

Child bullies at higher odds for substance abuse as adults

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Schoolyard bullies have been making life difficult for kids for eons,

often causing lasting damage to their victims. Now, new research shows these bullies can also suffer lasting consequences as they age.

Bullies may be more likely to abuse drugs, alcohol and tobacco later in life, and this risk is greater for childhood bullies than those who picked on others during their adolescent years, the study found.

Bullying or unwanted aggressive behavior among school-aged kids has become more pervasive in recent years, and the stakes are much higher likely due to social media. In the past, bullying was limited to school, but now bullies can harass their victims online 24/7. About 20% of students aged 12 to 18 have been bullied at school or online in the United States, according to Stopbullying.gov.

"For a long time, research focused primarily on negative consequences for the victims of bullying, but it has become increasingly clear that bullying perpetrators also have a higher risk of [behavioral and [emotional issues](#)]," said study author Charlotte Vrijen, a postdoctoral researcher in the department of pedagogy and educational science at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. "We found robust evidence that child and adolescent bullies have a higher risk of later substance use than their non-bullying peers."

The study wasn't designed to look at why bullies are more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol later on, but some theories exist.

"Bullying perpetrators are more likely to affiliate with delinquent peers, who may increase exposure to substance use," Vrijen said. "Another option is that children with difficulties in emotion regulation and impulsivity have both a higher risk of becoming a bully as well as a higher risk of substance use."

It's also possible that bullies don't have a great home or family life.

"Bullying perpetrators ... may come from families with more harsh parenting and more frequent parental substance use," Vrijen added.

The findings may open up a window for possible prevention. "If affiliations of bullies with delinquent peers are driving the association, early interventions aimed at preventing bullying perpetration may also prevent substance use," she said.

For the study, Vrijen and her colleagues reviewed literature on bullying in childhood or adolescence and later use of drugs, alcohol, or tobacco published between 1992 and 2019. In all, they analyzed 28 studies including nearly 28,500 kids. The findings were published online Feb. 17 in the journal *Pediatrics*.

Calling the research "important," Brittany LeMonda, a senior neuropsychologist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, said it suggests that the same factors that predispose children to bullying may also increase the likelihood that they abuse alcohol or drugs later in life.

But "identifying children at risk for [substance abuse](#) can improve outcomes through [early intervention](#)," said LeMonda, who was not involved in the new study. "We can provide children who bully with interventions aimed at not only reducing those behaviors but also more positive coping strategies and interventions to reduce risk of [substance abuse](#) later in life."

More information: Stopbullying.gov offers tips on what to do if your child is getting bullied at school or online.

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