



NEWS

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EMBARGO: MAY 4, 2009

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Special needs children left out more, bullied more than other children

MUSC-led study finds special needs children are targets of bullying and are often socially isolated

Charleston, S.C. (May 4, 2009) – Few have emerged from childhood without facing the ire of their peers, whether called an embarrassing name, left out of the “cool” group, or in extreme cases, enduring severe physical, emotional or psychological trauma. In a Medical University of South Carolina-led (MUSC) study presented at the annual meeting of the world’s largest pediatric academic organization, the Pediatric American Societies, researchers found that children with developmental and/or medical special needs are indeed “left out” more than their peers, and are often targets of bullying compared with typically developing children. The study also concluded that special needs children were ostracized, or purposely ignored, more often than other children. . Previous research suggests this treatment can have serious, negative effects on a child’s self-esteem, sense of belonging, control, and meaningful existence and can ultimately result in impaired coping skills, social withdrawal, and mental health problems.

“It is essential that parents, educators, and clinicians regularly ask children with special needs about their social experiences and reassure them that any problems will be effectively addressed,” said lead author Kimberly Twyman, M.D., MUSC Department of Pediatrics. “Most importantly, we should take steps to ensure that these children feel like they ‘matter’. Parents often underreported bullying and ostracism concerns therefore the child or adolescent needs to be asked directly about these problems.”

Additional study authors included Michelle Macias, M.D., and Eve Spratt, M.D., also of MUSC’s Pediatric and Psychiatry departments, and Conway Saylor, Ph.D., Lloyd Taylor, PhD., and Danielle Saia, all of The Citadel’s Psychology department.

Children aged eight to 17 with learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, behavioral/mental health disorders, and cystic fibrosis were compared with control children who had no diagnosis on the Reynolds Bullying and Victimization Scale and a pilot ostracism scale. The authors suggest that further research is needed to explore these findings and the relationship to child adjustment and mental health.

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