Boys who bully peers more likely to engage in sexual harassment

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Boys who engage in homophobic teasing are prone to perpetrating sexual harassment two years later, according to a new study led by Dorothy Espelage, the Gutgsell Endowed Professor of child development in the College of Education at the University of Illinois. Co-authors of the study were graduate student Lisa De La Rue at Illinois, and Kathleen C. Basile and the late Merle E. Hamburger, both of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Adolescent boys who bully peers and engage in homophobic teasing are more likely to perpetrate sexual harassment later on, suggests a new study of middle-school students conducted by researchers at the University of Illinois and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Boys who engage in bullying are 4.6 times more likely to commit sexual harassment two years later, according to the study, published online by the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

Similar links were found among boys who participate in homophobic teasing. Boys who tease peers with gender-based epithets are 1.6 times more likely to perpetrate sexually harassing behaviors two years later, the study found.

More than 970 students at six middle schools in the Midwest were surveyed for the study. The research was supported by a CDC grant to Dorothy L. Espelage, the Gutgsell Endowed Professor of child development in the department of educational psychology at Illinois. The department is a unit within the College of Education.

The findings support the existence of a bully-sexual violence pathway, whereby adolescent bullies who participate in homophobic name-calling are at increased risk for committing sexual harassment over time. The authors of the study – Kathleen C. Basile and the late Merle E. Hamburger, both of the CDC, and Espelage – proposed the existence of such a pathway in a 2012 study.

Sexual harassment – defined in the study as unwanted sexual commentary, sexual rumor spreading and unwanted touching – is widespread among youth, researchers have found. While girls are victimized most frequently, boys can be targets as well.

Significant numbers of gay, lesbian and transgender youth experience homophobic teasing and other forms of sexual harassment, as do other males who are perceived by peers as not conforming to traditional conceptions of heterosexual masculinity, the researchers said.

The researchers believe that some teens sexually harass other students because they are insecure about their sexuality and feel a need to "prove" to peers that they are heterosexual.

The association between bullying and sexual harassment may be indicative of a developmental pathway for some bullies and warrants greater prevention and intervention efforts in schools, said Espelage, who is among the first researchers to investigate these problems in middle-school populations.

Primary prevention efforts may need to begin even earlier than middle school – in late elementary school – and focus on gender-based aggressive acts that precede sexual harassment perpetration, especially homophobic name-calling, Espelage said.

"School officials and parents are uncomfortable about addressing any topics related to sex and often choose to ignore the gender-based name-calling, sexual jokes and other forms of sexual harassment, even though these behaviors are clearly unwanted and distressing to victims," Espelage said. "Most anti-bullying curricula don't cover sexual victimization either, which implies to kids that these behaviors may be normal or OK. Normalizing or dismissing these behaviors creates a hostile environment and perpetuates the cycle of sexual aggression."

Under the provisions of Title IX, the federal law that prohibits discrimination based on sex, schools that receive federal funds can be held liable for damages if they are aware of sexual harassment among students and fail to take action about it.