

Sibling bullying experiences affect perceptions of peer bullying in study

February 19 2015, by Deann Gayman

Sibling rivalry and aggression are part of growing up. It's fodder for sitcoms and family films, because anyone who has siblings most likely survived an occasional noogie or verbal lashing.

It's so commonplace, in fact, that it may actually be undermining efforts to tamper down peer [bullying](#).

That's one of several findings in a study published in the January issue of the Journal of Family Violence by University of Nebraska-Lincoln law-psychology researchers Lori Hoetger, Katherine Hazen and Eve Brank.

The study, which gleaned its results from a survey of 392 [undergraduate students](#), examined how [sibling](#) aggression is perceived, how it is reported and how often. The survey also asked questions about peer-to-peer bullying in similar contexts.

Although they had their own experiences with sibling aggression as children, the authors were still surprised to learn that most survey respondents considered sibling aggression normal and that respondents were hesitant to define it as bullying.

"We had theorized and discussed a little bit that maybe this is happening between people that presumably love each other and care about each other, so I think everyone just accepts it as normal behavior," Brank said.

Normalization of sibling aggression also played a role in the finding that surprised the researchers most: "The most striking result to us was that people who reported experiencing more sibling bullying when they were younger were less likely to report (peer-to-peer) bullying if they saw it," Hoetger said. "There seemed to be this sense that they were so used to it when they were younger, they might not see it as a big deal or that it was worthy of reporting."

This has implications for peer-to-peer bullying interventions that are being developed, she said. It can be difficult to ask children to report bullying if they consider it "normal."

"I would hope that people who work on bullying interventions would be aware of it and realize that this is happening outside of school as well," she said. "Instead of just focusing those efforts on peer bullying at school, those same efforts could be used in other groups."

No matter how common sibling aggression is, it can still have detrimental consequences, the researchers said.

"One study has shown that it can have negative effects, such as depression or [low self esteem](#), similar to the effects of peer bullying," Hoetger said, adding that "there hasn't really been a lot research that looks at bullying between siblings in particular, so I think that's definitely a need."

The normalization of sibling bullying makes further research difficult as well.

"One of the issues with researching this is that it's not being reported," Hoetger said. "There are no statistics nationally, because it's just not often reported outside of the family."

"You'll tell your mom and dad, but you're not going to report it to the police or your teachers."

Brank is an associate professor of psychology, Hoetger is a research assistant professor of psychology and Hazen is a graduate student in psychology.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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