



Popular girls may be popular bully targets, study suggests

By David Hunn

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You think it's easy being a cheerleader?

Not according to new research on bullying.

Boys are still tormenting boys, just as always. But now researchers have found boys are also pestering girls. And not just any girls — popular ones.

"There is a common perception that bullying happens exclusively within genders," said Philip Rodkin, a professor of child development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "We found a lot of bullying across gender lines."

And Rodkin's study, in the most recent issue of the *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, also found that the girls harassed were often more popular than their male harassers.

Early research, Rodkin said, showed bullies holding physical or psychological power over their victims, who were mostly same-sex peers. Meaning boys beat up boys. Girls bullied girls. And jocks tormented nerds.

More recent work, however, has begun to draw lines between boys and girls, popular and unpopular.

But the lines have been hazy, with researchers studying groups of bullies, groups of victims, and rarely showing a direct connection between bully and bullied, Rodkin said.

Rodkin and his team looked at more than 500 fourth- and fifth-graders from several schools surrounding the quiet Champaign suburbs, in central Illinois, three hours east of St. Louis.

They asked students to write down the names of bullies and the names of their victims. And then they asked whether the bullies and victims were popular. In November, they published the study, "Who Bullies Whom? Social Status Asymmetries by Victim Gender."

Rodkin's team found that boy-boy bullying often fit the classic jock-nerd stereotype.

Boys who bullied girls, on the other hand, were viewed by classmates not at all as "alpha males" but instead as much less popular than their girl victims.

Rodkin also said the research suggests such trends may be going undetected.

Indeed, several St. Louis-area counselors and administrators said their schools were not reporting much cross-gender bullying.

Some said they were seeing more girl-girl pestering. Some said their schools were so vigilant, bullying had nearly disappeared. Some said they didn't pay attention to social status. And some said that — now that they know — they'll look carefully for evidence of boy-girl bullying.

But Jamie McHale, a counselor at Pond Elementary in Rockwood, said she had seen it.

McHale remembers one case where a boy, who wasn't very well-liked in his class, began picking on other boys, most of them with disabilities. Then, as classmates saw the bullying and tried to stop it, he shifted his target to the whistle-blowers, most of whom were girls.

He was sneaky, McHale said. It took a while — and administrative intervention — to stop.

Rodkin's research could help prevent just such bullying.

"Their results demonstrate that bullying is a very complex social dynamic," said Susan Swearer, a school psychology professor at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. "The key to reducing bullying is to understand kids' social status, friendship groups and the social climate of the school."

So, what do cheerleaders think of boy-girl bullying? Does it really happen to them?

One night last week, several girls gathered for tumbling practice at Cheer Legendz, a suburban cheerleading squad. Sure, they've seen boys bully girls, several said.

And then they began listing them.

One pushes around girls at Ross Elementary, said 11-year-old Brianna Koester.

One tormented a friend in second grade, said Lafayette High freshman Brit Jacobs.

One dug his nails into Angie Pandorf, now a Marquette High junior, because she got a drink before he did — in third grade.

And that, Rodkin said, is just the point.

"We have to be wary in schools," he said. "Boys and girls seem to live in different worlds in elementary schools."

But the roots of adolescent problems, he said, begin there.

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