



## Newsweek

### FAMILY

# Becoming A Bully Magnet

Why some kids grow up to be targets.

By [Claudia Kalb](#) | NEWSWEEK

Published Oct 7, 2008

Every parent wants to know the secret to school happiness: why is one kid well liked while another gets picked on? There's no recipe for social success among first graders<sup>1</sup>. But a new study published this week in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* reveals some intriguing clues about why certain children land in the dreaded world of what science calls "peer victimization." One key finding: they're more likely to be aggressive early on in life. That may sound counterintuitive, but it's not surprising to experts in the field, who have known for some time that there's a link between being aggressive and being tormented, which can lead to a host of emotional and social problems. When volatile and angry children act out on their frustrations —smashing a toy after someone takes their ball away— they aren't exactly beloved by their peers. "They're easy marks<sup>2</sup>," says Kenneth Dodge, a psychology professor at Duke University. "You know you can get a rise out of them<sup>3</sup>, you can push their buttons<sup>4</sup>."

Kids who take their wrath out on other kids, as the children did in the study, are also at risk. Their classmates don't like them —and some will eventually make their displeasure known. Prior research has focused largely on school-age kids, around age 4 or 5, and the studies have been relatively small. The new study, which followed 1,970 children in Canada, traces behavior all the way back to toddlerhood. Mothers of 17-month-old children were asked how often their kids hit, bit or kicked other children and how often they fought or bullied their peers. Later, when the kids were between the ages of 3 and 6, the moms reported on how often their kids were made fun of, how often they were hit or pushed and how often they were called names. Their answers showed a link: kids who were aggressive early on in life were more likely to be victimized than non-aggressive kids. "The message is that those negative events do happen in preschool and we can predict them from very early on," says Michel Boivin, a professor of psychology at Université Laval in Quebec and one of the study's authors.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the USA's school system, a *first grader* is a child of about 6 to 7 years of age.

<sup>2</sup> An *easy mark* is a person, in this case a child, who can be easily deceived.

<sup>3</sup> When you get a rise out of somebody, you succeed in annoying them.

<sup>4</sup> To *push* (or *press*) *someone's buttons* means to draw a strong emotional reaction from someone. In this case, that emotion is anger.



And those negative events lasted beyond the preschool years. Researchers studied the kids until first grade, using teachers as a resource for information. The kids even answered questions about themselves —how often they were called bad names, excluded from groups, pushed or kicked, or teased in a mean way. Aggression in toddlers was, again, associated with harassment in first grade and the researchers found two other risk factors for peer victimization as well: harsh or reactive parenting —anger, shouting and spanking when the kids were fussy— and lower income families.

Behavioral studies aren't easy to do. In an ideal world, scientists would monitor the kids themselves without having to rely on reports from others. But that's logistically and financially unfeasible when the goal is to do a big study over several years. A researcher's observations can change the playing field, too: kids are likely to stop the name-calling when an adult is watching. And, says Gary Ladd, a professor at the School of Social and Family Dynamics at Arizona State University, victimization is a "low base-rate behavior." Translation: "You'd have to follow kids all day long to see a little bit of it," he says. All of this research matters because bullying can destroy a child's self-esteem, especially when the abuse goes on year after year. Victimized kids are at risk for depression, skipping school, physical health problems, alcohol and drug use, and, in rare instances, suicide. "Some kids react to harassment by turning inward, blaming themselves, suffering in silence," says Ladd. "Others get very angry and start fantasizing about how to get revenge." The key is to intervene early —watch the kids and interview their teachers. If early aggressive behavior can be prevented, says Boivin, "we may be able to influence the negative trajectories that follow."

Find this article at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/162816>

### Questions:

1. Say whether the following statement is true (T) or false (F): "The study published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* this week will provide parents whose children are abused by their peers at school with a scientific explanation for this behavior." Justify your answer.

**Form of question:** T/F

**Type of comprehension:** LITERAL.

**Answer:** F. [The study is not about explaining the abusive behavior of bullies (why some children enjoy being mean and abusing other children; what are these children like, from a psychological point of view). The study presents some of the personality traits of the children who suffer or are likely to suffer this kind of abusive behavior by their peers at school or in their closest personal and social environment.]

