

Bidirectional relationships between bullying, victimization and emotion experience in boys with and without autism

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Boys with autism are more often victims of bullying than their peers without autism. Although we know that emotions are important in this respect, cause and effect is unknown. For example, do adolescents who are bullied develop more fear and shame, or are these emotions the trigger that make them an easy victim for bullies?

The present study examined how anger, fear, guilt, and shame are related with being victimized and bullied over time. Specifically, 169 adolescent boys (43% of whom had autism) were asked to fill out self-report questionnaires on three occasions (over the course of 18 months).

Results showed that more anger and less guilt predicted more bullying over time in boys with and without autism. In turn, boys who bullied also reported more anger and less guilt 18 months later.

Regarding victimization, we found some differences between the groups with and without autism. Boys who reported more anger and fear were indeed bullied more over time. However, this relation with fear was especially strong in boys without autism. In turn, victimization was related to the development of more anger, fear, and shame. Yet, boys with autism reported more anger after being bullied in particular. This suggests a vicious circle: socially unpleasant situations seem to cause uncontrollable arousal in boys with autism, and they might see anger as a way to gain control; which in turn, makes them a target for bullies.