

Researchers study how children view and treat their peers with undesirable characteristics

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A study by Kansas State University researchers is looking at how children perceive and interact with peers who have various undesirable characteristics, such as being overweight or aggressive.

The researchers' study explored children's perceptions of the ability of the peer to control or change such traits.

The K-State research team included Mark Barnett, professor of psychology; Rachel Witham, graduate student in counseling and student development, Hutchinson; and Jennifer Livengood, Wamego, Natalie (Brown) Barlett, Ames, Iowa, and Tammy Sonnentag, Edgar, Wis., all graduate students in psychology. Their research was presented in May at the Association for [Psychological Science](#) annual convention in San Francisco, Calif.

"This study provides some evidence that if a child feels that an undesirable characteristic is under some sort of personal control, they are less likely to respond favorably to someone who displays that characteristic," Livengood said. "The study implies that if a child doesn't have experience with that particular undesirable characteristic, they are less likely to respond favorably to someone with that specific quality."

The researchers found that children who perceive themselves or a friend as similar to a peer with an undesirable characteristic might experience heightened empathy for that peer, and then might respond in a positive manner toward the peer. The findings also showed that boys, more than girls, tended to have negative attitudes toward peers with undesirable characteristics.

The study included third-graders and sixth-graders who completed questionnaires that had

descriptions of hypothetical peers. The peers included a poor student, nonathletic student, obese student, aggressive student, shy student, asthmatic student and a [student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#).

When the children read a brief description of a hypothetical peer, they were asked to rate statements regarding the peer's personal control and change over the characteristic, and how they would respond to such a person. The children also were asked to indicate if they or a friend were similar to the peer.

The findings showed that the more the children agreed that the peers were at fault for their characteristic, the more they agreed that they would tease those peers, and the less they agreed that they would like or help those peers if they needed assistance.

According to the researchers, the sixth-grade boys displayed stronger agreement than the sixth-grade girls that the peers were at fault for the undesirable characteristic and that they would tease them. They also had less agreement that they would help such a peer if they needed assistance.

The study showed that the aggressive and asthmatic peers tended to receive the most extreme ratings. The aggressive peer was rated high on having fault for the characteristic and low on having a desire to change. The asthmatic peer was rated high on having the characteristic caused by something in the peer's body or brain and low on having fault for the characteristic.

The children's ratings showed that they consistently anticipated treating the asthmatic peer more favorably than the aggressive peer. The researchers said it appeared that the children

perceived the highly aggressive peer's behavior as under personal control, and the asthmatic peer was perceived as suffering a medical condition that was largely out of personal control to cause or change. The obese peer also was rated high on having fault for the characteristic.

The children agreed more strongly that girls would improve more than boys with the help of adults to alter an undesirable characteristic. The researchers said since girls tend to seek assistance from adults and comply with directives from adults more frequently than boys, the [children](#) might have anticipated that girls would respond more favorably than boys.

Source: Kansas State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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