

# Bullied preemies may develop mental illness as adults, study says

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Babies born at an extremely low birth weight (ELBW) are miracles, but they are more likely to be bullied as children, and this can significantly increase their risk for mental health problems as adults.

Not only that, but the more they were bullied as [children](#), the more likely they are to develop problems such as depression, [anxiety](#), antisocial behavior or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as adults, says a new study from McMaster University's Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine.

"Being bullied has a significant and lasting impact for those preemies, even into their 30s," said Kimberly Day, lead author of the study and Lawson Postdoctoral Fellow at the Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster. "This has important implications for parents, teachers, and clinicians who need to be aware of the long-term effects of peer victimization on mental health. They need to watch out for bullying and intervene when possible."

The study was published in the journal *Pediatrics* today. The study included ELBW babies who were 2.2 pounds or less at their birth between 1977 and 1982 in Ontario, who were interviewed at age 8, 22 to 26 and 29 to 36. They were compared to normal birthweight babies of 5.5 pounds or more who were born in the same time span and interviewed at the same intervals.

Bullying is common, with up to one-third of children worldwide facing

[peer victimization](#), and ELBW children are even more likely to be victims. ELBW children may be at risk for being bullied because of poor motor abilities, more anxiety and struggles at school, the study said.

And, of those ELBW children who were bullied, they were nearly twice as likely to develop a [mental health problem](#) such as anxiety, depression, or ADHD by the time they were in their 20s. However, the risk was even higher for those who were bullied more often.

By their 30s, the ELBW adults who had been bullied as children were nearly 3 times more likely to have developed [anxiety disorders](#) such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, social phobia, and panic disorder. Rates were even higher for those bullied more frequently.

"This is the first study to fully illustrate the profound and long-lasting effects of bullying on the [mental health](#) of preterm survivors," said Dr. Ryan Van Lieshout, the senior author of the study and an assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioural neurosciences at McMaster. "Their risk for anxiety disorders is especially high, particularly among those who are exposed to bullying on a regular basis."

Provided by McMaster University

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