

**Newsweek**

# Becoming A Bully Magnet

**Why some kids grow up to be targets.**

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NEWSWEEK

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. 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," says Kenneth Dodge, a psychology professor at Duke University. "You know you can get a rise out of them, you can push their buttons."

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.

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."

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