

Study: Gifted children especially vulnerable to effects of bullying

Kim Medaris

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. —Bullying in the gifted-student population is an overlooked problem that leaves many of these students emotionally shattered, making them more prone to extreme anxiety, dangerous depression and sometimes violence, says a Purdue University researcher.

In what is believed to be the first major study of bullying and gifted students, researchers found that by eighth grade, more than two-thirds of gifted students had been victims. Varying definitions of bullying in other studies make comparisons difficult, although the prevalence here is similar to findings in a few other studies.

"All children are affected adversely by bullying, but gifted children differ from other children in significant ways," says Jean Sunde Peterson, an associate professor of educational studies in Purdue's College of Education.

"Many are intense, sensitive and stressed by their own and others' high expectations, and their ability, interests and behavior may make them vulnerable. Additionally, social justice issues are very important to them, and they struggle to make sense of cruelty and aggression. Perfectionists may become even more self-critical, trying to avoid mistakes that might draw attention to themselves."

Peterson and Karen E. Ray, a doctoral student in counseling psychology, surveyed 432 gifted eighth-graders in 11 states. The students were asked if they had experienced bullying behavior, such as name-calling, pushing, hitting and other physical violence, or teasing about family, grades or appearance.

The researchers found that 67 percent of gifted students had experienced bullying by eighth grade, 16 percent defined themselves as bullies and 29 percent had violent thoughts. Interviewed students described depression, unexpressed rage and school absenteeism as responses to bullying.

The most common kind of bullying during the first nine years of school was name-calling, followed by teasing about appearance, intelligence and grades, and pushing and shoving. Teasing about appearance had the most negative effect emotionally.

While most of the bullying reported was verbal, it doesn't mean it was any less harmful than the physical variety, Peterson says.

"The words that are put on you when you're young are likely to stay with them the rest of their lives," she says. "It's important to remember that although cognitively these children are advanced, physically, socially and emotionally they may not be. They are affected by teasing and aggression, as other bullies' targets are, but also somewhat uniquely and possibly more intensely."

The surveys for the Peterson and Ray study were done by mail, and the researchers conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with 57 of the bullied students in six states for an additional study. The results of the survey study are published in the April edition of *Gifted Child Quarterly*, and the results of the interview portion of the study will be published in the same journal in July.

The research was funded by the Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Arizona.

The study was not designed as a comparative look at bullying in gifted versus non-gifted students, but instead sought to document the prevalence and impact that bullying has on gifted students. In their review of the literature, however, Peterson and Ray found that anywhere from about 60 percent to 90 percent of students in the general population had been bullied, and around 20 percent of students were bullies.

Peterson says bullying can lead to a variety of problems in children, as was evident in some interviews.

"We found some very unsettling findings when it came to how gifted children coped with being bullied," she says. "Eleven percent said they responded with violence."

Also, a substantial number of students — both those bullied and not bullied — reported having violent thoughts. By eighth grade, 37 percent of boys and 23 percent of girls said they have had such thoughts.

Peterson says the fact that students consider acting in violent ways was one of the most troubling findings in the study, and one that should be explored further.

"The disturbing thing about this is that we don't know what those violent thoughts are," she says. "They could involve kicking a trash can or blowing up their school. We just don't know. But the fact that so many had thoughts of violence and that some who were bullied had violent thoughts about their perpetrators should make all of us pay attention."

Peterson says there are things schools, parents and school counselors can do to improve the situation for students.

"The key here is to improve communication — between students and parents, students and school counselors, and parents and school counselors," she says. "Parents should use open-ended questions and probes with their children like 'What is your school day like?' or 'Tell me about how students treat each other,' not 'Have you been bullied recently?'"

"We found that the vast majority of students who were bullied were silent about it because they thought others would see them as weak or because they believed they

wouldn't be taken seriously. That's why it's crucial that adults take an interest in their child's life and pay attention if they mention they're being picked on."

Parents should be on the lookout for symptoms such as a flatness of emotions, wanting to avoid school and insomnia. She says if a parent suspects their child is being bullied, the first step is to talk with school officials.

"Studies have shown that when school counselors are involved with students and parents, great things can happen," Peterson says. "We're hoping for a cosmic shift in the way schools see bullying, and we're hopeful that counselors, teachers and administrators can agree on how to identify and respond to bullying, just as we've been taught to identify and respond to sexual harassment."

Other key findings from the study include:

- The peak year for bullying was sixth grade, when 46 percent (54 percent of males and 38 percent of females) had experienced bullying. In that grade, 35 percent of survey participants were called names, 24 percent were teased about appearance, 13 percent were pushed and 12 percent were threatened.
- In terms of emotional impact on the gifted students, fifth grade was the peak year, with 13 percent indicating that they were bothered "a lot" by bullying. By eighth grade, just 8 percent said that bullying bothered them a lot, and 16 percent said it didn't bother them at all.
- A larger percentage of males than females were bullied. As bullies, girls tended to rely on more indirect methods, such as rumor-spreading and social exclusion, than boys did.
- Twenty-eight percent of gifted students (33 percent of males, 22 percent of females) had bullied someone at some time during the first nine years of school. The main bullying tactics used by gifted students were name-calling and teasing.

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