

IDENTIFYING VICTIMS OF BULLYING BEFORE SCHOOL

After eight years of follow-up, an international group of researchers found that preschool children who are frequent targets of their peers' aggression tended to display high levels of physical aggression and to experience high levels of harsh parenting as early as 17 months after birth.

Researchers found that children described as physically aggressive by their mothers when they were 17 months old were likely to be bullied by their peers later on. Harsh reactive parenting and a low family income increased the risk that such victimization would become chronic.

"We know from looking at other studies that aggressive children tend to be victimized in

the early grades," says team leader and author Michel Boivin. "What's new now is that we assessed it early on. The experiences you have with your peers in early childhood can be painful and they predict for similar experiences in the early grades of school."

To conduct their study, researchers contacted the families of a randomly selected group of children born in Quebec between October 1997 and 1998. Of this group, 1,970 children were assessed at four and a half months of age and then every year thereafter for the next seven years. Mothers were asked whether their children were teased, hit, pushed or called names by other children and whether their children bit, hit, kicked, fought or bullied others. Hyperactive, impulsive and inattentive behaviours were also recorded, as were unhappy, fearful, nervous, worried or upset moods. Mothers were also asked about their parenting

skills and how often they became angry, raised their voices or spanked their children.

After the children started school, teachers and the children themselves were asked similar questions. Children were also asked whether other children at school bullied them, said bad things about them behind their back or left them out of games.

By analyzing the answers to these questions, Boivin and his colleagues identified three clear pathways of peer victimization. Most children (71%) followed a low/increasing trajectory of victimization, while 25% were on a moderate/increasing path and 4% were somewhere along a high/chronic trajectory. By first grade, teachers described children in the moderate and high-risk groups as more highly victimized by their peers, which indicates some continuity in the negative nature of their peer experiences. Children in families with insufficient income or who were raised by a mother using a harsh parenting style were more likely to fall within the high/chronic group. Because of this, researchers recommend that parents be trained not to use these punitive parenting behaviours and to help these at-risk children find positive ways of relating to people while they're young.

Joanne Cummings, the partnership director of PREVNet, a national network of people dedicated to stopping bullying, concurs. *"We already have good parent management training programs, but parents of such young children aren't usually referred for treatment," she says. "This study provides strong evidence that children who exhibit high levels of aggression at an early age are at substantial risk for victimization by their peers. Sadly, the experience of harsh parenting and then peer victimization leads these kids to believe that people will not be good to them."*

Parents can change that cycle, says Cummings. *"For most kids, average parenting skills are good enough. For other kids, parents need extra training in order to enjoy their relationships with their children and decrease aggression."* 🐾

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