Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones: Middle School Students' Perceptions of Bullying

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Research has shown that boys who bully are perceived as more aggressive and receive harsher punishments than girls who bully. In addition, people who bully girls are viewed as more aggressive than those who bully boys. This study explored the interaction between the gender of the bully and the victim, as well as the impact of the type of bullying behavior (physical versus verbal) on the perceived aggression of a bully and the punishment given to him or her. Previous research on inequities in punishment largely has been archival whereas this study is an experiment and manipulated the gender of the victim and the type of bullying. Middle school students (N = 189) were randomly assigned to read one of eight vignettes describing a hypothetical bullying situation. The vignettes varied the type of bullying (i.e., verbal or physical), gender of the aggressor, and gender of the victim. Participants filled out a survey to evaluate the bully's aggression and the punishment they would give to the bully. Participants reported they would give boys that bullied harsher punishments and viewed them as more aggressive than girls that bullied, especially when the victim was a girl and when the bullying was physical in nature. In addition, participants perceived students who engaged in physical bullying to be more aggressive and thought they deserved harsher punishments than students who engaged in verbal bullying. Inequities in perceptions of aggression and punishment need to be addressed.

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