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Institute of Education, University of London

Stereotypical image of school bully needs updating, researchers say

The stereotypical image of the school bully needs to be revised, researchers at the Institute of Education, London, have concluded.

Less than 1 per cent of primary school children are "true bullies", and most children who bully are themselves bullied by other pupils, the researchers say. Bullies are also more likely than their classmates to suffer from low self-esteem, depression, and behavioural problems from early childhood and through primary school. They are more likely to suffer from mental health problems later in life too.

Dr Leslie Gutman, lead author of the new study, believes that schools need to teach that bullying is unacceptable and hold bullies to account for their actions. However, she feels that there should also be greater awareness of the wider possible consequences and causes of bullying behaviour.

The study by the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (WBL) found that 75 per cent of children enjoy healthy friendships. But the one in four who does not may often have suffered from issues such as language delays, conduct problems, and hyperactivity from an early age.

The report highlights the value of existing government initiatives, such as peer mentoring, the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme, and national strategies for targeting schools with bullying issues. However, Dr Gutman, Research Director at WBL, says: "Early interventions that teach children coping strategies for developmental difficulties such as hyperactivity may also alleviate the later possibility of being targeted as victims and/or engaging in bullying.

"We are not suggesting that schools should adopt a soft approach to bullying but simply stating that, on the basis of the evidence, bullying is a more complex issue than some people believe it to be."

The researchers used data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children to study 6,500 pupils aged 8 to 11. They also found that children with happier friendships are more likely to have married parents and more educated mothers. Girls are more likely than boys to have larger numbers of friends, while boys are more likely to be both bullies and victims.

Even those who had friendships with which they were happy could have problems: in particular, children who had friendships which were otherwise supportive, but characterised by a high degree of conflict, tended to feel less in control of their lives.

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The importance of social worlds: an investigation of peer relationships: Wider Benefits of Learning Report No 29 can be found at <http://www.learningbenefits.net/Publications/ResRepIntros/ResRep29intro.htm>

Notes for Editors

Data used in this study are taken from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), a longitudinal study of children born in the former Avon Health Authority with an expected date of delivery between 1 April 1991 and 31 December 1992. ALSPAC has collected information about children's peer relationships at the age of 8 and 10. This information was supplemented by mothers' reports on a broad

range of outcomes, including social behaviour, socio-emotional adjustment, and well-being from infancy to later childhood, as well as school reports of children's educational attainment at 11.

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/alspac>

The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning investigates the benefits that learning brings to the individual and to society as a whole. www.learningbenefits.net