

# Bullied children 3 times more likely to self harm

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Children who are bullied in childhood are up to three times more likely to self harm up to the age of 12, a study published today on *BMJ* suggests.

The authors from King's College London carried out a study on just over a 1000 pairs of twins at five, seven, 10 and 12 years of age. All children were born in 1994-1995 in England and Wales. The children were assessed on the risks of self-harming in the six months prior to their 12th birthday. Self-harm data was available for 2141 children.

237 children were victims of frequent bullying: 18 (8%) of them self harmed. Of the 1904 who had not been bullied, 44 (2 %) had self harmed.

Approximately one quarter of all school-children in the UK are bullied at some point during their school lives. Victimation is associated with behavioural problems during adolescence, but few studies have tested the assumption that exposure to bullying increases the likelihood that a child will self-harm. The authors hope this study will help to identify those at greatest risk of self-harm.

The authors found that several factors increased the risk of self-harm amongst children who were bullied, including: a family history of self-harming; maltreatment; behavioural and emotional problems. And although the likelihood was slightly higher for girls (1.6%), the association was evident amongst both sexes.

Bullying was defined as when another child: says mean or hurtful things; completely ignores or excludes the victim; hits, kicks or shoves the victim; tells lies or spreads rumours and / or does other hurtful things, all on a frequent basis. Examples of self-harm included: cutting and biting arms; pulling out clumps of hair; banging head against walls; attempted suicides by strangulation.

The authors suggest that while "more effective programmes to prevent bullying occurring [...] are required", there should also be efforts in place to help children cope with emotional distress arising from bullying. And although alternative coping strategies should be provided, the effectiveness of these does need to be investigated.

In conclusion, bullying during early years can have damaging consequences by adolescence, especially if children are also exposed to family adversity or have mental-health difficulties. The authors suggest that schools and healthcare professionals should aim to further "reduce bullying and introduce self-harm risk-reduction programmes" in order to prevent the risk of bullied children hurting themselves in later life.

Provided by British Medical Journal

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