

# **Bullying among Adolescents Prevalence, Gender differences and Factorial Relationship with Family Environment and Parental Attachment**

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## **Abstract**

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*Bullying among adolescents poses serious threat to the well-being and mental health of youth. The negative consequence associated with its involvement makes it vital to take into account the underlying variables that can play an integral role in this phenomenon. The present study assessed the prevalence of bullying and aimed at studying the relationship of familial variables namely, family environment and parent attachment (mother and father) with bullying. Moreover, the gender differences in bullying were also examined. The sample comprising of 614 adolescents (323 girls and 291 boys) aged 12–18 years were administered the Illinois Bully Scale, Family Environment Scale, and Inventory of Parents and Peer Attachment. The data was analysed using percentage analysis, independent sample t-test and Factor Analysis. The results revealed that bullying was highly prevalent in the present sample and there existed an inverse relationship of bullying with independence, achievement-orientation and control in terms of family environment among boys. In case of girls, there was a direct structural relationship of bullying with mother and father alienation. The findings also depicted significant gender differences in bullying with adolescent boys being more involved in bullying their peers at schools than adolescent girls. It can be concluded that there seems to be a high prevalence of bullying among adolescents and gender and family context plays an integral part in this phenomenon. Results are further discussed in the light of obtained findings.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a stage characterised by numerous physical, emotional, psychosocial and cognitive changes.

Though an individual becomes accustomed to the rapid transformations during this stage, the continuous changes often create stressful conditions for him. It is the time when a person starts moving beyond his family members in forming social relationships. The interactions with those who are not in the immediate settings of the home become a common scenario. The most important among these are the peers with whom adolescents readily spend greater deal of time and interact regularly. Adolescents seek to establish social status among group members and enjoy popularity. But sometimes, the process of forming healthy social relationships with peers is interrupted due to display of problematic behaviours among adolescents. They have a tendency to explore risky behaviours and get involved in challenging tasks which can bring them into limelight and establish their dominance over their peers. Bullying is one such risky behaviour that has now become a serious matter which needs immediate attention.

The history of bullying can be traced down to 1970s with the initial efforts of Dan Olweus who is honoured with the status of being the pioneer in bullying research. In the words of Olweus (1993), bullying refers to “intentional aggressive

behaviour that is repeated against victim who cannot readily defend him or herself.” This definition highlights four major elements that encompass what constitutes a bullying act. These are: a) intentionality, b) repeated, c) hurtful, and d) power imbalance. It means that bullying is a deliberate act which aims at harming the other person (the victim) repeatedly such that he is not in a position to safeguard himself, i.e., he lacks the power to defend himself. Sometimes, there is confusion between the terms “bullying” and “aggression” but bullying is a sub category of aggression (Olweus, 1993). The element of power imbalance and the repeated nature of bullying contrast it from aggression.

Bullying can be easily understood when classified into traditional and cyber forms. Traditional bullying refers to the offline forms constituting physical, verbal and relational/social bullying. Physical bullying includes behaviours like hitting, kicking, pushing, etc., which can cause bodily hurt. Verbal bullying refers to abusing or name-calling the target repeatedly. Relational or social bullying includes spreading false information about someone or excluding them from social groups. Cyberbullying is a harmful behaviour which a person or a group inflicts purposely and repeatedly by the means of electronic contact towards a victim lacking the power to defend oneself. The present study focuses on the traditional forms of bullying behaviours.

Evidences show that bullying behaviour is not confined to certain cultural settings, but it is rather expanded to various countries around the world (Cook et al., 2009). Bullying is a grave issue concerning Indian youth as well. Findings obtained by an eminent research firm, IMRB (Indian Market Research Bureau) concluded that “Every third child” undergoes bullying in India (The Times of India dated 3 September, 2015). Ramya and Kulkarni (2011) found that 60.4 per cent Indian adolescents reported bullying experiences.

