**What Motivates Kids Who Are Bullies?**

**Study Shows Children Who Bully Are Trying to Boost Their Popularity**
By Salynn Boyles

WebMD Health News Reviewed by Laura J. Martin, MD
**WebMD News Archive**

**March 25, 2010** -- Class bullies are often thought of as outcasts whose actions lead to rejection by their peers, but new research shows that many are actually popular kids who raise their social standing by picking on others.

As many as half of all children are bullied at some point during their school years, and at least one in 10 is a frequent target of bullies, surveys suggest.

In an effort to better understand what makes bullies bully, researchers in the Netherlands questioned close to 500 grade-school children between the ages of 9 and 12.

The researchers found that children who bullied were often motivated by a desire to increase their popularity and that they chose generally unpopular victims to avoid losing social status.

Boys who bullied tended to seek the approval of other boys; girls who bullied sought the approval of other girls.

When boys bullied girls they chose victims who were disliked by other boys, with little concern about what the girls thought. Girls did the same when they bullied boys.

**The study appears in the March/April issue of Child Development.**

"Bullies aren't looking to be loved, but they are looking to be noticed," says study researcher Rene Veenstra, PhD, who is a professor of sociology at Holland's University of Groningen. "They are often perceived as very popular."

While the study is not the first to show that bullies seek and often find social acceptance through their actions, it is among the first to show this in preteens, University of Wisconsin professor of educational psychology Amy Bellmore, PhD, tells WebMD.

"It flies in the face of the generally held idea that kids who pick on other kids have poor social skills and low self-esteem," she says. "Even at this young age, bullies tend to be aware of the social hierarchy within the class and are seeking the admiration of specific people."

**How to Reduce Bullying**

Sandra Graham, PhD, who is a professor of psychological studies at University of California, Los Angeles, says the recognition that bullies are often popular should have an impact on interventions aimed at reducing bullying.

She says interventions that seek to raise the self-esteem of children who bully have not been very successful.

"The thought had been that if we made bullies feel better about themselves they wouldn't pick on other kids," she says. "But there is not much evidence that bullies suffer from low self-esteem."

Graham says children who bully seem to benefit from interventions that help them manage their anger.

And interventions aimed not at the bully or the victim, but at the classroom as a whole have also had an impact.

Veenstra tells WebMD that in Finland, bullying decreased by about 40% in elementary schools where just such a program was enacted.

The 20-hour intervention focused on increasing empathy for victims of bullying though discussion, role playing, and watching videos of famous people talking about their own experiences with bullies.