

For most bullied gay kids, things do 'get better,' study finds

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While gay British teens more likely to be bullied in school, situation improved by young adulthood.

(HealthDay)—Many gay and bisexual teenagers are bullied in school, but the problem does ease substantially as they get older, a new study out of England suggests.

Researchers found that of more than 4,100 teens aged 13 and 14 who they surveyed, gay and [bisexual teens](#) were more likely to say they'd been bullied—anything from name-calling to being physically hurt.

Fifty-seven percent of girls and 52 percent of boys said they'd been victims, versus about 40 percent of their [heterosexual](#) peers.

The good news was that things got better with time, the researchers

report online Feb. 4 and in the March print issue of [Pediatrics](#). At ages 19 and 20, 6 percent of lesbian and [bisexual women](#) and 9 percent of gay and [bisexual men](#) said they'd been victimized in the past year.

The bad news was that men were still four times more likely to report bullying than heterosexual [young men](#) were.

"Basically this is saying that it does get better, but it's not good enough," said Brian Mustanski, an associate professor of medical social sciences at Northwestern University, in Chicago.

Mustanski, who was not involved in the study, has done research on the impact of bullying on gay and bisexual kids. "The work we've done shows that there is an association between bullying and [suicide attempts](#) and self-harming behavior in [gay and bisexual] youth," he said.

But it's not only researchers [paying attention](#) now, Mustanski added.

The media have put a spotlight on recent cases in which [gay teens](#) have taken their own lives after being taunted by their peers. And in 2010, syndicated columnist Dan Savage, who is gay, launched the "It Gets Better" project to get a message to gay and bisexual kids who are being bullied.

"The message was, it will get better with time," Mustanski said. "And that's an important message. But we really hadn't had any research to show that that's true."

Lead researcher Joseph Robinson agreed that these findings help validate what people have believed to be true.

"This suggests that chances are, things will get better," said Robinson, an assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Illinois

at Urbana-Champaign. "We've been giving kids a message of hope, and this is showing that's not a false hope."

But the continuing disparity between gay and heterosexual young men is concerning, Robinson said. "For straight males, bullying gets better a lot quicker—which is great news for them. But we'd like to see the same improvement for gay and bisexual males."

The picture may be worse for young men because society is generally less accepting of men being gay or bisexual, Robinson noted. "Men, in particular, just can't deviate from gender norms," he said. "That's what society expects."

The findings are based on a national sample of 4,135 school kids in England who were interviewed annually over seven years. Of these, 187 (almost 5 percent) identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Besides asking about bullying, the study also looked at kids' "emotional distress" levels—how often they felt depressed, anxious or unhappy.

In general, gay and bisexual young people had more distress, and bullying in school appeared to explain about half of the disparity. Both Robinson and Mustanski said that suggests that anti-bullying efforts could make a big difference in young people's mental health.

Right now, some schools have anti-bullying policies that specifically ban bullying based on sexual orientation. Some have gay-straight student alliances, which aim to fight homophobia. But not all schools have programs like that.

Parents can go a long way in helping, Robinson said. "Hopefully, parents are being supportive and have an open line of communication with their kids." But, he added, stopping bullies, and their effects, shouldn't be up

to parents and kids alone.

"It needs to be a much more systematic effort," Robinson said. "Schools need to get behind this." He added that if you've complained to your school about [bullying](#) and nothing has been done, you can take it to your local civil rights office.

Mustanski also suggested looking for resources outside of school, including community groups and online help—like the Trevor Project, which offers a hotline for [gay](#) and bisexual kids who are thinking of suicide or hurting themselves.

One question from the current study is whether the findings would be similar in the United States or other countries. Robinson said he "strongly suspects" the general patterns would be the same in the United States as in England.

But you can't know for sure without the numbers, Mustanski pointed out. "We absolutely need a study like this in the U.S.," he said.

More information: For help in dealing with anti-gay bullying, go to the [It Gets Better project](#).

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