Moreover, studies have consistently reported that gender is an important variable to consider with respect to bullying behaviours. Studies conducted in other countries indicate that significant gender differences exist in bullying behaviours among adolescents (Innamorati et al., 2018; Kokkinos and Kipritsi, 2012). In the Indian context, Malik and Mehta (2016) reported boys are more involved in bullying than girls. It becomes essential to study the gender differences in bullying among Indian adolescents to have a further clearer picture. Also, the high prevalence rates of bullying among youth make it important to look into the factors that can play a significant role in it, specifically in Indian context where there is lack of systematic bullying research. The study of the context of bullying process can help in achieving this aim. The contextual nature of family is a significant factor in this regard. Family environment

and attachment to parents are two of the vital variables to analyse when studying the role of familial factors involved in bullying among adolescents.

Eskisu (2014) reported that high school students engaged in bullying have dysfunctional families and family members who are less supportive towards them. Previous studies also indicate significant relationship between higher peer victimisation and peer aggression and being exposed to domestic violence (Baldry, 2003; Bauer et al., 2006). It has been found that a constant relationship is present between contextual and relational dynamics of family and the involvement in bullying (Nocentini et al., 2019). Moreover, those who are engaged in bullying acts come from families where conflict is common (Stevens et al., 2002).

Apart from family environment, parental attachment is another variable which contributes to problematic behaviours like bullying. Attachment can be defined as the affective bond existing between a child and his primary caregiver. Attachment theory emphasises on the salience of this bond and pronounces that it helps an individual to have effective interactions in future and develop social competence (Bowlby, 1969; Thompson, 2008). Some children receive consistent care and nurturance from parents, while others have to deal with ignorance and insensitivity of parents towards them. Such initial experiences with

the primary caregivers guide the development of internal working models in them, which are the set of rules that emerge out of early attachment experiences and provide guidance to process the social information and future exchanges.

Positive internal working models are formed in children who have experienced positive and consistent behaviour of parents. These children develop secured attachment with parents and see themselves and other people as worthy, while those whose parents have been rejecting and insensitive develop negative internal working models. Such children regard themselves and others as unworthy and become insecurely attached to parents.

Researchers have reported that lower trust and communication and higher alienation with mother and father is linked with bullying perpetration (Nikiforou et al., 2013). Studies highlight significant association between poor quality attachment and bullying (Özen and Aktan, 2010). Students having low quality parental attachment have more likelihood of bullying perpetration when compared to those having greater attachment (Walden and Beran, 2010).

### **NEED AND IMPORTANCE**

The high prevalence rate of bullying among Indian adolescents along with its negative impact highlights the need to study this issue extensively. Also, the contextual factors play

a paramount role in adolescent functioning and social influences. Family environment and parental attachment are such contextual variables that are important to study in relation to bullying behaviour. Healthy familial environment and parental bonding provide buffer against maladaptive behaviours like bullying. However, there is still lack of research in the Indian context that have focused on this upsurging problematic behaviour. In view of this, the present study was conducted to assess the clarity of the relationship of family environment and parental attachment in bullying behaviour.

### **OBJECTIVES**

In light of the above studies, following objectives were framed:

1. To study the prevalence of bullying in the total sample.
2. To assess the gender differences among adolescents involved in bullying.
3. To assess the relationship of family environment and attachment with parents (mother and father) with bullying involvement.

### **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

#### **Sample**

The present study comprised of sample size of 614 adolescents (291 boys and 323 girls). The age range was 12 to 18 years. The data was acquired from different schools of Jammu city (Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir). Convenient sampling

technique was employed for data collection. The tests were conducted in a group of 20–25 participants. Along with the information obtained using various psychological tools, relevant demographic details related to the participants were also collected. It includes educational qualification and sex. In order to collect information genuinely, the participants were provided with the choice of not mentioning their names.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL TOOLS USED**

#### **1. Illinois Bully Scale (Espelage and Holt, 2001):**

Illinois Bully Scale comprises of 18 items which analyses bullying and fighting behaviour among participants. The 18 items are spread over three subscales which are the bully subscale (9 items), victim subscale (4 items) and fight subscale (5 items). Only bully subscale (9 items) was used in the present study. It assesses the frequency of bullying behaviour among participants in the past one month. The higher score on bully subscale indicates more self-reported bullying perpetration.

