

New report reveals bullying increases risk of mental health problems in later life

Scottish groups welcome findings and call for action

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Children who experience bullying are almost four times more likely to experience significant mental health issues by age 17, a ground-breaking new study, spearheaded by researchers in Scotland, has found.

The report, led by Glasgow University and top US hospital group UCLA Health, is believed to be the first to examine the link between peer bullying, interpersonal distrust and the subsequent development of problems such as anxiety, depression, hyperactivity and anger.

Researchers used data from 10,000 children across the UK who were studied for nearly two decades as part of the Millennium Cohort Study.

From this data, it was found that adolescents who were bullied at age 11, and in turn developed greater interpersonal distrust by age 14, were around 3.5 times more likely to experience significant mental health problems at age 17 compared to those who developed less distrust.

The findings could help schools and other institutions to develop new interventions to counter the negative mental health impacts of bullying, said the study's coauthor, Dr Dimitris Tsomokos, from Glasgow University.

He explained: "Parents, teachers and researchers have known for a while that a sense of belonging in school and communities is crucial for children and adolescents, both in terms of academic performance and overall wellbeing. Our work provides evidence that a key reason for the breakdown of belonging is distrust, which develops over time.

"Distrust can emerge because of earlier experiences of bullying or due to other reasons. It breaks down the sense of belonging and degrades mental health."

The findings come amid growing public health concerns about the mental health of youth across the world. Recent studies in America found that 44% of sampled high school students in the US reported being depressed for at least two weeks in 2021, with one in 10 students who were surveyed having reported attempted suicide that year.

In this new study, the researchers viewed these alarming trends from the perspective of Social Safety Theory, which hypothesises that social threats, such as bullying, impact mental health partly by instilling the belief that other people cannot be trusted, or that the world is an unfriendly, dangerous or unpredictable place.

Prior research has identified associations between bullying and mental and behavioural health issues among youth, including its impact on substance abuse, depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. However, this study is the first to confirm the suspected pathway of how bullying leads to distrust and, in turn, mental health problems in late adolescence.

The researchers explained that when people develop clinically significant mental health problems during the teenage years, it can increase their risk of experiencing both mental and physical health issues across their entire lifespan if left unaddressed. In addition to interpersonal distrust, the authors examined if diet, sleep or physical activity also linked peer bullying with subsequent mental health problems. However, only interpersonal distrust was found to relate bullying to greater risk of experiencing mental health problems at age 17.

Martha Evans, director of the Anti-Bullying Alliance, welcomed the study. She said: "It confirms what we know about the effects of childhood bullying lasting into adulthood and seriously undermining a person's mental health, well-being and happiness. As an organisation reaching over 20,000 children's staff with anti-bullying training each year, we know more work is needed to support staff and students to reduce bullying and reduce its impact. We need the government to provide more training and support to schools."

Nicola Killean, Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, said that not only is being bullied a distressing experience for any child, it is also a violation of their human rights.

"A child who is bullied can lose their dignity, selfworth and identity," she said. "Bullying affects how a child can access other rights, such as their rights to education, to play and to socialise. If a child is being bullied, they may avoid school or certain classes or stop taking part in activities.

"It can severely impact their right to health, particularly mental health, and can have longer-term impacts, as the University of Glasgow's research shows."

Lorraine Glass, Interim Director of respectme, Scotland's Anti-Bullying Service, said: "We welcome this new research which adds to our existing knowledge and experience on the mental health impacts of bullying on children and young people.

"respectme works with adults in Scotland who have a role to play in the lives of children and young people. We offer free e-learning modules for professionals, practitioners and parents/carers which include information on the damaging impacts on mental health of bullying, to help raise awareness and improve support for young people experiencing it.

"We believe that sustained antibullying work is essential to both the prevention of, and responses to, supporting young people."