

Covert bullying higher among young girls with disabilities

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A new South Australian study has found a serious problem of covert bullying in schools, particularly in relation to girls with disabilities.

The work, led by University of South Australia researcher Dr. Anna Moffat, reveals that 57 percent of girls with disabilities in upper primary [school](#) have experienced covert bullying where they are excluded from social circles, rejected, subjected to vicious rumors, whispering and threatening looks.

While boys with disabilities are also bullied more than their peers, this difference was greatest in [high school](#).

The research team, including Professor Gerry Redmond and Associate Professor Pammi Raghavendra from Flinders University, used data from the Australian Child Wellbeing Project, a survey of 4753 Australian children aged eight to 14 years, 490 of whom identified as living with a disability.

They looked at the influence of family, peer and teacher support on the prevalence of covert bullying in children with and without disabilities and whether there were any differences in gender or age.

"In children without disability, higher levels of peer, family and teacher support seem to provide some protection against bullying. Low levels of social support in children with disability means that they often aren't afforded this same protection," Dr. Moffat says.

Girls with disabilities in years four to six reported significantly lower levels of [teacher](#) and family support and significantly higher levels of covert bullying (57 percent compared to 28 percent among girls without disability).

The figures were only slightly better for year eight [girls](#) living with a disability, where 47 percent reported being bullied compared to 20 percent of their female peers without disabilities.

The researchers note that [social isolation](#) from peers and perceived lower levels of support from teachers may make some students with [disabilities](#) particularly vulnerable while at school.

"Our study shows that school-wide strategies to reduce social isolation of students with disability may be most effective in reducing covert bullying," Assoc Prof Raghavendra says. "A multi-pronged approach is needed to address this issue."

"This study is unique in that [children](#) between eight to 14 years of age self-identified as living with a disability, whereas most studies use diagnosis to classify students. This self-identification gives further credibility to our findings."

The findings of the study are reported in the *Journal of School Violence*.

More information: Anna K. Moffat et al. The Impact of Social Network Characteristics and Gender on Covert Bullying in Australian Students with Disability in the Middle Years, *Journal of School Violence* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/15388220.2019.1644180](https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2019.1644180)

Provided by University of South Australia

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