2. Say whether the following statement is true (T) or false (F): "According to this study, children who display aggressive patterns of behavior from an early age are likely to be abused by their peers at school later on." Justify your answer.



**Form of question:** T/F.

**Type of comprehension:** REORGANIZATION.

**Answer:** T. The answer can be put together by relating the information given in lines 6 through 12.

3. How would you explain the concept of “peer victimization”, in the light of the information given in the text? Please, use your own words in composing your answer.

**Form of question:** *Wh*-question.

**Type of comprehension:** REORGANIZATION.

**Answer:** A child is said to be being victimized by his/her peers when these inflict on him/her some kind of unmotivated abusive behavior (hitting, punching, insulting, ridiculing, among other types of harassment), usually for a prolonged period of time, which can result in physical, emotional, and/or psychological damage, or, in the worst of cases, suicide.

4. What is the meaning of “You know you can get a rise out of them, you can push their buttons”, in the context of peer victimization of and by schoolchildren?

**Form of question:** *Wh*-question.

**Type of comprehension:** INFERENCE.

**Answer:** What it means is that children who are bullied are those who are easy to annoy, those from whom you can easily draw a strong emotional reaction, such as annoyance or even anger.

5. What two types of children are at higher risk of “becoming bully magnets”, according to the findings of the above mentioned study?

**Form of question:** *Wh*-question.

**Type of comprehension:** INFERENCE.

**Answer:** Children who react aggressively to their own frustrations, either by destroying things (“Volatile and angry children who act out their frustrations —smashing a toy after someone takes their ball away—”) or by venting their anger out on other children (“kids who take their wrath out on other kids”).

6. Circle the option (a, b, c, or d) which best completes this statement. “The most distinctive feature of this study is that

- a) it includes a larger number of subjects than previous studies on the issue of peer victimization.
- b) it focuses on 1970 Canadian children, while the nationality of the subjects included in previous studies was not recorded.
- c) it spans over a wider period of time in the lives of the 1970 Canadian children whose behavior and emotional reactions were recorded and analyzed.



d) it studies the causes of peer victimization on 1970 Canadian toddlers, as reported by their respective mothers.

**Form of question:** Multiple choice.

**Type of comprehension:** REORGANIZATION.

**Answer:** C. Prior research had focused only on schoolage kids, while this study started recording, with the help of their respective mothers, the instances of aggressive behavior of 1970 Canadian toddlers. Sometime later (months or years, depending on the initial age of the child), these mothers reported on how often their children were victims of abusive behaviors such as being made fun of, being hit, or being called names.

7. Say whether the following statement is true (T) or false (F): “The study concludes that kids at the highest risk of peer victimization at school are those who were told off and spanked by their parents when they misbehaved.” Justify your answer.

**Form of question:** T/F.

**Type of comprehension:** Literal.

**Answer:** F. First, the study suggests or hints risk factors, but it is not conclusive about them. Second, having severe parents is one risk factor, but it is not mentioned that it is the highest risk factor.

8. Why are kids from lower income families among those at risk of being bullied by their peers at school?

**Form of question:** Wh-question.

**Type of comprehension:** Inference.

**Answer:** Parents in a low-income family tend to be people who have not had the opportunity or, for a variety of reasons, have not wished to pursue college or other kind of higher education. This means they have not had access to highly paid jobs, which results in a lack of economic resources that may eventually lead to severe parenting because of a feeling of guilt for not being able to provide their family with everything they need or what they consider they should have. Another reason is that this type of parents lack the emotional and psychological development which is usually acquired by those who do pursue higher education. Also, the uneducated parent can feel threatened by a child's becoming smarter than them, and so may raise them in a more severe and restrictive manner.

9. What are the main problems that scientists may encounter when embarking on a study of the characteristics of the study discussed in this article?

**Form of question:** Wh-question.

**Type of comprehension:** REORGANIZATION.

**Answer:** One of the problems (lines 38-41) is that it is normally impossible for the researcher(s) to monitor the children's behavior without having to rely on information



given by third parties (parents, schoolteachers, peers). Another problem is that children will commonly change (i.e. improve) their behavior when the researcher(s) are present (lines 41-45).

10. What would you do if you found out that your youngest brother/sister is being bullied at school?

**Form of question:** *Wh*-question.

**Type of comprehension:** Personal response.

**Answer:** Open-ended.