

Disabled children face bullying throughout school years

December 29 2016, by Randy Dotinga, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Bullying is a problem that affects almost all students in

some ways, but for disabled children it's a problem that seems to last throughout their school years.

Disabled children, including those with learning [disabilities](#), were about 20 percent more likely to report being bullied than other students in surveys taken at a New England school district. And that difference remained steady from third through 12th grades, the researchers found.

"Students with disabilities need to be taught skills to respond appropriately to [bullying](#). They need to know what to do, how to respond and who to tell," said study co-author Chad Rose. He's an assistant professor of special education with the University of Missouri College of Education.

"But they don't have those response skills, and that perpetuates this gap," Rose said.

For the new study, Rose and co-author Nicholas Gage, from the University of Florida, analyzed the results of surveys of more than 6,500 students from grades K-12 during the years 2011-2013.

About two-thirds of those children surveyed received free or low-priced lunches; 43 percent were Latino, 36 percent were white and 14 percent were black. Sixteen percent were identified as having a disability.

The surveys asked the students about bullying, which Rose defined as "pervasive aggression." Students responded to questions about whether they'd been hit or threatened, had their feelings hurt, or had lies and mean rumors spread about them. Online harassment wasn't included in the surveys.

The students also were asked questions about whether they bullied others.

The researchers found that disabled kids reported being bullied more than the other kids did. And this gap didn't change over time.

"Sixty-six percent of disabled students in grade 3 reported some bullying compared to 42 percent of other students, and when the students reached fifth grade, the gap remained similar, 61 percent compared to 41 percent," said Gage, an assistant professor at UF's College of Education. "This 20 percent gap was constant across all grade levels."

Rose noted that many of the disabled children didn't have obvious disabilities. "We didn't primarily focus on those with visual, hearing or orthopedic impairments," he said. "Most of the students had learning and emotional disabilities like ADHD and autism."

So why are disabled kids vulnerable to bullying? Possibly "because they are perceived as looking or acting differently from their peers," said Jennifer Greif Green, an associate professor at Boston University's School of Education.

"Some researchers have speculated that [students](#) with disabilities have more trouble than their peers understanding complex communication, such as sarcasm or nonverbal cues, and that makes it more likely they will be involved in bullying," she said.

Green said the study is valuable because it's among the first to look at disabled children as bullying victims. And, she said, it shows that disabled kids can persist through school as both bully victims and bullies themselves.

What should be done? Rose goes back to the importance of training [disabled children](#) about how to deal with bullying.

Rose said all schools should be teaching skills "like working with others,

knowing how to respond in aversive situations, keeping your temper, making sure you know how to communicate with your peers."

Other skills, he added, include "engaging in a conversation, working with others in a group, participating, knowing how to respond if you don't win a game. Basic skills that most of us have, even though we don't know how we learned them."

What can parents do? "I encourage them to talk to their kids beyond, 'How was your day at school?' Use more direct questions to establish more open lines of communication," Rose recommended.

The study appeared online recently in the journal *Exceptional Children*.

More information: For more about bullying and disabled kids, try the [National Bullying Prevention Center](#).

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