

Study finds it's mean boys, not mean girls, who rule at school

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Pamela Orpinas is a professor in the College of Public Health's Department of Health Promotion and Behavior. Credit: Paul Efland/UGA

Debunking the myth of the "mean girl," new research from the University of Georgia has found that boys use relational aggression—malicious rumors, social exclusion and rejection—to harm or manipulate others more often than girls.

The [longitudinal study](#), published online in the journal *Aggressive Behavior*, followed a cohort of [students](#) from middle to [high school](#) and found that, at every grade level, boys engaged in relationally aggressive behavior more often than [girls](#).

A team led by UGA professor Pamela Orpinas analyzed data collected from 620 students randomly selected from six northeast Georgia school districts. Students who participated in the study completed yearly surveys, which allowed the UGA researchers to identify and group them in distinct trajectories for [relational aggression](#) and victimization as they progressed from grade six to 12.

"Overall, we found relational aggression to be a very common behavior. Almost all of the students surveyed, 96 percent, had passed a rumor or made a nasty comment about someone over the course of the seven-year study," said Orpinas, a professor of health promotion and behavior in the College of Public Health.

Experiences of victimization were found to be universal as well. Over 90 percent of the students reported that they had been victims of relational aggression at least once.

The analysis found that students followed three developmental trajectories of perpetration and three similar trajectories of victimization—low, moderate and high declining (that is, very high in middle school and declining in high school). When examining how these trajectories differed by gender, the data revealed some unexpected results. Significantly more boys than girls fell into the two higher trajectories for relational aggression perpetration, while more girls than boys fell into the two higher trajectories for victimization.

"We have books, websites and conferences aimed at stopping girls from being aggressive, as well as a lot of qualitative research on why girls are

relationally aggressive," Orpinas said. "But oddly enough, we don't have enough research on why boys would be relationally aggressive because people have assumed it's a girl behavior."

Studies on relational victimization are uncharted territory in scientific literature, Orpinas explained. Much more research is needed to understand why girls are more likely than boys to be targets of relational aggression or to perceive certain acts as aggressive.

While the study may call for more scholarship on "mean boys" and why they behave the way they do, Orpinas said, the findings ultimately emphasize a need to include [boys](#) and girls equally in programs aimed at reducing relational aggression.

"In the end, I think we need to ask how we can focus on increasing the positive interactions among kids rather than the negative ones," she said, "because the kids that students admire are often the ones who are fun and positive about others."

More information: The paper, published in *Aggressive Behavior*, is available online at [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... 02/AB.21563/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/AB.21563/abstract).

Provided by University of Georgia

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