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The Bully-Sexual Violence Pathway in Early Adolescence

The focus of this ASAP is to highlight the early findings from a three-year study aimed to examine the overlap between bullying and sexual violence victimization and perpetration in five middle schools in a Midwest state. The first two waves of the study have shown that bullying perpetration and homophobic teasing were significant predictors of sexual harassment perpetration over time. While these findings are preliminary, they do suggest that homophobic teasing may be a component of bullying that may increase the potential for sexual harassment later. In other words, a bully perpetrator who also used homophobic teasing may later turn to sexual harassment.

Key Term

This ASAP is reporting preliminary findings of the first two waves in a five wave study. A **wave** simply refers to a point in time where the same groups of students were asked the same questions to track behaviors and/or changes over time.

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What is ASAP?

Applying Science. Advancing Practice. (ASAP) is a series of informational briefs created by CDC's Division of Violence Prevention to help apply scientific knowledge to the practice of primary prevention of violence.

Who is it for?

This series of ASAPs are written for professionals, particularly in youth-serving or educational settings who are engaged in violence prevention activities. Sharing with other community partners is encouraged.

How will it help?

ASAP offers specialized, topic-specific information necessary for successful, sustainable violence prevention efforts.

Key Terms

Words to describe negative behaviors (bullying, homophobic teasing, and sexual harassment) have often been used interchangeably, as if they mean the same things. Though these three behaviors overlap conceptually in many ways, in order to respond appropriately it is important to understand how each of these behaviors is unique. For the purposes of this study, the behaviors were defined as follows:

Bullying: An act of intentionally inflicting injury or discomfort upon another person (through physical contact, through words or in other ways) repeatedly and over time for the purpose of intimidation and/or control.

Homophobic Teasing: Negative attitudes and behaviors directed toward individuals who identify as or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered.

Sexual Harassment: Includes comments, sexual rumor spreading, or groping.

Homophobic teasing in the Bully-Sexual Violence Pathway

The *Bully-Sexual Violence Pathway* is an emerging theory in which bullying perpetration and homophobic teasing are thought to be predictive of sexual violence perpetration over time. The study described in this ASAP is the first step in answering the question of whether bullying in early adolescence might be a precursor to sexual violence perpetration in that the need for control and dominance that underlies bullying is transferred to increasingly escalating forms of aggression. This aggression shapes the relationships of the developing adolescent. Bullying in the form of name-calling and rumor spreading has been associated with homophobic teasing, which can lead to a climate where adolescent peer groups make fun of students who express behaviors that are not consistent with their gender. For example, boys are expected to be masculine and girls are expected to be feminine. When students engage in homophobic teasing, sexual violence perpetration *may* develop. In other words, a bully perpetrator who also uses homophobic teasing may

turn to sexual violence perpetration as opposite-sex attractions develop and when masculine or feminine behavior considered socially acceptable for their gender is promoted.

This research is focused on one kind of sexual violence, sexual harassment, that does not include forcible acts like rape. The findings of this study do not imply that bullying leads to rape. It suggests that bullying and homophobic teasing are associated with later sexual harassment. This association suggests the potential for bullying prevention strategies to address sexual harassment and homophobic teasing more explicitly.

The Study

Over 1300 diverse, Midwestern middle-school students were given a paper-and-pencil survey in the Spring and Fall of 2008. The surveys were given in the classroom. Students were asked questions in developmentally appropriate ways about their own behaviors related to bullying, homophobic teasing, and sexual harassment directed toward other students. (For example – to capture homophobic teasing students read the following sentence: *Some kids call each other names like homo, gay, lesbo, fag or dyke. How many times in the last 30 days did YOU say these words to...* and then were asked how often they said these words to *...a friend, someone you did not like, someone you did not know well, someone you thought was gay, and someone you did not think was gay*.)

The students' well-being was given the highest level of attention. Students were assured that participation in the survey was voluntary and they were given the option of skipping any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. A specially-trained doctoral-level psychology student was present during every survey administration to provide immediate support if students needed it. If a student needed additional support, referrals were given and students were reminded of the available school-based resources.

In the study sample, boys and girls admit to bullying behavior at a similar rate; however more boys reported making sexual comments and homophobic teasing than girls. Girls in the study did show slightly higher rates of spreading sexual rumors.

