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Violence in the home leads to higher rates of childhood bullying

Children who were exposed to violence in the home engaged in higher levels of physical bullying than youngsters who were not witnesses to such behavior, according to a study by researchers from the University of Washington and Indiana University.

The study is one of the first in the United States to specifically examine the association between child exposure to intimate partner violence and involvement in bullying. It also is one of the first to break down bullying into physical aggression (hitting, pushing and other forms outward aggression) and relational aggression (teasing, being mean and ostracizing peers).

Overall, 34 percent of the children studied engaged in bullying and 73 percent reported being the victim of some form of bullying in the previous year. Almost all of the bullies, 97 percent, said they were also victims of bullying.

"Children learn from seeing what their primary caregivers do. They are very attuned and very observant about what goes on in a household," said Dr. Nerissa Bauer, lead author of the study and a former UW pediatrician who is now an assistant professor of pediatrics at Indian and Riley Children's Hospital.

"Parents are very powerful role models and children will mimic the behavior of parents, wanting to be like them. They may believe violence is OK and they can use it with peers. After all, they may think, 'If Daddy can do this, perhaps I can hit this kid to get my way.' When parents engage in violence, children may assume violence is the right way to do things," she said.

"This study supports the idea that parental violence can lead to violence between children and their peers," added Todd Herrenkohl, a UW associate professor of social work and co-author of the paper published in the current issue of the journal *Pediatrics*. "Children develop a mindset when they see how parents deal with problems. It is a script based on early observations in the home."

Data for the study were drawn from the ongoing Seattle Social Development Project and the Intergenerational Projects, which are tracing youth development and social and antisocial behavior. Participants in these long-term studies were recruited from Seattle elementary schools, and 808 students (generation 2), their parents (generation 1) and their children (generation 3) have been followed since 1985. The bullying study looked at the behavior of 112 children from generation 3 who were 6 to 13 years old, an age group not normally examined in bullying research. Most previous bullying studies have focused on middle school-age children.

The study focused on intimate partner violence, a somewhat broader term than domestic violence, for physical, emotional or sexual acts of violence. It includes couples who may not be married or living together. A 2000 federal study estimated that between 3.3 and 10 million children are exposed to intimate partner violence annually. Overall, 51 percent of the households in the Seattle study reported intimate partner violence during either or both of two specified times over a five-year period.

It also found that:

- Girls reported higher rates than boys for bullying others, accounting for 61 percent of the reported incidents.
- Girls also were victims more frequently, accounting for 55 percent of the incidents.
- Children who are exposed to family violence are more likely to have internalizing behaviors such as early childhood depression, sadness and withdrawn behavior.
- There appears to be no link between witnessing family violence and relational bullying.

Bauer said the study of bullying is relatively new and issues such as domestic violence and intimate partner violence traditionally have been sticky subjects for pediatricians to talk about.

"Physicians may have been afraid of the answers they might get and may not know of community

resources that are available. In the not so recent past, intimate partner violence was something physicians typically did not ask about. Today, it is recognized that family violence is common, with about 40 percent of women reporting they have been victims of it sometime in their lifetime," she said.

"Physicians and teachers should be sensitive that when children display behavior issues that the possibility of domestic violence in the family exists. Not all children exposed to violence will respond in the same way, but there are many indirect effects and problems that you can see, such as engaging in bullying, not being able to make friends, not eating or those with extended school absences. But not all bullies come from violent families," she said.

Herrenkohl said the study illustrates the importance of looking at how family events affect children over time and the power of the intergenerational transmission of violence.

"We know that bullying leads to further antisocial behavior and this study shows how family violence leads to bullying. When intimate partner violence happens we can work with parents to show them how it can impact their children," he said. "A key is early identification of this kind of problem, but it is never too late to intervene to break the cycle of violence."

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The research was funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse and a National Research Service Award Primary Care Research Fellowship. Co-authors of the paper, all at the UW, are Drs. Paula Lozano and Frederick Rivara, associate professor and professor of pediatrics; Karl Hill, research associate professor in the Social Development Research Group; and J. David Hawkins, professor of social work and former director of the Social Development Research Group.

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