

Obese girls and boys bullied more often, research finds

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Obese children and teenagers -- and chubby girls in particular -- are far more likely to be victims of bullying than their normal-weight peers, according to new Canadian research.

And, as they grow older, overweight teens -- boys especially -- are far more likely to turn the tables and become bullies themselves, the study revealed.

"Almost all the research that is done focuses on the physical aspects of obesity, but this study tells us that there's this whole other psychological component that's really important to explore," Ian Janssen, a researcher in the department of community health and epidemiology at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., said.

The study, published in today's edition of the medical journal *Pediatrics*, found that about one in seven Canadian children aged 11 to 16 are victims of bullying.

Ten per cent of girls of normal weight are bullied, compared with 15 per cent of overweight girls and 23 per cent of obese girls. Among boys, 11 per cent of those of normal weight are bullied, compared with 14 per cent in the overweight group and more than 15 per cent of the obese boys.

The research showed that bullying of heavy children gets more frequent and more violent as they move into their teen years, when adolescents are overly conscious of their maturing bodies.

It also revealed that obese children strike back. "My guess is that after being bullied for a while, they retaliate," Dr. Janssen said.

He stressed, however, that the research was designed to look at the link between weight and bullying, but does not explain why it occurs.

"We can only hypothesize about the whys," he said, before adding: "But it kind of makes sense that the fat kids get picked on."

Dr. Janssen said bullying has particularly devastating effects on

teenagers, because their most important relationships are with their peers."Bullying can have devastating developmental consequences. It can really affect these kids profoundly," he said.

The research was conducted on a sample of 5,749 boys and girls aged 11 to 16 from across Canada. The information was collected in 2002 as part of a 35-country survey by the World Health Organization.

The researchers looked at various forms of bullying, including verbal (name-calling, teasing), physical (punching, hitting, kicking), relational (being ostracized) and sexual harassment.

Girls were most likely to be victims of physical bullying, while boys are victims of relational bullying.

Dr. Janssen said what surprised him most was the violent behaviour of girls. "You don't usually associate the hitting, punching and kicking with girls, you think it would be more about relationships."

Dr. Janssen said the lack of physical attacks on obese boys is easy to explain. "Boys who are overweight and obese are often big and strong -- the kid who is the offensive lineman on the football team -- so not many others are going to pick on them, at least physically," he said.

Dr. Janssen said schools should also take some lessons from the data, and adapt their anti-bullying programs so they pay particular attention to obese and overweight youth.