

Teachers, pupils disagree about who the bullies are, study says

November 5 2013

New research from the University of Illinois indicates that elementary school students and their teachers often don't agree on who bullies whom in their classrooms. And researchers say that intervention and prevention programs need to both heighten teachers' awareness of bullying and provide support for victims that mitigate its impact on their academic achievement.

In a study conducted in five elementary schools in the Midwest, U. of I. researchers asked first-, third- and fifth-grade students and their [teachers](#) to identify bully-victim dyads in their classrooms according to gender combinations – boy-boy, boy-girl, girl-girl and girl-boy.

The participants, 700 children and 38 teachers, also were provided with a definition of bullying that included physical behaviors such as pushing or hitting, verbal abuse such as saying mean things or calling other people names, and relational aggression, such as excluding a classmate from play.

While bully-victim pairs were found across all the gender combinations and the data were fairly consistent across grade levels, student-teacher agreement on bully-victim dyads was very low. On average, students and teachers agreed on only 8 percent of the bully-victim pairs, although in one classroom student-teacher agreement rose to 39 percent.

Teacher-student agreement was highest on same-gendered bully-victim dyads and lowest on dyads that involved girls who bullied boys.

The prominence of victims was the most positive predictor of teacher-student agreement, suggesting that teachers and pupils may pay more attention to the kids who get picked on than to their aggressors, said Philip C. Rodkin, one of the co-authors of the study.

A professor of child development in the College of Education, Rodkin is an expert on youth aggression and peer relationships.

Students reported greater numbers of bully-victim pairs than did teachers, perhaps because much of the harassment occurs out of teachers' sight.

"We think that greater awareness by teachers of their students' social relationships can help them make more judicious choices about whom to seat next to whom and whom to engage in collaborative work," Rodkin said. "More generally, teachers could benefit from training in how to help encourage productive friendships between students, prevent animosities between students from getting out of control, and create classroom cultures that all students feel a part of. This could be especially important in ethnically diverse classrooms and in promoting positive relationships between girls and boys."

Teachers play a significant role in creating a school climate that either fosters or inhibits bullying, and a critical part of developing a positive climate is understanding how teachers can structure the environment so that aggression is less likely to occur, educational psychologist Dorothy L. Espelage wrote in a separate study that reviewed recent findings on bullying's impact on [academic achievement](#).

"Teachers' lack of awareness and knowledge about the serious implications of bullying and how to respond to it effectively can exacerbate bullying situations," said Espelage, who is a professor of [child development](#) at Illinois and an expert on bullying and youth

violence.

Victimized children often blame themselves, experience social anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and have difficulty concentrating on their schoolwork, which lead to lower grades and poor performance on standardized tests.

Quality friendships and initiatives that help [students](#) develop social competence and promote peer acceptance are critical to mitigating the impact of peer victimization, and school professionals should consider counseling services that reinforce bullying victims' coping skills and help them improve their academic performance, Espelage and her co-authors recommended.

Espelage's co-authors: Jun Sung Hong, a professor of social work at Wayne State University; Sabina Low, a professor of psychology at Arizona State University; and Mrinalini A. Rao, a research assistant in counseling psychology at Illinois. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control funded the research.

Rodkins' co-authors: Hai-Jeong Ahn, who is a research fellow at the Korean Educational Development Institute in Seoul, and Scott Gest, a professor of human development at Pennsylvania State University. Their research was funded by an Education Research Grant, Social and Behavioral Contexts, from the Institute of Education Sciences.

Both studies were published recently in a special issue of the journal *Theory Into Practice*, which Espelage guest-edited.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Teachers, pupils disagree about who the bullies are, study says (2013, November 5)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-11-teachers-pupils-bullies.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.