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Tuesday, Oct. 14, 2008

Schoolyard Bullying: Which Kids Are Most Vulnerable?

By Hilary Hylton

Playground gibes are a rite of passage for most school-age kids, but for some children, teasing at school can turn into outright violence and abuse. Researchers say that as many as 1 in 10 children suffer physical attacks, name-calling and other social aggression at school, and a new study suggests that a child's risk of becoming a chronic victim of bullying may depend on factors that appear very early in life.

"Studies also show that peer victimization becomes increasingly stable over time, with the same children endurin such negative experiences throughout childhood and adolescence," write the authors of a study on victimization, published in the current issue of *Archives of General Psychiatry.* "The consequences associated with high and chronic victimization are manifold and include depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, physical health problems, social withdrawal, alcohol and/or drug use, school absence and avoidance, decrease in school performance, self-harm and suicidal ideation."

Given the overwhelming slate of potential harm, the aim of the study was to identify early predictors of victimization, along with behavioral interventions that may prevent it. The bulk of past research on the matter involved primary-school-age children, says Michel Boivin, a psychologist at Université Laval in Québec, Canada, and a co-author of the study; the new research tracks behavior in very young kids — as early as those in pre-preschool, when children first begin interacting with one another socially.

The research team studied data on 1,970 children — about half boys, half girls — and their families, all participants in the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development. The children were born between October 1997 and July 1998 and represented a socio-economic cross-section of Quebec society. Mothers were surveyed about their children during their earliest school years — every six months up to age 6 — in order to determine hov often children complained of suffering physical violence at school, being called names or being teased by their peers. Subsequently, the study asked the same questions of teachers and the children themselves.

Those periodic interviews, Boivin said, allowed researchers to identify three "trajectories" of victimization risk

that children tended to follow as they moved from preschool into kindergarten. Most kids (71%) fell into the low-trajectory camp; about a quarter fell into the moderate category. But "there was 4% — mostly boys — who are chronically, highly victimized," Boivin says.

Researchers found several key factors that predicted a child's risk of future victimization — namely, physically aggressive behavior in the child, harsh parenting methods (like "overly punitive" responses to kids' bad behavior) and low socio-economic status. The best predictor, the study concluded, was early childhood physical aggression. "If a child is aggressive at 2 years of age, he's more likely to be in the higher-increasing trajectory," Boivin said. "If, in addition, the mother is hostile and reactive, the prediction risk increases." Adding the third element, low socio-economic status, increases that likelihood even further.

"At 30 months, there is a lot of physical aggression among kids," Boivin notes, but most children manage to adjust socially and eventually develop the verbal skills needed to negotiate peacefully within a group. "Aggression becomes less and less of a normative way to get things done," he says. But children on the high-risk path appear unable to develop those social skills; their aggression ends up turning on them. "As children get older, in grade school, they slowly shift their aggression and tend to withdraw into shyness," Boivin said.

Boivin's study was careful to distinguish aggression from hyperactivity in children. While hyperactivity also often causes social problems and increases a child's risk of being victimized by about second grade, the authors did not find that it predicted peer victimization in young children. Rather, it was physical aggression in early childhood — behavior such as kicking, biting and bullying — that increased a child's odds of becoming a victim of that same behavior later on.

Identifying risk factors in preschool or even earlier helps parents and school administrators step in earlier too. Children who exhibit aggressive behavior can be counseled earlier, for example, and harsh parents can be taught a gentler form of discipline. The authors say further study is needed to answer questions of cause and effect. For instance, does children's aggressive behavior prompt harsh parenting or vice versa? And what about the role of older siblings? Psychologists know that older siblings often victimize their younger brothers and sisters, sometimes to great detriment; studying these family dynamics may help parents protect younger siblings starting in early childhood.

Certainly, the development of the victimized child needs more study, but the new paper offers some guidance for where to begin. Patterns of victimization begin as soon as children begin to interact socially, Boivin says, and parents and caregivers need to be alerted to the problem in the earliest years. "The message is that this ... is not unique to school-age children," Boivin says.

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