurtured behavior, influenced by a child's [social environment](#) rather than genetics. This makes the behaviour easier to change, so we hope the next step for this study is to

see whether it is possible to 'teach' children how to use humour to enhance their [resilience](#) and encourage them to not use negative forms of humour."

The two year study involved 1,234 children who were questioned at the beginning and end of each [school year](#). Researchers measured three types of bullying and victimisation: verbal, physical and relational/indirect (e.g. [social exclusion](#), spreading nasty rumours) and used self-reports and peer nominations to draw their conclusions. Each child was also assessed in relation to their number of friends, humour styles, symptoms of depression and loneliness and self-esteem.

## Four types of humour

### Positive humour

- Self-enhancing humour, e.g. 'If I am feeling scared I find that it helps to laugh'.
- Affiliative, e.g. 'I often make other people laugh by telling jokes and funny stories'.

### Negative humour

- Self-defeating, e.g. 'I often try to get other people to like me more by saying something funny about things that are wrong with me or mistakes that I make'.
- Aggressive, e.g. 'If someone makes a mistake I will often tease them about it'.

Provided by Keele University

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