#### **2. Family Environment Scale (Moos and Moos, 1986):**

The Family Environment Scale evaluates perception of people with respect to their family environments. There are 90 true/false statements assessing three broad dimensions: Relationship dimension, the Personal Growth dimension, and the System

Maintenance dimension. There are further 10 subscales underlying these dimensions which include Cohesion (COH), Expressiveness (EXP), Conflict (CON), Independence (IND), Achievement orientation (AO), Intellectual-cultural orientation (ICO), Active-recreational orientation (ARO), Moral-religious emphasise (MRE), Organization (ORG) and Control (CTL). The participants have to mark “TRUE” or “FALSE” for each statement with respect to their family. The scoring is done using a template.

#### **3. Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden and Greenberg, 1987):**

It is a self-report inventory containing 75 items that measure respondent's attachment quality with their mother, father and peers (25 items each). There are three dimensions which assess the quality of attachment, namely trust, communication and alienation. In the current study, only mother attachment and father attachment items were used. The participants mark their responses on a five-point scale (almost never or never true = 1 to almost always or always true = 5). The scores range from 25-125, with higher score indicating more secure attachment.

These tools were adopted and used in their original form as they have been employed on Indian adolescent population widely in the past by

several authors (Gupta, 2012; Negi and Aleem, 2014).

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Before the administration of the psychological tests, permission was sought from the participants and the school authorities. They were briefed about the purpose of the present research study. Participants were assured that the information collected was purely for research purpose and would be kept confidential. Prior to the collection of data, focus was laid on building a good rapport with the participants. The questionnaires were administered in the free period. Any doubt or difficulty in grasping the items was cleared with complete cooperation. Separate instructions were provided for each test based on the manual.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 20 of IBM was used for data analysis purpose. Prevalence of bullying was calculated for the total sample. Further, data of those involved in bullying in the previous 30 days was subjected to independent sample t-test to analyze the gender differences among those engaged in bullying. Factor Analysis was run separately for boys and girls to examine the factorial relationship of bullying and familial variables studied in the current investigation.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

To fulfill the first aim of the study, prevalence rate of bullying was

estimated among the sample of 614 (291 boys and 323 girls) adolescents. Those who reported “never” in the bullying measure were regarded as being uninvolved in bullying perpetration. It was found that about 13 per cent (78) adolescents reported that they were non participative in any kind of bullying activity. On the other hand, about 87 per cent (536) adolescents were found to be engaged in bullying their peers in the past one month. The high prevalence rate of bullying indicated in the present study signifies that it is a cause of major concern among Indian adolescents. Several authors previously have also reported bullying as highly prevalent among adolescents in India (Malhi et al., 2014; Ramya and Kulkarni, 2011). It needs immediate attention of the concerned authorities as well of the parents of such students. Lack of strict rules at school and less seriousness of school authorities can be the possible reasons of high prevalence of bullying in the present sample. Moreover, adolescents look forward to gain recognition in their friends circle. It is conceivable that teenagers may engage in problematic behaviours like bullying their peers to establish their dominant position among peer groups.

The second aim of the study was to study the gender differences in bullying among adolescent boys and girls. Since 78 adolescents reported no participation in bullying, they were excluded from further analysis. Thereby, the sample consisting of

576 adolescents was subjected to independent sample t-test to meet the second objective. Table 1 shows the values of mean, S.D., and t-ratio for bullying among adolescent boys and girls. The findings infer that there exists significant gender differences in bullying perpetration among boys and girls. Boys significantly differed from girls on bullying ( $t = 5.019$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The values of the mean scores further makes this difference more clear indicating that adolescent boys are more frequently involved in bullying when compared to adolescent girls. Similar results have been reported in the Indian context by Malik and Mehta (2016).

