Medical Xpress

Research throws new light on why children with autism are often bullied

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(Medical Xpress)—A study of hundreds of teachers and parents of children on the autistic spectrum has revealed factors why they are more or less likely to be bullied.

Dr Judith Hebron and Professor Neil Humphrey from The University of Manchester, say older autistic children are more likely to be bullied than youngsters – going against prevailing thought.

The survey of 722 teachers and 119 parents also revealed that the children would be more likely to be bullied at mainstream, rather than special schools. However, smaller class sizes and a higher ratio of adults to pupils are two of a number of reasons why there may be fewer opportunities for bullying in special schools.

Bullying is less likely if they have strong support networks of friends and teachers and when parents actively engage with their school.

But poor behaviour associated with the condition also leads to bullying as can use of public transport to travel to and from school.

And those children without a 'statement' – entitling them to specific support and provision - are also less likely to be bullied than children at School Action Plus.

School Action Plus is not legally binding and less extensive than a statement.

Because younger students have less complicated social groupings, they may be more tolerant of autism, argue the researchers.

However, as they grow older, tolerance of difference may decrease because teenagers often want to adhere more closely to peer group norms, they say.

The results are published in the journal *Autism*. Dr Hebron said: "Children with autism are easy targets because their behaviour may be regarded as odd or different, and our research tells us this is likely to result in bullying, teasing and provocation.

"At its most extreme, bullying results in suicide, self-harm, low self-esteem, mental health problems and difficulties at school.

"But not all of these children are bullied, and as researchers, we are interested in finding out why."

She added: "Our results send out a message to parents and teachers to help them identify opportunities where they can intervene to prevent bullying.

"Having an adult on public transport, for example, might be a way to decrease the likelihood of bullying: unstructured social situations with little or no adult supervision are, according to our results, likely to lead to bullying

"Contrary to what people may think, many children on the autistic spectrum – with support from their school and parents –wish to and are able to make friends, so our findings on the importance of social networks are potentially important.

"Peer groups can be very inclusive and a positive culture within a school

with a zero tolerance of bullying can nurture this type of environment."

The article is titled "Risk and protective factors Exposure to bullying among students with autism spectrum conditions: A multi-informant analysis of risk and protective factors."

Provided by University of Manchester

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