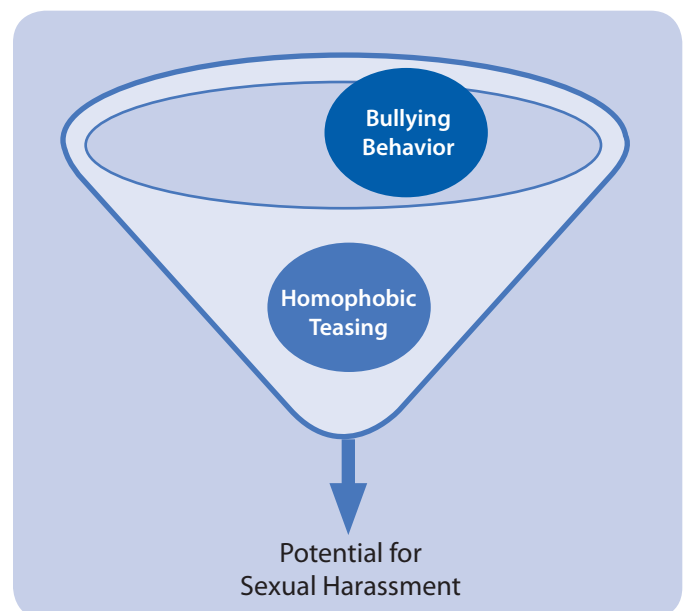
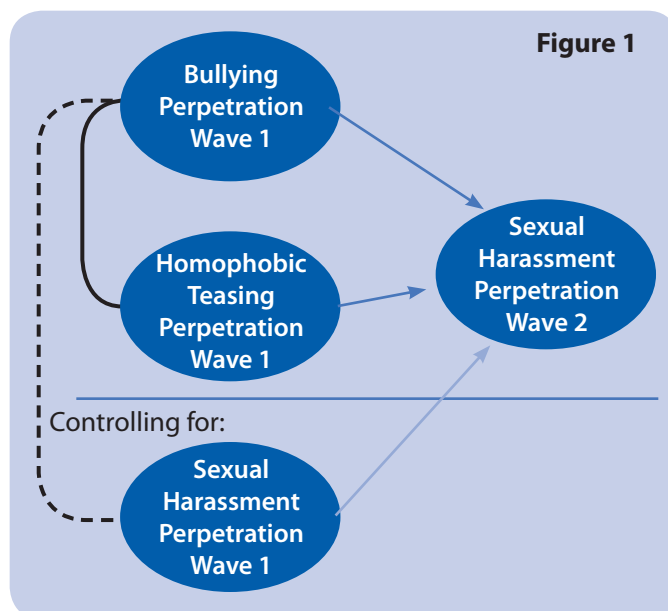
As seen in Figure 1, bullying at Wave 1 significantly predicted sexual harassment at Wave 2 (even after controlling for sexual harassment at Wave 1, which means that bullying is predictive of sexual harassment over and above a student's tendency to sexually harass and is depicted by a dotted line.). Homophobic teasing at Wave 1 was also associated with sexual harassment at Wave 2. These findings suggest that a pathway may exist starting in early middle school where traditional bullying perpetration transforms into more gendered harassment and aggressive behavior, in the form of homophobic teasing and sexual harassment. According to the Bully-Sexual Violence Pathway, as adolescents who perpetrate traditional bullying mature, they increase their use of homophobic teasing. It is suggested that as these youth engage in more interactions with opposite sex peers, they are more likely to perpetrate sexual violence. The current waves of this study confirm a strong association between

bullying perpetration and subsequent sexual harassment perpetration for both boys and girls. It also confirms that homophobic teasing is associated with co-occurring bullying perpetration and later sexual harassment perpetration.

The Bully-Sexual Violence Pathway Theory does not suggest that all youth who engage in bullying behaviors will engage in sexually harassing behaviors. What it does suggest, as demonstrated in Figure 2, is that bullying behavior and homophobic teasing, if not resolved or redirected, may escalate in nature. This escalation may increase the potential for sexually harassing behavior. Modifying existing or planned bullying prevention strategies to address homophobic teasing and sexual harassment may be an opportunity for prevention of this form of sexual violence. With continued analysis of future waves of the study data, we hope to confirm and expand on this Bully-Sexual Violence Pathway.

While it is too soon to offer specific recommendations for practice, it is clear that the early findings point toward a closer look at how bullying prevention programs can – and should – include the issues of sexual harassment and homophobic teasing as part of the strategy.

Figure 1



Changing the Dialogue

Although homophobic teasing and bullying are not the same thing, addressing homophobic teasing explicitly within a bullying prevention curriculum may be a way to build roadblocks in the Bully-Sexual Violence Pathway.

Building prohibition of homophobic teasing into the standard “rules for behavior” between youth will provide a foundation for addressing these negative behaviors as they come up. Calling

youths’ attention to the behavior guidelines whenever someone fails to abide by them, including homophobic teasing, begins to build accountability and empathy. It is up to the adults in the youth-serving organizations to create and model a climate of respect for all students in the classroom so that everyone can learn and enjoy school activities. When adults do not intervene to prevent name-calling, bullying or taunting, young people assume this behavior is acceptable.

When working directly with youth...

If you hear this...

You can say this...

That’s so gay!

- What does that mean?
- You think that means “stupid” but it actually refers to a person’s sexual orientation.
- You might be surprised to know that what you said may hurt someone’s feelings.
- How can something have a sexual orientation?

You throw like a girl.

- Are you saying I am a girl?
- Are you implying girls can’t throw?
- People do have different abilities, but that doesn’t mean you need to be so mean.

You’re such a dyke/fag!

- That type of language is not appropriate.
- We don’t use those words here.

For more information about preventing bullying, homophobic teasing, and sexual harassment:

Division of Violence Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/sexualviolence/resources.html>

Other related CDC resources:

<http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>;

<http://www.cdc.gov/msmhealth/suicide-violence-prevention.htm>;

<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/SexualMinorityYouth/>

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/disparities/pdf/smybackgrounder.pdf>

Non-CDC Related resources:

Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets – <http://www.search-institute.org/developmental-assets/lists>

[http://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(11\)00274-6/abstract](http://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(11)00274-6/abstract)

For more information, please contact:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

1-800-CDC-INFO • www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention • cdcinfo@cdc.gov