

Mean boys

It turns out girls aren't the only ones using emotional taunts

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FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
SEPTEMBER 30, 2008 AT 9:05 AM EDT

Nasty gossip. Hurtful rumours. Clique-y backbiting. It's the stuff of stereotypical girl bullying. But it's also rampant among boys, according to new research.

Boy bullies have long been thought to favour physical aggression while their female counterparts are considered more likely to rely on the more indirect forms of aggression.

But while boys continue to outpace girls in their use of physical aggression, they are also just as likely as girls to use social and emotional taunting.

"We just don't notice it because we're focusing on their physical aggression," says the study's lead author, Noel Card, an assistant professor of family studies and human development at the University of Arizona.



To escape the abuse boys heaped on her when she refused to date, Katie Neu quit going to school. *(ASHLEY HUTCHESON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL)*



Combing through 148 previous studies involving 74,000 children, Dr. Card's meta-analysis found that gender explains less than 1 per cent of the difference in boys' and girls' bullying tactics. Girls are slightly more likely to use forms of social aggression, but he says the statistical difference is "trivial." Dr. Card's research, published in the current issue of the journal *Child Development*, also confirmed previous research showing teachers and parents are more likely to cling to these gender myths than are children, who report indirect aggression equally among boys and girls.

"A kid punching another is pretty evident if you see it," Dr. Card says. "A lot of this indirect aggression happens in the classroom, under teachers' noses."

The passing of notes, even the roll of an eye, can terrorize a kid, Dr. Card says.

Experts suggest boys may choose indirect aggression more when it comes to targeting girls, due to vestiges of a chivalric code, says Debra Pepler, a psychology professor at York University and scientific co-director of PREVNet (Promoting Relationships and Eliminating Violence), a network of Canadian researchers examining bullying. "You're not supposed to hit women."

Yet the alternative "spreads like wildfire," says Kids Help Phone counsellor Aren van Delden, who figures about 20 to 25 per cent of her calls have to do with these issues. Victims may not know where mean-spirited rumours started, so they think "everybody is against them," she says.

Other research has shown that some victims of indirect aggression report more damage than would have been inflicted by more direct forms of violence. "Girls perceive it as more dangerous," says bullying expert Mara Brendgen of the University of Quebec at Montreal. "It affects social reputation, which is difficult to rebuild. ... With physical aggression you have bruises and cuts, but they heal."

Just ask Mariska Burton. The 15-year-old was bullied for 12 years by boys of every stripe, from quiet types to obnoxious jocks, with news spreading that she was fat, ugly and would never have a boyfriend. The bullying reached its peak when she was in Grade 9 and excelled as a mechanic in the male-dominated shop class.

"They talked about my appearance," the Grand Prairie, Alta., teen recalls. "They knew my weakness: I wasn't self-confident."

That old saying about sticks and stones? "Words hurt more than you think," says Ms. Burton, who says she was also physically assaulted. By the end of Grade 9 she was suicidal.

Her high-school principal and teachers finally stepped in and protected her, and she says she's not being bullied any longer. She now participates in programs in her community aimed at reforming bullies.

Other bullying victims have less success. Listowel, Ont., teen Katie Neu experienced similar bullying from the time she was in Grade 2. Taunts ranged from accusations of being adopted when she was younger to slurs of a sexual nature as she matured.

"Guys started harassing me about dating," she says. "I didn't want to date anyone because I wanted to do well in school, so they started a rumour that I was a lesbian."

Although a few teachers tried to help, the favoured response to her complaints was "boys will be boys." When she tried counselling, she was asked what she had done to provoke the bullying.

After barely passing Grade 9, Ms. Neu now does high school online from home, where she can also work on an anti-bullying website she co-founded called bullyingcanada.ca. Her grades have jumped to an average of 76 per cent.

Helping kids like Ms. Neu is a challenge, especially when it comes to indirect aggression - and its increasingly potent handmaiden, cyber-bullying.

While cyber-bullying research remains in its infancy, experts say it takes the tactics of gossip, rumour and exclusion to new depths.

Those who work with victims of cyber-bullying are already seeing how it differs, due to its potentially enormous audience and guarantee of anonymity.

"It's a public humiliation, which makes it 1,000 times worse," says Marshall Korenblum, a

professor at the University of Toronto and the chief psychiatrist at Hincks-Dellcrest, a children's mental-health centre.

Cyber-bullies also avoid a key endpoint in face-to-face bullying: When a victim starts crying, even the meanest kid will let up, Dr. Card says.

"With cyber-bullying, there's no perception that might induce empathy in the aggressor, so they might keep going, not even realizing how much they're hurting this person."

Educators know all forms of bullying are a problem. The Ontario Teachers' Federation cheered the provincial government's plan to add tougher standards to the Safe Schools Act earlier this year.

Researchers say the more they can tease out subtle differences and similarities in gender and other areas, such as ethnicity and sexual orientation, the better equipped society will be to target all forms of aggression.

In her recent work, cyber-bullying expert Faye Mishna, a professor at the University of Toronto's faculty of social work, found that while boys and girls practised online bullying equally, girls were more likely to practise exclusion and spread rumours and boys were more likely to use name-calling. "One size doesn't fit all," she says.

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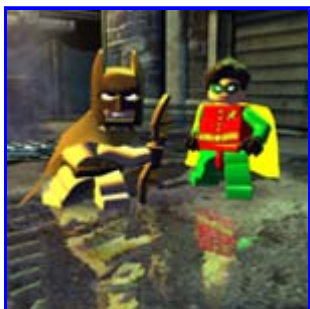
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