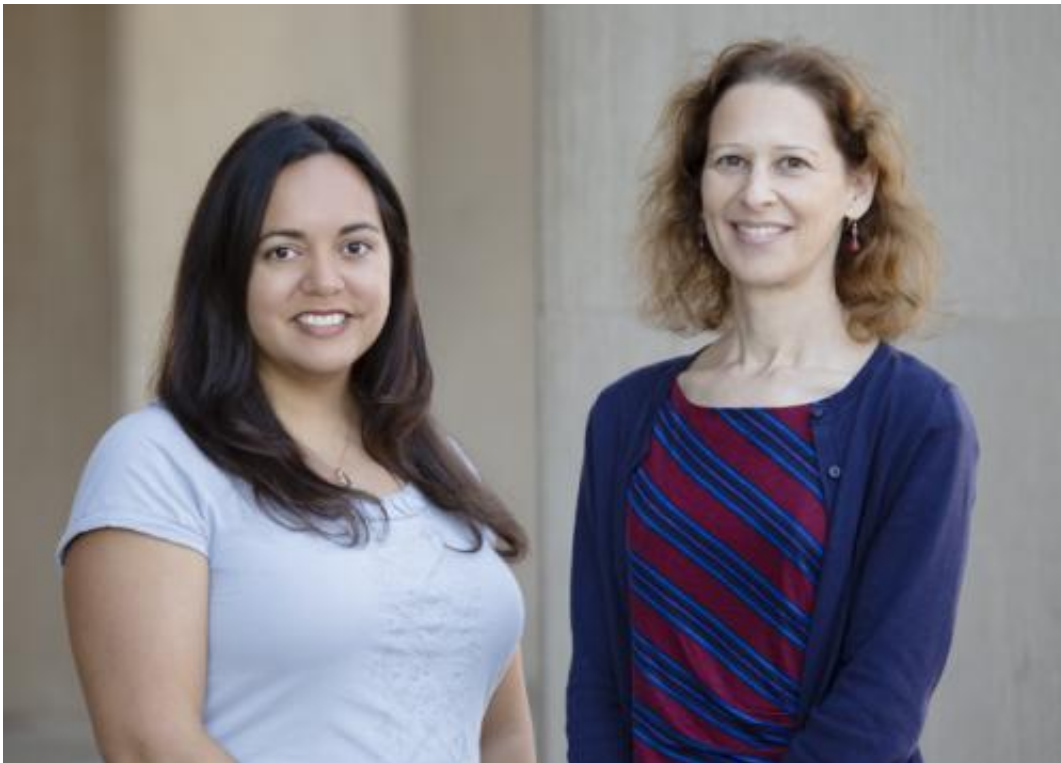


# Gender, social orientation affect children's reactions to bullying

September 25 2014, by Sharita Forrest

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New research by Nicole Llewellyn and Karen Rudolph suggests that children's gender, social orientation and sensitivity to social rewards and punishments may determine their responses to peer victimization. Llewellyn is a doctoral candidate and Rudolph is a faculty member, both in the department of psychology. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A new study of nearly 600 third-graders may explain why some children who experience peer victimization develop problems with depression or

aggression while other children who also get bullied have healthy emotional and social adjustment.

Children's gender, social orientation – whether they strive toward attaining positive experiences in social situations or try to avoid negative experiences – and their sensitivity to social rewards and punishments may determine how [victims](#) will be affected by bullying, the researchers say.

In the study, boys who had been bullied as third-graders, but who were strongly motivated to seek social approval and high status in their peer groups, showed heightened [aggression](#) as fourth graders. However, other boys who also had experienced peer victimization but were less sensitive to social rewards did not.

Conversely, girls who were bullied during third grade and were strongly motivated to avoid social disapproval or social punishments were more likely to show depressive symptoms as fourth-graders.

Thus, the data suggested that boys with high-approach social orientations and girls with high-avoidance social orientations were especially sensitive to peer victimization, but they responded to it in opposite ways, said the researchers, Nicole Llewellyn and Karen Rudolph, both at the University of Illinois.

Students from several small urban and rural schools in the Midwest participated in the study. Midway through the children's third-grade year, they and their teachers completed questionnaires about the children's experiences with [peer victimization](#).

The children's third- and fourth-grade teachers also assessed each child on how frequently they engaged in behaviors intended to harm others through physical aggression or verbal threats.

The children reported on their symptoms of [depression](#) and completed surveys that measured their social sensitivity, based on their need for approval from others and their specific social goals – whether they demonstrated social competence by striving toward attaining positive judgments, or by trying to avoid negative judgments from other people.

"When you're focused on demonstrating your competence in the peer group, and then are thwarted in that by being victimized, you can respond by approaching the world or by avoiding it," said Llewellyn, who is a doctoral candidate in psychology and the lead author of the study. "If you are oriented toward social approach, you might respond with aggression – behavior that tries to re-establish your status through force. Or, if you are oriented toward social avoidance, you might respond by pulling back, by withdrawing and becoming depressed."

Llewellyn and Rudolph aren't certain why males and females react differently to victimization. It may be that approach-oriented boys are more likely than approach-oriented girls to express anger through aggression. Or, avoidance-oriented girls may be more likely than avoidance-oriented boys to blame themselves and ruminate on their victimization experiences, causing depression.

Some prior research has suggested that testosterone and estrogen may interact differently with the stress hormones elicited by victimization, predisposing males to aggression and females to depression.

"Most likely, multiple factors – including genetics, biological predispositions, sex hormones, temperament and perhaps differing socialization experiences for males and females – work in combination to influence children's behavioral responses to victimization," said Rudolph, who is a professor of psychology.

"We found that the girls who were high in avoidance motivation but had

the fewest victimization experiences, also had the lowest levels of depression," Llewellyn said. "They were actually functioning better than less sensitive children. This may mean that these very sensitive kids could be especially open to different kinds of interventions that teachers and parents can provide. They're not doomed to depression or aggression because they are highly sensitive. Under the right circumstances, being highly sensitive may help them thrive as well."

"We're not suggesting that these sensitive kids need to be toughened up, or that parents try to change children's temperaments," Rudolph said. "But parents and teachers can shift children's social goals and redirect them in constructive ways. For example, if children are really responsive to their friends' needs, they may be able to make friends easily and keep them. Teachers, as arbiters of the classroom, can be really effective in changing their students' perspectives on what's important and teaching them what to value in the [peer group](#)."

"Although the ultimate goal is to prevent bullying from occurring, encouraging children to strive toward social goals other than attaining popularity and status, and encouraging them to not be overly concerned with peers' opinions of them, could help [children](#) who are struggling with victimization attain healthy social and emotional development," Rudolph said.

**More information:** "Individual and sex differences in the consequences of victimization: Moderation by approach and avoidance motivation." Llewellyn, Nicole; Rudolph, Karen D. *Developmental Psychology*, Vol 50(9), Sep 2014, 2210-2220. [DOI: 10.1037/a0037353](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037353)

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