Boys in the present sample have been found to bully more than girls. There can be possible explanations of the obtained findings. Gender role socialisation viewpoint can explain greater likelihood among boys to bully others compared to girls. Typically, girls are raised to provide nurturance and care and display of aggression is discouraged in them. On the other hand, boys are raised to be dominant and voice out disagreement more openly than girls. There seems to be a possibility that adolescent boys

engage in bullying as efforts to have an authority over others and show themselves in more powerful position, which girls usually avoid. Girls are more conscious of their social image. Also, girls refrain from reporting such incidents.

To meet the third objective of the study, factor analysis was run. A separate factor analysis procedure was run for boys and girls. The factors in both the cases were treated with varimax rotation. The factor loadings were elucidated with the cutoff point of  $\pm 0.40$  and above. Table 2 shows the results of factor analysis for the boys sample ( $N = 264$ ). For boys, five factors were procured which accounted for 54.06 per cent variance.

### Factor I

There are significant positive loadings in Factor I on the variable of parent attachment, i.e., mother's trust ( $r = 0.777$ ), mother's communication ( $r = 0.721$ ), father's trust ( $r = 0.850$ ) and father's communication ( $r = 0.771$ ). Boys having responsive and understanding parents who satisfy their emotional needs shared healthy interactive patterns with them and good quality of communication.

**Table 1**

**Indicating Values of Means, Standard Deviations and t-Ratio of Scores for Bullying among Adolescent Boys and Girls**

Group	Bullying		
	Mean	S.D.	t-Ratio
Adolescent Boys (N=264)	6.75	5.15	5.019**
Adolescent Girls (N=272)	4.79	3.75	

\*\* Significant at 0.01 level

They shared secured attachment with both their parents. Supportive findings have been reported by researchers previously (Nikiforou et al., 2013; Walden and Beran, 2010).

### Factor II

There are significant factor loadings in Factor II on the variables of family environment and parent attachment, i.e., cohesion ( $r = -0.435$ ), conflict ( $r = 0.642$ ), mother's alienation ( $r = 0.657$ ) and father's alienation ( $0.675$ ).

Adolescent boys who are emotionally detached from both their father and mother due to the inconsistency of response behaviour on the parent's part belong to families where they receive less support and assistance from the members of the family. Alienation with both the parents is also related to aggressiveness and display of anger in the family. Adolescent boys who feel alienated with their mothers also tend to experience the same with their fathers.

**Table 2**  
**Showing Results of Factor Analysis for Boys (N = 264)**

VARIABLES	FACTORS					
	I	II	III	IV	V	h <sup>2</sup>
BULLY	-	-	-	-0.547	-	0.344
COH	-	-0.435	-	-	-	0.434
EXP	-	-	-	-	0.808	0.738
CON	-	0.642	-	-	-	0.502
IND	-	-	-	0.491	0.508	0.533
AO	-	-	-	0.644	-	0.497
ICO	-	-	0.493	-	-	0.444
ARO	-	-	0.694	-	-	0.543
MRE	-	-	0.758	-	-	0.634
ORG	-	-	-	-	-	0.438
CNT	-	-	0.436	0.553	-	0.524
MT	0.777	-	-	-	-	0.641
MC	0.721	-	-	-	-	0.564
MA	-	0.657	-	-	-	0.466
FT	0.850	-	-	-	-	0.734
FC	0.771	-	-	-	-	0.654
FA	-	0.675	-	-	-	0.501
<b>Eigen Value</b>	<b>3.522</b>	<b>1.912</b>	<b>1.435</b>	<b>1.243</b>	<b>1.080</b>	
<b>Value% of Variance</b>	<b>20.715</b>	<b>11.249</b>	<b>8.441</b>	<b>7.310</b>	<b>6.352</b>	<b>54.06</b>

### **Factor III**

Factor III has positively loaded on the variables of family environment, i.e., intellectual-cultural orientation ( $r = 0.493$ ), active-recreational orientation ( $r = 0.694$ ), moral-religious emphasis ( $r = 0.758$ ) and control ( $r = 0.436$ ). It depicts that adolescent boys whose families promote active participation in recreational exercises also focus upon social affairs like politics, culture, societal events, etc. Moreover, the emphasis on following rules is linked to importance laid on moral and religious activities.

