

## **EMBARGOED UNTIL APRIL 27, 2012 BY THE BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL**

**TITLE:** Bullying victimisation and increased risk of self-harm in early adolescence:  
A longitudinal cohort study

**PUBLICATION SOURCE:** British Medical Journal (BMJ), to appear on April 27, 2012

### **THE FINDINGS:**

- Among 2141 children followed up as part of a longitudinal study 2.9% (62 out of 2,141) had self-harmed by age 12. Over half of these children who harmed themselves were victims of frequent bullying (56%, 35 out of 62). Being bullied meant that a child was around 3 times more likely to self-harm.
- When considering twins within the same family, the twin who had been bullied was more likely to self-harm than their non-bullied sibling. This shows that being bullied is an important predictor of self-harm by itself, apart from all other factors that siblings share, such as their parents and home family life.
- Being bullied is not rare, so it is important not to assume that every bullied child will self-harm. We found that the small group of bullied children who self-harmed were more likely to also have been maltreated by an adult in the past, experienced other mental-health problems, and to have a family member who had attempted or completed suicide. Parents, teachers and doctors can use this information to assess a child's risk of self-harm.

### **WHY ARE THESE FINDINGS IMPORTANT?**

Bullying by peers is experienced by approximately 25% of children in the UK<sup>1</sup> and has been linked to a range of emotional and behavioural problems. Despite increasing media and public attention on individual cases of self-harm and suicide amongst bullied children, and a rise in anti-bullying policies and laws there has been little formal research into the link between bullying and self-harm.

This study has now clearly demonstrated that children who are bullied by peers are more likely to self-harm by following children over time and taking into account a range of individual and family factors.

This study reaffirms that bullying should be a clear target for prevention policy, as it was linked to higher rates of self-harm even when controlling for all other influential features of children's backgrounds.

That children as young as 12 years of age are more likely to hurt themselves following bullying by peers suggests bullied children need help from caring adults to prevent them from engaging in these self-destructive behaviours.

The children who need help most urgently are those who have been maltreated by someone else in the past, who show mental health problems, and who have a family history of suicide.

### **SUPPORTING DETAILS:**

The study protocol was approved by the UK Multicentre Research Ethics Committee and university ethics review board. Study participants gave informed consent for the research. Children in danger were referred for help by the investigators.

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<sup>1</sup> According to a national survey conducted in the UK by the NSPCC in 2009: Radford L, Corral S, Bradley C, Fisher H, Bassett C, Howat N, et al. Child abuse and neglect in the UK today. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2011.

Bullying victimisation was reported by both mothers and children in separate interviews. Frequent bullying refers to repeated harmful actions (e.g., name calling, spreading rumours, physical assault, intentional exclusion) between children where there was a power differential between the bully and the victim, and the victim could not make it stop.

Self-harm was measured in an interview with mothers when the children were 12 years-old. They reported on whether their child had deliberately harmed themselves or attempted suicide in the previous 6 months. Descriptions of these incidents provided by the mothers were checked by an independent researcher to confirm that an act of self-harm or a suicide attempt had clearly taken place. Children's self-harming behavior can include acts such as arm-cutting, taking pills, repeated head-banging, or attempt to commit suicide by hanging.

Ruling out alternative explanations. Children who had been frequently bullied by peers were more likely to self-harm at 12 years of age, even when taking into account earlier emotional and behavioural difficulties, low intelligence, exposure to maltreatment by an adult and the socio-economic status of the family.

#### **PARTICIPANTS:**

2141 members of the E-Risk Study, which follows twins born in 1994-1995 in England and Wales. This birth cohort's families represent the full range of socioeconomic status and health in the general population. Follow-ups have been carried out at ages 5, 7, 10 and most recently at age 12 years, when 96% of the living cohort members took part.

#### **MEDIA CONTACTS:**

Seil Collins, *Press Officer, King's College London, Institute of Psychiatry*; tel: 0207 848 5377; e-mail: [seil.collins@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:seil.collins@kcl.ac.uk)

Helen Fisher, *MRC Social, Genetic, and Developmental Psychiatry Centre, King's College London, Institute of Psychiatry*, e-mail: [helen.2.fisher@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:helen.2.fisher@kcl.ac.uk)

Avshalom Caspi, *Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Duke University, Durham, NC*; e-mail: [avshalom.caspi@duke.edu](mailto:avshalom.caspi@duke.edu)

Terrie Moffitt, *Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Duke University, Durham, NC*; e-mail: [terrie.moffitt@duke.edu](mailto:terrie.moffitt@duke.edu)

#### **UNIVERSITIES INVOLVED:**

MRC Social, Genetic, and Developmental Psychiatry Centre, King's College London, Institute of Psychiatry Box PO80, SE5 8AF, UK; and Duke University, Durham, NC, 27708, USA.

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#### **ADDITIONAL LINKS:**

The Bullying Project aims to raise awareness of the often very painful consequences of bullying in order to get the public, policymakers and teachers to actively oppose and prevent children from being bullied. They have created a film trailer based on 5 real life stories which is currently being shown in US cinemas: <http://thebullyproject.com/#/video>.