For many victims, bullying does not leave them just with unhappy childhood memories. It can have devastating long term consequences which last into adulthood. Bullying can lead to serious illness, poor social relationships and problems holding down a job. Also of concern is that victims are at greater risk in early adulthood of psychiatric problems such as depression, anxiety and self-harm.

**Mental illness**

Yet the long-term damage caused by bullying has rarely been researched. As part of his research work, Dr Wolke has already shown that being bullied is related to severe mental illness. He has established that victims at the age of 12 are at increased risk of psychotic experiences where people see things that are not there or believe things that are not true. Both children who are picked on and bullies themselves are up to four and a half times more likely to suffer psychotic experiences by the age of 18.

What Dr Wolke and his team set out to understand also was how bullying increased the risk of mental illness in adulthood as well health and social problems. To do this, he carried out joint research with Duke University Medical Center in the US. Together they analysed the experiences of 1,420 children from North Carolina, a state on the Southeastern coast of the US. All these children were part of the Great Smoky Mountains Study, a long term survey which began in 1992. They were interviewed up to the age of 16 about issues including bullying, and most (1,270) were followed up into adulthood. The questions they were asked as adults between the ages of 24 and 26 focused on their mental wellbeing.

More than a quarter (26 percent) of the children said they had been bullied at least once while more than half said they had never suffered this type of abuse. Nearly one in ten admitted they had bullied others- this included bullies only and bully-victims.

**Most at risk groups**

Surprisingly victims were not the most vulnerable to mental health issues, according to the research findings. Instead, bully-victims were the group most at risk in later life. Bully-victims often turn to bullying as a response to being victimised. They were more than six times more likely to smoke heavily, be diagnosed with a serious illness or develop a psychiatric disorder later in life. Bullying also impacted on their work and money prospects-they were more than twice as likely as other people to have difficulty holding down a job or be committed to saving.

The same was true for victims of bullying. These were still the research conclusions after they had taken into account other risk factors for psychiatric disorders. These factors included poverty, abuse and an unstable home life.

As for bullies themselves, they appear to suffer few ill effects such as increased risk of psychological harm in adulthood. This is obviously not welcome news for their victims. Dr Wolke said: “In adulthood they (bullies) appear to have surprisingly healthy outcomes- these are people who can spread fear without having sleepless nights. “They appear to be children with a prevailing anti-social tendency who know how to get under the skin of others, with bully-victims taking the role of their helpers. It is important to find ways.
of removing the need for these children to bully others and to channel their ability to lead into more productive and acceptable activities from sports to clubs. In doing so, it will protect the many children suffering at the hand of bullies.

Bullying and Bullies: The Facts
Bullying is the systematic abuse of power and has been found in all societies. These include modern and ancient civilisations. The most frequent form of abuse children experience is being bullied by people the same age as you or in the same group. It is much higher than abuse carried out by parents or other adults. One in three children report having been bullied at some point in their lives. Bullies themselves do not care if you are poor or rich - bullying is just as common in private schools as it is in state ones. Dr Wolke said: “People think bullying is about inner city schools when in fact a child can always find someone to play with in a larger school. It’s in small village schools that finding a playmate is more difficult.” Bullies also do not care if you are white or black. They pick on the most vulnerable regardless of their social or ethnic background and pick on them repeatedly. The aim for bullies is to gain status and dominance in a pecking order. In the days of the caveman, this type of behaviour may have been life-saving. It secured your survival, reduced stress and increased mating opportunities.

What needs to be done?
This study shows that psychological damage does not go away just because someone grows up and is no longer a victim. In fact, the effects of frequent bullying are as detrimental 40 years later, even more so than being taken into care in childhood. Dr Wolke said it demonstrates that bullying is a public health issue which causes serious long term injury. But doctors hardly ever ask children about their relationships with their peers. Many bullied children suffer in silence and are reluctant to tell parents or teachers. This is down to feelings of shame or fear the bullies will take revenge. A national campaign is needed so parents can spot the signs their child is being bullied. GPs as well as sports and after-school clubs should be included in anti-bullying programmes, not just schools. This way they too can spot signs of bullying and take appropriate action. Dr Wolke said: “Bullying isn’t a harmless rite of passage or a ‘normal’ part of growing up - it casts a long shadow over the lives of victims into adulthood. More effective intervention to prevent bullying could reduce long-term health and social costs for individuals and society.”