

A Simple Bully Buster: Cooperative Learning

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A recent study suggests how teachers can promote kindness in the classroom, not competition.

As educators become increasingly aware of the prevalence and harm of bullying, there have been major conferences, school-wide programs, and legislation in 47 states intended to curtail it. But a recent study suggests how simple exercises in the classroom, involving just small groups of students at a time, may also have a positive impact.



In the study, researchers gave surveys to 217 students in grades three through five, measuring how much the students liked to cooperate or compete with their peers, and how often they acted with aggression or kindness toward them. The students also reported how often their teachers put them in small groups to complete assignments together, a classroom strategy known as "cooperative learning" because the students have to collaborate with one another in order to get their work done.

The results, published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, suggest that cooperation begets cooperation: Students who participated in more cooperative learning exercises were more likely than their peers to say they liked cooperating with other students, leading the researchers to conclude that "cooperative experiences promote the development of the personality trait of cooperativeness."

What's more, students who engaged in more frequent cooperative learning were also more likely to report performing kind, helpful—or "pro-social"—behaviour toward their classmates.

On the other hand, students who said they liked competing were significantly more likely to act aggressively toward their peers and try to do them harm.

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Students who cooperate with each other are not just more likely to do well on their shared projects, say the researchers. Prior studies suggest that participating in cooperative projects leads to positive relationships and greater psychological health. On the other hand, they report, being competitive is associated with bullying, and bullies tend to be more sad, lonely, and anxious.

Based on their results, the researchers advocate more cooperative learning in classrooms as a way to promote positive behaviours and combat bullying (which they dub "harm-intended aggression").

"Cooperative learning experiences may be used to increase students' cooperative predispositions," they write. "Doing so will increase student engagement in pro-social behaviours and will reduce the incidence of harm-intended aggression among students."

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