

Wounds from childhood bullying may persist into college years, study finds

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The emotional trauma of being bullied by peers may surpass that of experiencing child abuse or being exposed to neighborhood violence, suggests a new study led by educational psychologist Dorothy Espelage. Espelage conducted the research while on the University of Illinois' education faculty. Co-authors on the paper were Illinois alumnus Jun Sung Hong, a professor of social work at Wayne State University; and Sarah Mebane of the Marine Corps Community Services. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Childhood bullying inflicts the same long-term psychological trauma on girls as severe physical or sexual abuse, suggests a new survey of college students.

The study, which involved 480 college freshmen through seniors, indicated that the detrimental effects of bullying may linger for years, negatively affecting victims' [mental health](#) well into young adulthood. While most of the scholarship on bullying has focused on kindergarten through 12th-grade [students](#), the struggles revealed by college students who participated in the research suggest a need to develop assessments and interventions for this population, according to the researchers.

Participants in the study were surveyed about their exposure to a variety of traumatic experiences - including bullying, cyberbullying and crimes such as robbery, sexual assault, and domestic and community violence - from birth through age 17. Students also reported on their psychological functioning and symptoms of depression, anxiety and [post-traumatic stress disorder](#).

The students who experienced bullying as children reported significantly greater levels of [mental health problems](#) than their peers, according to the study, published online by the journal *Social Psychology of Education*.

Educational psychologist Dorothy Espelage conducted the study while on the faculty of the University of Illinois, where she held appointments as the Hardie Scholar and the Edward William and Jane Marr Gutgsell Endowed Professor of Education.

Currently a professor of psychology at the University of Florida, Espelage is a nationally recognized expert on bullying, sexual harassment, homophobic teasing, and dating and gang violence.

Experiencing bullying was the strongest predictor of PTSD symptoms among the college students who participated in the survey, surpassing other types of trauma such as exposure to [community violence](#) or being abused or neglected by adults, Espelage and her co-authors found.

Females in particular struggled with the emotional damage inflicted by bullying, reporting significantly greater levels of depression, anxiety and PTSD than their male peers, according to the study.

"Bullying victimization significantly predicted students' current levels of depression and anxiety - over and above other childhood victimization experiences," Espelage said. "The prevalence of psychological distress in children who have been bullied is well-documented, and this research suggests that college students' psychological distress may be connected in part to their perceptions of past childhood bullying victimization experiences."

Students who experienced one interpersonal trauma were at the greatest risk of being victimized in other ways and of developing PTSD, the data indicated.

The researchers suggested that practitioners in college mental health centers need to be aware that students who request psychological help are likely to have experienced multiple forms of trauma that need to be assessed.

Practitioners should routinely collect information about the various types of trauma students may have experienced to identify those people at greatest risk of experiencing PTSD, the researchers advised.

A critical first step in restoring troubled [college students'](#) social and behavioral functioning would be to provide clinicians at campus counseling centers with continued training on the current research on

childhood bullying and its long-term effects, Espelage and her co-authors wrote.

The researchers also recommended that universities broaden the curricula of their [sexual assault](#) programs to encompass various other traumatic experiences, such as child abuse and domestic violence.

Connecting students with interventions that help them develop protective social support networks may be the best way to help them cope with the emotional aftermath of [bullying](#) and other [traumatic experiences](#), the researchers suggested.

"Practitioners, in collaboration with school officials, need to make all efforts to develop and implement programs that increase traumatized students' sense of empowerment and control as they navigate through college," Espelage said. "This would be possible in a campus climate that fosters supportive ties among students, and between students and the campus community."

U. of I. alumnus Jun Sung Hong, currently a professor of social work at Wayne State University, and Sarah Mebane of the Marine Corps Community Services co-wrote the study.

More information: Dorothy L. Espelage et al, Recollections of childhood bullying and multiple forms of victimization: correlates with psychological functioning among college students, *Social Psychology of Education* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s11218-016-9352-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-016-9352-z)

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