

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Why Kids Bully: Because They're Popular

By Belinda Luscombe  
2011

*In this informational text, Belinda Luscombe discusses bullying and popularity. As you read, make note of the details that support how social status, or popularity, affects bullying.*

- [1] Mean kids, mothers tell their wounded young, behave that way because they have unhappy home lives, or feel inadequate,<sup>1</sup> or don't have enough friends or because they somehow lack empathy.<sup>2</sup> But a new study suggests some mean kids actually behave that way simply because they can.

Contrary to accepted ruffian-scholarship,<sup>3</sup> the more popular a middle- or high-school kid becomes, the more central to the social network of the school, the more aggressive the behavior he or she engages in. At least, that was the case in North Carolina, where students from 19 middle and high schools were studied for 4.5 years by researchers at the University of California-Davis.



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Authors Robert Faris and Diane Felmlee interviewed public-school kids seven times over the course of their study, starting when the students were in grades 6, 7 and 8. They asked the students to name their friends and used the data to create friendship maps. They then asked the kids who was unkind to them and whom they picked on, and mapped out the pathways of aggression.

What they found was that only one-third of the students engaged in any bullying at all — physical force, taunts or gossip-spreading — but those who were moving up the school popularity chain bullied more as they went higher. Only when kids reached the very top 2% of the school's social hierarchy or fell into the bottom 2% did their behavior change; these kids were the least aggressive.

- [5] "Seemingly normal well-adjusted kids can be aggressive," says Faris, whose results are published in the new issue of the American Sociological Review. "We found that status increases aggression."

While the authors are not ruling out psychological<sup>4</sup> or background influences as underlying causes of the

1. **Inadequate** (*adjective*) unable to deal with a situation
2. **Empathy** (*noun*) the ability to understand and share the feelings of another
3. studies on violence, aggression, and bullying
4. **Psychological** (*adjective*) related to the mental and emotional state of a person

bullying, they believe that popularity is at least as important. "It's one of the few times I can recall in social sciences where race and family background seem to make very little difference," says Faris. "Those demographic and socioeconomic<sup>5</sup> factors don't seem to matter as much as where the kids are in the school hierarchy."

Faris also found that the more kids cared about popularity, the more aggressive they were. Ironically, that's pointless; hostile behavior did not cause rises in status. "The evidence suggests that overall aggression does not increase status," he says. Then again, it's not whether it works that's important. It's whether the kids believe it works.

Another stereotype the study jabbed at was that males and females bully differently. Boys spread gossip only marginally less often than girls did. And girls were negligibly<sup>6</sup> less physically violent to each other than boys were. Gender-on-gender bullying was more prevalent among girls than boys, but boys were more likely to be hostile toward girls than the other way around.

Gender wasn't entirely a neutral factor, however. If a girl knew a lot of boys, or a boy knew a lot of girls at a school where there wasn't much intermingling of the sexes, those kids' status would go up, presumably because they provided a bridge to contact with potential dates. And, yep, the "gender-bridge" kids, as the study called them, seemed to be more aggressive than others.

- [10] If bullying is actually more of a result of hierarchy than of psychology, Faris believes there might be a more effective solution than trying to change the behavior of the bullies. (Break out the Edmund Burke.)<sup>7</sup> "The majority of kids who witness this, either give it tacit<sup>8</sup> approval or outright encouragement," says Faris. "Those are the ones who give these kids their status. We need to change their minds."

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5. wealth
  6. **Negligibly** (*adverb*) so small that it is unimportant
  7. an Irish statesman and philosopher who believed in having strong principles within societies
  8. **Tacit** (*adjective*) understood or implied without being stated

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What is the central idea of the text?
  - A. The desire for popularity has little impact on determining the likelihood that a student will bully others.
  - B. Students who have friends in the opposite gender provide a bridge for the genders to socialize and are less likely to bully other students.
  - C. Students who are at the very top of the social hierarchy of the school are more likely to bully the students at the very bottom of the hierarchy.
  - D. Popularity matters just as much as psychological and other background factors when determining the likelihood that a student will bully others.
  
2. What connection does the author draw between popularity and aggression?
  - A. There is no relationship between popularity and aggression.
  - B. As a student's popularity grows, their tendency to be aggressive drops.
  - C. As a student's popularity grows, so does their tendency to be aggressive.
  - D. There is a stronger relationship between gender and aggression than popularity and aggression.
  
3. How does the author use paragraph 10 to refine her ideas?
  - A. It shows that part of what forms the relationship between popularity and bullying is the students who witness bullying and do not stop it.
  - B. It emphasizes the issue with "gender bridge" kids and what underlies these students' increased aggression.
  - C. It demonstrates that increased aggression does not actually lead to a rise in status in the social hierarchy.
  - D. It undermines the idea that any student can bully because the majority of kids are witnesses to bullying.
  
4. What is the author's main purpose in the text?
  - A. to question the findings of earlier studies that emphasized the role of popularity in aggression
  - B. to demonstrate that, contrary to prior findings, popularity, aggressiveness and bullying are linked
  - C. to prove that the popular kids are more aggressive because bullying leads to higher levels of popularity
  - D. to offer a different look at bullying from the role of the aggressor, not the victim, in order to understand the causes

5. What does the author want readers to understand about popularity and bullying?

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.**

1. In the text, the author discusses how some kids begin to bully as they become more popular. Can you think of other times when you or someone you know has used their status or power to hurt someone else? How did it make you feel? How do you think it made the other people involved feel?
2. In the text, the author explains how those who witness bullying have a role to play in eliminating it from schools, and that witnessing it and saying nothing might be part of the problem. Have you ever been in a situation where you witnessed something bad and felt either compelled or unable to speak up? Explain your response.