### **Factor IV**

Factor IV has loaded significantly on the variables of bullying and family environment. This suggests that bullying behaviour among boys is significantly related to their family environment. The focus of this study is largely concerned with the findings of this factor. As shown in Table 1, there are significant loadings on bullying ( $r = -0.547$ ), independence ( $r = 0.491$ ), achievement-orientation ( $r = 0.644$ ) and control ( $r = 0.553$ ). It can be inferred that boys who belong to families where less autonomy is promoted are likely to bully others. It could be that such boys look out for ways where they can exercise their control over others outside their families. Also, family environment where more control is exerted in terms of adhering to proper rules and regulations are less involved in bullying activities. A possible explanation for this could be that

they learn the importance of following rules and norms from their family members since childhood which they continue in the school premises. They have an understanding of the consequences of disobeying the rules in school which may land them in trouble. Moreover, boys engaged in bullying have low levels of achievement orientation. They lack the competitive spirit which is probably due to their greater focus on unhealthy activities like bullying. Such activities take up most of their time and divert them from other important goals regarding education and career.

Family lays down the foundation of social interaction for an individual. A positive family environment fosters healthy peer interactions. Recent studies have revealed that lack of support from families, poor communication, low levels of warmth and care are linked to bullying among youth (Eskisu, 2014). When compared to adolescents who are victimised due to bullying or are rather non participative in bullying acts, those who bully have been found to report negative perceptions pertaining to their parents (Mohebbi et al., 2016). Overall, perpetrators of bullying have negative perceptions regarding their families.

### **Factor V**

There are significant positive loadings in Factor V on the variable of expressiveness ( $r = 0.808$ ) and independence ( $r = 0.508$ ) suggesting independence is prompted among

families of boys where family members are encouraged to express themselves freely to state their viewpoints.

Table 2 shows the results of factor analysis for girls sample (N = 272). For girls, five factors were procured which accounted for 56.16 per cent variance.

### **Factor I**

Similar to boys, Factor I in girls has loaded positively on the variable of parent attachment, i.e., mother's trust ( $r = 0.786$ ), mother's communication ( $r = 0.770$ ), father's trust ( $r = 0.808$ ) and father's communication ( $r = 0.779$ ). Since both trust and communication are the dimensions which highlight secured emotional bond with the caregiver, they are positively associated. Girls having healthy attachment bond with mothers also share the same with their fathers.

### **Factor II**

Factor II in girls has loaded significantly on the variables of family environment. These include conflict ( $r = -0.496$ ), intellectual-cultural orientation ( $r = 0.650$ ), active-recreational orientation ( $r = 0.721$ ) and organisation ( $r = 0.556$ ). This indicates that families of girls where dispute is a common scenario and conflicts take place openly, there is less likelihood of attention being paid to social, cultural, political, intellectual and recreational activities. The conflicting nature of relationships among family members

possibly leaves them less time to focus on other aspects of life which are of more social and personal concern. They hardly spend time on activities which encourage enjoyment and relaxation. They remain stuck in a vicious circle of conflicts that takes place among familial relationships.

### **Factor III**

There are significant positive loadings on Factor III for the variables of bullying ( $r = 0.447$ ), mother's alienation ( $r = 0.804$ ) and father's alienation ( $r = 0.760$ ). The aim of the study is more focused on the findings of this factor. Alienation is the dimension of attachment which signifies insecure attachment or poor attachment bond with the parents. The results depict that girls who are likely to bully others are emotionally detached from both the parents. It is well-known that positive emotional bond with the primary caregivers lays down the framework for later social relationships. Adolescent girls who feel alienated with their parents tend to carry the negative schemas about social interactions in subsequent relationships feeling that others are unavailable for them. Such schemas persist and are clearly visible when they engage in unhealthy peer interactions like bullying perpetration.

