

New research reveals friends are worse than enemies when it comes to bullying

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Credit: University of Hertfordshire

Research into the effects of different types of bullying on young people's health, conducted by academics at the University of Hertfordshire, has shown bullying between friends to be the most damaging type.

The study, published in the November issue of the *Journal of School Health*, compared the [health effects](#) of different types of bullying;

physical, verbal and relational and found [relational bullying](#) to be more harmful to [health](#) than the other two.

The research also found that experiencing relational bullying is associated with poorer health related quality of life (HRQL) among young people; that [girls](#) were more likely to experience relational bullying but the negative health effect of the bullying was equal for boys and girls.

Relational bullying causes harm to the victim through the systematic manipulation and destruction of their peer relationships, friendship circles and social status, such behaviours could include threatening to retract [friendships](#), spreading rumours, purposefully ignoring and excluding the victim or using friendship as a bartering tool.

These findings could change the way that relational bullying is dealt with in schools. Currently relational bullying is often regarded by teachers as less serious than physical bullying, needing fewer interventions and provoking less sympathy with the victims. As relational bullying is embedded within friendship groups it becomes difficult to distinguish relational bullying from natural conflict between friends, potentially reducing the likelihood of outside intervention. Furthermore many parents didn't even consider social exclusion to be a form of bullying.

Kayleigh Chester, researcher in the University of Hertfordshire's health and human science research institute and lead author of the paper, said: "In an average class, around 5 [young people](#) will have been relationally bullied in the past couple of months. It highlights the potentially harmful impact of these more hidden bullying behaviours. Girls were more likely to say they had been bullied in this way, but it is important we do not see relational bullying as a 'girl problem' as the data suggests boys and girls are affected in similar ways."

The study is the first known UK study to examine the association between relational bullying and HQRL among a large representative sample of school aged children. It used data from self-completed surveys from 5335 English students aged 11-15 years that were part of the WHO Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study carried out in England.

Provided by University of Hertfordshire

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