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Who is likely to become a bully, victim or both?

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Children and adolescents who lack social problem-solving skills are more at risk of becoming bullies, victims or both than those who don't have these difficulties, says new research published by the American Psychological Association. But those who are also having academic troubles are even likelier to become bullies.

"This is the first time we've overviewed the research to see what individual and environmental characteristics predict the likelihood of becoming a bully, victim or both," said lead author Clayton R. Cook, PhD, of Louisiana State University. "These groups share certain characteristics, but they also have unique traits. We hope this knowledge will help us better understand the conditions under which bullying occurs and the consequences it may have for individuals and the other people in the same settings. Ultimately, we want to develop better prevention and intervention strategies to stop the cycle before it begins."

Cook and co-authors from the University of California at Riverside examined 153 studies from the last 30 years. They found that boys bully more than girls, and bullies and victims both have poor social problem-solving skills. More than anything else, poor academic performance predicts those who will bully.

"A typical bully has trouble resolving problems with others and also has trouble academically," said Cook. "He or she usually has negative attitudes and beliefs about others, feels negatively toward himself/herself, comes from a family environment characterized by

conflict and poor parenting, perceives school as negative and is negatively influenced by peers."

"A typical victim is likely to be aggressive, lack social skills, think negative thoughts, experience difficulties in solving social problems, come from negative family, school and community environments and be noticeably rejected and isolated by peers," said Cook.

The typical bully-victim (someone who bullies and is bullied) also has negative attitudes and beliefs about himself or herself and others, the study found. He or she has trouble with social interaction, does not have good social problem-solving skills, performs poorly academically and is not only rejected and isolated by peers but is also negatively influenced by the peers with whom he or she interacts, according to the study.

Sample sizes for the studies examined ranged from 44 to 26,430. Ages ranged from 3 to 18 years old. The participants were from the United States and Europe. Researchers used self-, peer, teacher and parent reports to measure the extent of bullying, aggression and victimization; externalizing behavior (defiant, aggressive or disruptive responses); internalizing behaviors (withdrawal, depression, anxious and avoidant responses); social competence; beliefs, feelings and thoughts; academic performance; family and home environment; school environment; community life; peer status and influence.

The authors found that age played a role in how much bullies and victims acted out their aggressions or internalized their feelings. Younger bullies were more defiant, aggressive and disruptive, whereas older bullies were more withdrawn, depressed and anxious. Younger bullies were not as bothered by rejection and being unpopular as were older bullies. And older victims suffered from depression and anxiousness more than younger victims.

According to the authors, most programs use strategies to prevent bullying that favor removing the bully from the environment, such as enforced anti-bullying rules and peer-reporting of bullying incidents in schools. The more promising interventions target the behaviors and the environments that are putting these young people at risk of becoming bullies and/or victims.

"Intervene with the parents, peers and schools simultaneously," said Cook. "Behavioral parent training could be used in the home while building good peer relationship and problem-solving skills could be offered in the schools, along with academic help for those having troubling in this area."

More information: "Predictors of Bullying and Victimization in Childhood and Adolescence: A Meta-analytic Investigation," Clayton R. Cook, PhD, Louisiana State University; Kirk R. William, PhD, Nancy G. Guerra, EdD, Tia E. Kim, PhD, and Shelly Sadek, MA, University of California, Riverside; School Psychology Quarterly, Vol. 25, No.2.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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