

Study: Family violence can lead boys to aggression and to drug problems

July 16 2013, by Sharita Forrest



A new study indicates that adolescent substance abuse has roots in bullying, fighting and familial violence, including conflict between siblings. Dorothy Espelage, a faculty member in the College of Education, led the research. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

(Medical Xpress)—Boys exposed to familial violence, including conflict between siblings, become increasingly aggressive toward their peers at school, and this aggression is associated with greater levels of alcohol and drug use over time, a new study by a University of Illinois researcher suggests.

While familial violence more directly influences girls' alcohol and drug

use during adolescence, it seems to do so independently of [aggressive behavior](#) such as bullying and fighting, according to the study, which was published online recently in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

Bullying and [school violence](#) expert Dorothy Espelage led the research, which indicated that verbal and [physical aggression](#) between and among siblings may be as detrimental to children as exposure to interparental [domestic violence](#). However, few researchers, particularly in the U.S., have comprehensively examined [family violence](#) by including aggression between siblings in their studies, focusing instead on the impact of interparental violence alone.

"There's been a growing consensus that family violence is a training ground for peer aggression and associated [risk behaviors](#) such as substance abuse," said Espelage, who is an educational psychologist in the College of Education. "However, awareness of the impact of sibling aggression on bullying has lagged behind other types of family violence. It is imperative that researchers investigating the family context of bullying and substance abuse examine not only violence involving parents but also that involving siblings."

Students at four middle schools in the Midwest completed questionnaires that assessed their levels of substance abuse, and fighting and bullying perpetration. Participants also were asked about the types and frequency of conflict in their households, including teasing, arguing and physical aggression between siblings. More than 1,200 students participated in the [longitudinal study](#).

The results suggested that bullying and fighting perpetration serve as links between family violence and substance abuse, but only for males. Both forms of aggression were part of a cluster of problem behaviors, in which substance abuse and bullying showed reciprocal relations and operated in similar contexts.

"Bullying and fighting could be manifestations of individual antisocial tendencies that are precursors to the onset of alcohol and drug use among boys," Espelage said. "And it's also possible that both aggression and substance use spring from affiliating with aggressive peer groups that are also engaging in other deviant behaviors, such as substance abuse."

Females exposed to familial violence reported higher levels of alcohol and drug use over time but independent of bullying and fighting perpetration.

Because other studies have indicated that girls report higher levels of internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression, Espelage and her co-authors theorize that depression – rather than peer aggression – may be the mediator between family violence and adolescent substance abuse for girls.

More information: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... /jora.12060/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jora.12060/abstract)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Study: Family violence can lead boys to aggression and to drug problems (2013, July 16) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-07-family-violence-boys-aggression-drug.html>

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