Supportive findings are reported by Nikiforou et al. (2013) who found that girls involved in bullying reported higher levels of father's alienation. Similar findings have also

**Table 2**  
**Showing Results of Factor Analysis for Girls (N = 272)**

VARIABLES	FACTORS					
	I	II	III	IV	V	h <sup>2</sup>
BULLY	–	–	0.447	–	–	0.418
COH	–	–	–	–	0.471	0.440
EXP	–	–	–	–	0.763	0.636
CON	–	–0.496	–	–	–	0.477
IND	–	–	–	–	0.489	0.468
AO	–	–	–	0.718	–	0.573
ICO	–	0.650	–	–	–	0.514
ARO	–	0.721	–	–	–	0.528
MRE	–	–	–	0.572	–	0.426
ORG	–	0.556	–	–	–	0.421
CNT	–	–	–	0.681	–	0.566
MT	0.786	–	–	–	–	0.662
MC	0.770	–	–	–	–	0.699
MA	–	–	0.804	–	–	0.702
FT	0.808	–	–	–	–	0.690
FC	0.779	–	–	–	–	0.667
FA	–	–	0.760	–	–	0.660
<b>Eigen Value</b>	<b>3.858</b>	<b>1.850</b>	<b>1.506</b>	<b>1.274</b>	<b>1.060</b>	
<b>Value% of Variance</b>	<b>22.695</b>	<b>10.885</b>	<b>8.860</b>	<b>7.494</b>	<b>6.233</b>	<b>56.16</b>

been obtained by Walden and Beran (2010) who concluded that high levels of parental alienation reported by students is related with high frequency of bullying experiences. Studies have consistently found that insecure attachment with parents is associated negatively with bullying (Özen and Aktan, 2010).

#### **Factor IV**

This factor loaded positively on the subscales of family environment, i.e.,

achievement-orientation ( $r = 0.718$ ), moral-religious emphasis ( $r = 0.572$ ) and control ( $r = 0.681$ ). Adolescent girls whose families centre on obeying regulations give more importance to moral and religious practices. This may be because they follow the traditional norms. Such families also promote competitive spirit.

#### **Factor V**

This factor has also loaded positively on the subscales of family environment

which include cohesion ( $r = 0.471$ ), expressiveness ( $r = 0.763$ ) and independence ( $r = 0.489$ ). Supportive family members encourage free expression of personal views and openness in the family. They also promote autonomy and assertiveness among family members.

### **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The current study was undertaken to take into account the prevalence of bullying along with analysing the familial variables that are associated with bullying in adolescents. Gender differences were also analysed. It was found that bullying is highly prevalent in the present sample. Boys were more engaged in bullying than girls. Family environment is significantly associated with bullying among boys. In case of girls, poor quality attachment with both the parents is related to their participation in bullying. The findings obtained highlight the need to address the issue of bullying among Indian adolescents with immediate action. Counsellors in schools can work in coordination with the concerned school authorities to deal with the problem of bullying. Anti-bullying programs should be promoted at schools. Also, parents should focus on fostering healthy attachment with their children and provide them with nurturing and

supportive family environment. Workshops can be conducted at the school level for this purpose to make parents and family members aware about the crucial stage of adolescence and its challenges and how they can play an important role in healthy adolescent development.

### **LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

It is pertinent to acknowledge the limitations of a research study so that improvements can be made in future investigations. The present study did not examine the peer victimisation aspect of bullying behaviours. Moreover, the data was collected for only offline forms of bullying and cyber bullying was not taken into consideration. Cyberbullying and factors contributing to it should also be studied in subsequent studies to provide a more comprehensive picture of this new type of bullying. Also, self-report measures were used for data collection. Techniques other than self-report measures can be used in studying bullying. Other sources of information like parents, teachers and peer nominations should also be examined for bullying research since these can also provide valuable data. Regardless of these limitations, the present study is a significant contributor in growing bullying literature in India.

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