

Bullied girls, but not boys, benefit from mom's support

April 3 2015, by Jared Wadley



Children who are bullied become tolerant of aggressive and antisocial behavior, such as cheating, lying or being cruel to others.

But can a mother's affection and communication with the child prevent negative behavioral outcomes for the bullied child? University of Michigan researchers say yes for girls, but no for boys in a newly

published study involving more than 1,000 children older than 8 years.

For girls, receiving their [mothers'](#) warmth and [open communication](#) significantly reduced the harmful effects of being victimized by peers. For boys, however, early negative peer experiences led to a significant increase in antisocial outcomes, regardless of their relationships with their mothers.

The study looked at which family and parental factors mitigated or intensified the impact of adverse [peer relationships](#).

"Children who develop hostile and distrustful relationships with their parents due to low parental warmth and responsiveness may adopt similar patterns of negative expectations when engaging with peers, as a result of their greater fear and anxiety," said Grace Yang, a U-M research fellow and study's lead author who collaborated with Vonnie McLoyd, the Ewart A. C. Thomas Collegiate Professor of Psychology.

Study participants answered questions about bullying in school or in the neighborhood in the previous month. They rated if someone "picked on me or said mean things to me," "hit me" or "purposely left me out of my friends' activities." About 68 percent of the kids reported being a target.

In the home visit, researchers evaluated the mother's warmth by the way she talked to her child, showed pride or pleasure toward him or her, and if she was cold, harsh or hostile to the child. Family conflict, which involves physical and verbal aggression, was also factored.

Boys who were bullied more frequently displayed higher levels of [antisocial behavior](#) five years after the initial interview despite family or parenting factors. How girls responded to bullying, however, depended on the parent and family dynamics, the study found.

Researchers said the gender differences in moderating influences may be due to how boys and girls behave with peers and where they spent their time.

If boys have larger friendship and peer networks than girls, the peers may assume greater influence in boys' emotional lives. In consequence, [boys'](#) response to bullying would depend less on family interaction patterns and more on peer interactions, Yang said.

In addition, mothers reported less [communication](#) with sons than daughters.

"This difference probably reflects a lesser tendency for sons, compared with daughters, to initiate discussions with their mothers," McLoyd said.

Boys talk less with their mothers, and consequently receive less support and intervention on their behalf to lessen the occurrence and mitigate the negative effects of bullying.

Yang and McLoyd said future studies will need to factor in the fathers' and siblings' influences on bullying. The findings appear in the current issue of *Social Development*.

More information: "Do Parenting and Family Characteristics Moderate the Relation between Peer Victimization and Antisocial Behavior? A 5-year Longitudinal Study." *Social Development*. doi: 10.1111/sode.12118

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Bullied girls, but not boys, benefit from mom's support (2015, April 3) retrieved 18

April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-04-bullied-girls-boys-benefit-mom.html>

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