

Study: Popular kids -- but not the most popular -- more likely to torment peers

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While experts often view aggressive behavior as a maladjusted reaction typical of social outcasts, a new study in the February issue of the *American Sociological Review* finds that it's actually popular adolescents—but not the most popular ones—who are particularly likely to torment their peers.

"Our findings underscore the argument that—for the most part—attaining and maintaining a high social status likely involves some level of antagonistic behavior," said Robert Faris, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of California-Davis.

The study, which Faris co-authored with sociology professor Diane Felmlee, his UC-Davis colleague, also finds that those [students](#) in the top 2% of the school social hierarchy—along with those at the bottom—are the least aggressive.

"The fact that they both have reduced levels of [aggression](#) is true, but it can be attributed to quite different things," Faris said. "The ones at the bottom don't have the social power or as much capacity to be aggressive whereas the ones at the top have all that power, but don't need to use it."

Students' popularity was determined by how central they were in their school's web of friendships, and the authors define aggression as behavior directed toward harming or causing pain to another. It can be physical (e.g., hitting, shoving, or kicking), verbal (e.g., name-calling or threats), or indirect (e.g., spreading rumors or ostracism).

In general, the study, which followed kids over the course of a school year, finds that increases in social status for both males and females are accompanied by subsequent increases in aggression until a student approaches the top of the social hierarchy.

According to the researchers, adolescents in the top 98th percentile of the social hierarchy—where aggression peaks—have an average aggression rate that is 28% greater than students at the very bottom and 40% greater than students at the very top. Aggression rate is defined as the number of classmates a student victimized in the past three months.

"Aggression usually requires some degree of social support, power, or influence," Faris said. "This is mostly because students expect to see each other on a daily basis at school and any act of aggression brings risk of retaliation. Those at the center of the web of social ties are, we believe, more powerful and may deter retribution."

Yet, those students at the very top of the social hierarchy—who seemingly possess the most social capacity for aggressiveness—generally aren't aggressive.

"If an adolescent at the top of the social hierarchy were to act aggressively towards his or her peers, such action could signal insecurity or weakness rather than cement the student's position," said Faris. "And, it's possible that, at the highest level, they may receive more benefits from being pro-social and kind."

Faris also acknowledged the possibility that kids at the top level are "somehow different" and "not disposed to aggressiveness in the first place."

The Faris/Felmlee study relies on data from The Context of Adolescent Substance Use survey, a longitudinal survey of [adolescents](#) at 19 public

schools in three counties in North Carolina that began in the spring of 2002. The Faris/Felmlee study is based on 3,722 8th, 9th, and 10th grade students who participated during the 2004-2005 school year.

While the study focuses on a sample of small-town and rural North Carolina students, Faris expects similar results in bigger cities. "I would be surprised if kids in New York City or LA were radically different than kids in North Carolina," Faris said.

As for policy implications of the study, Faris said interventions targeted specifically at aggressive kids or victims miss the point. "I would start by focusing on the kids who are not involved and work on encouraging them to be less passive or approving of these sorts of antagonistic relationships," he said. "It's through these kids who are not involved that the aggressive [kids](#) get their power."

Provided by American Sociological Association

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