

Bullies and their victims obsessed with weight-loss

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Professor Dieter Wolke. Credit: University of Warwick

School bullies and their victims are more obsessed with weight-loss than anyone else, according to new research by the University of Warwick.

Professor Dieter Wolke and Dr Kirsty Lee, in the Department of Psychology, discovered that teenagers who are involved in bullying in any way—from [bullies](#), to their victims, to those who both bully and get bullied—are more likely to develop concerns about their eating and exercise behaviours, and become preoccupied with losing weight.

Almost 2800 adolescents in UK secondary schools were screened for involvement in bullying, through self and peer assessment.

A sample of those involved in bullying - around 800 teenagers—was analysed for eating and exercise thoughts and behaviours, self-esteem levels, [body](#) image and emotional wellbeing.

They were asked to complete established questionnaires—such as Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, the Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults, and the eating behaviours component of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Assessment.

Results from these tests showed that 42% of bullies have extreme preoccupation with weight-loss, as well as 55% of bullying victims, and 57% of teens who both bully and are bullied. This is compared with adolescents who have no involvement with bullying - 35% of those are obsessed with losing weight.

The researchers say that bullies are preoccupied with weight-loss because they are driven by the desire to be the most attractive, strongest and fittest.

Victims of bullying suffer from reduced psychological functioning due to being picked on—causing weight-loss obsession, chronically low self-esteem levels, and eating disorders.

Teenagers who are bullied, and also bully their peers—bully-victims—have the highest pre-occupation with weight-loss and are most likely to develop eating disorders, as well as other psychological problems.

Bully-victims are doubly affected, by both the desire to be attractive, strong and popular, and the psychological harm and lowered levels of self-esteem which come from peer victimisation.

From the results of this research, Professor Wolke argues that clinicians dealing with victims of peer bullying should directly target their emotional wellbeing, and issues with self-esteem and body image.

Professor Wolke comments:

"Bullies are bi-strategic—they want to be popular by being dominant though bullying but also want to look good".

"In contrast those who are bullied, the victims, are occupied with weight because they have poor body and [self-esteem](#) and are emotionally stressed and hope that looking good might make them feel better.

"If we could reduce bullying, it would help to improve self-worth, [body image](#), wellbeing and healthy ways of keeping fit."

The research, 'Does psychological functioning mediate the relationship between bullying involvement and weight loss preoccupation in adolescents? A two-stage cross-sectional study', is published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*.

More information: Kirsty Lee et al, Does psychological functioning mediate the relationship between bullying involvement and weight loss preoccupation in adolescents? A two-stage cross-sectional study, *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* (2017). [DOI: 10.1186/s12966-017-0491-1](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-017-0491-1)

Provided by University of Warwick

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