

# Child bullies are prone to sexual violence as adolescents, study shows



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New research by Dorothy Espelage, a professor of educational psychology, indicates that boys and girls who bully others are more likely to engage in sexual violence as adolescents. Espelage is among the experts invited back to Washington, D.C., for the second national bullying summit in September.

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Children who bully others are more likely to perpetrate sexual violence when they enter adolescence, according to a new study led by bullying expert [Dorothy Espelage](#) at the University of Illinois.

The study, part of a larger project funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found strong associations between bullying and sexual violence perpetration for both boys and girls. The sample included nearly 1,400 fifth- through eighth-graders at five middle schools in Illinois. Participants, who ranged in age from 10-15 years, were surveyed about the frequency in which they had engaged in bullying, sexually harassing behaviors and homophobic teasing against others during the prior year.

Sexual violence, for the purpose of the study, was defined as verbal assaults – including unwanted sexual comments and rumor spreading – as well as physical acts such as groping and unwanted non-penetrative sexual contact.

An equal number of boys and girls – 12 percent – that participated in the study could be classified as bully perpetrators, but slightly more boys than girls reported that they engaged in homophobic teasing, the researchers wrote. Bullying perpetration and homophobic teasing during the first phase of the study significantly predicted which children would grope or sexually harass others later, evidence of what the researchers called a “bully-sexual violence pathway.”

About 4 percent of boys and 2 percent of girls reported having pulled at someone’s clothing, and 1 percent of boys and a negligible number of girls reported forcing another to engage in sexual contact. However, the researchers theorized that such behavior probably would increase among the male students in late adolescence and early adulthood, in accordance with the findings of prior studies.

“We probably wouldn’t be surprised if we found these relationships in high school students, but to find them among 11-13 year-olds is very significant and troubling,” said Espelage, a professor of [educational psychology](#) in the

[College of Education](#) at the U. of I. “In a very conservative climate, we have ignored sexual violence and sexual harassment because parents and administrators are uncomfortable with the word ‘sex.’ If we want to make schools safe, we have to recognize that the climate and the landscape have changed. We’re seeing the connection between bullying and sexual violence at a very young age of adolescence – in middle schools – so by high school, maybe it’s too late to do sexual harassment prevention.”

Homophobic bullying fosters a climate in which kids respond to teasing by sexually harassing their peers to demonstrate their heterosexuality or masculinity. Currently popular at some schools is a boundary-pushing game called the “nervous game,” in which kids test how close they can come to touching another student’s body parts before the other student responds that it’s making them nervous and ends the game. Also prevalent among bullies at some schools is “de-pantsing” – jerking another student’s pants down in public, Espelage said.

In order to stem homophobic teasing and sexual harassment, parents, educators and legislators will need to broaden the content of bullying prevention curricula to address those behaviors specifically, the research team said in its report. In conjunction with the CDC, the researchers are developing fact sheets for rape-prevention educators to use in discussing sexual violence with schoolchildren.

“If they’re funded by the CDC to prevent rape, they need to do more than generic bullying prevention,” Espelage said. “They need to complement it with discussion about gendered violence, sexual harassment and physical boundaries because kids need to know when they have crossed the line into sexual harassment. It’s our job to educate (kids) about what is offensive ... and where the boundaries are.”

The CDC and the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education have signaled their intent to clamp down on public schools that tolerate sexual harassment/violence and bullying that targets marginalized groups. In a letter to schools last October, the OCR indicated that student misconduct that violates a school’s bullying policy may also constitute discriminatory harassment, triggering the school’s legal responsibilities under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Under those statutes, schools are obligated to “take immediate and appropriate action to investigate” and take steps to end the harassment and prevent its recurrence – whether or not the student makes a complaint, asks school officials to intervene or identifies the harassment as discriminatory.

The CDC is developing a federal definition of bullying that will be vetted by researchers, federal officials and other constituents at the second national bullying summit, to be held in Washington, D.C., this fall before the policy takes effect in January.

“And that definition will be very clear that once bullying becomes sexualized – like sexual violence or homophobic bantering – it invokes sexual harassment legislation” under Title IX, and schools will be held liable if they fail to implement policies and procedures to address these problems, Espelage said.

Analyses of bullying programs in the U.S. “are saying that these programs are having limited success,” Espelage said. “We have systemic issues that are unique to the U.S. educational context, and we need to do a better job of saying, ‘How can we adapt these programs that are working in Europe for our context.’”

“What’s lacking from many of the programs is there’s no voice of the teachers. We just throw curricula at them and tell them to do it” – at a time when teachers are already overwhelmed with standardized testing mandates, Espelage said.

One of the most widely used anti-bullying programs in U.S. schools, created by researcher Dan Olweus, does not

address gender-based violence at all, and the majority of programs don't recognize that bullying co-occurs with other types of aggression and risky behavior such as delinquency and substance abuse, Espelage said.

Espelage and Sabina Low, a professor of psychology at Wichita State University, are concluding a related study and the largest randomized clinical trial in the nation to date – involving 36 schools and 3,800 children – that examines the efficacy of bullying-prevention programs.

Espelage is seeking funding for another study, which would compare the effectiveness of a generic anti-bullying program with an expanded package that includes information about racial and sexual orientation issues and with a third program that contains diversity awareness training for teachers. Bullying researcher Mark S. Friedman, a professor of behavioral and community health sciences at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, will be Espelage's research partner on that study.

The researchers presented findings from the current study at the Aug. 4-7 annual convention of the American Psychological Association, in Washington, D.C. The study also was accepted for publication in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Espelage is among the experts invited back to the second national bullying summit, to be held in September. The first conference, last March, was hosted by President Barack Obama and Michelle Obama.

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