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# CHILDHOOD BULLYING: AN INVESTIGATION OF FAMILIAL LEVEL PREDICTORS

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**Abstract:** *The existence of bullying in childhood has received national attention. Often, this bullying occurs at school, where many peer-to-peer social relationships are formed. However, familial-level variables may also play a role in children experiencing bullying. This study investigates the role of these familial level variables, specifically how they correlate with childhood bullying. 5th grade data from the United States Early Head Start Longitudinal Research Study was utilized for this manuscript. Familial level variables studied were externalizing behaviors, parental drinking, parental monitoring, and father-child relationship reported by the child. The outcome variable of this study was the amount of bullying 5th graders experienced. Results suggested that familial-level variables such as parental monitoring and the father-child relationship play a significant role in decreasing the likelihood of a child experiencing bullying in elementary school. Implications for practitioners such as social workers and opportunities for future research are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Bullying; Father-Child Relationship; Family Relationship*

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## **Importance of Parent-Child Relationship**

Research suggests that parents play a significant role in the psychological well-being of their children (Papadaki & Giovazolias, 2013; Khaleque, 2013). The more warmth and affection a child receives from his or her parents, the more likely the child is to have an optimistic worldview and increased levels of independence, self-esteem, self-adequacy, emotional stability, and emotional responsiveness (Khaleque, 2013; Moran et al., 2018). Emerging research also suggests that fathers, in particular, play an essential role in their children's behavior. Papadaki and Giovazolias (2013) suggest that a father can positively impact their child's behaviors. The father may work as a protective factor even if the child perceives the other parent's behavior as rejecting. While this supports the link between high-quality parent-child relationships and positive outcomes in children, the inverse is also evident in the research base, which suggests that low-quality parent-child relationships yield adverse outcomes (i.e., low self-esteem, self-adequacy, emotional instability, and low emotional responsiveness; Alternburger & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2020; Marcone et al., 2020).

## **Parent-Child Relationship and Aggression**

Humans expect to receive positive responses and acceptance. Children can develop behaviors that reflect psychological maladjustment when that need is not fulfilled through the parent-child relationship (Papadaki & Giovazolias, 2013; Trumello, 2021). In relationships where parents provide little warmth and affection to their children, the children tend to show aggression and hostility (Khaleque, 2013; Trumello, 2021). In a study of nine to ten-year-old children, researchers identified that a father's affection and parent-child interaction are associated with aggressive tendencies in children (Dewi et al., 2015). This influence can carry on through late adolescence, as demonstrated by a study of 144 undergraduate students who reported high levels of attachment anxiety with their fathers, correlating with an increased engagement in relational aggression (Williams & Kennedy, 2012).

Psychological control also has a significant role in a child's development. A study by Murray and colleagues (2014) suggested that psychological control is indicative of parenting, which may hinder the normal development

of a child's autonomy. Children who experience high levels of psychological control from one parent while having a low-quality relationship with the other tend to exhibit more aggressive behaviors (Bai et al., 2020; Murray et al., 2014). More plainly put, the fashion in which a parent interacts with a child influences their development. In addition to parental interaction, caretaking techniques may influence the child's development.

A vital part of the parent-child relationship is the effect parental monitoring plays on development. Parental monitoring can be thought of as a parent or guardian knowing when, where, and with whom their child is spending time (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Specifically, research suggests that parental monitoring can lead to fewer negative peer relationships and fewer externalizing behaviors (Bortolo, 2022; Li, Fieffelman, & Stanton, 2000; Low & Espelage, 2014). However, the literature base is split on the role that parental monitoring plays in children who bully and experience bullying (Espelage et al., 2012; Low & Espelage, 2014; Veenstra et al., 2005). The current study was conducted to explain better the interplay of parental monitoring and how it affects children's bullying behavior.

## **Parent-Child Relationship and Bullying**

The degree to which a parent is involved in their child's life has been inversely correlated with the likelihood of their child participating in bullying activity (Georgiou & Fanti, 2010; McClain, 2020). Connors-Burrow and colleagues (2009) classify bullies as children who are aggressive, dominant, and impulsive. Theoretically, it is possible that the aggressive behavior produced by a father having a poor relationship with their child can be associated with an increase in bullying behavior. Christie-Mizell and colleagues (2011) suggest that children who perceive that they have spent adequate time with their parents are less likely to be at risk for behavioral problems. When children felt as if they did not spend enough time with their fathers because of their work hours, they were more at risk for bullying behavior (Christie-Mizell et al., 2011). Studies have also demonstrated that the more parent-child conflict is present in the home, the more children are likely to engage in bullying behavior (Georgiou & Stavrindes, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).

There is a negative correlation between child disclosure and bullying. When a child chooses to disclose more information about school with a

parent, this disclosure acts as a protective factor against peer aggression (Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2013). The more positive the relationship a child has with their parents, the greater the likelihood they will talk with their parents about what is going on at school. This positive relationship likely decreases the risk of the child engaging in bullying (Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2013; Pinquart, 2017).

## **Parent Alcohol Problems and Bullying**

A myriad of factors can create a parent-child relationship that fosters bullying behaviors during child development. Previous research has suggested a relationship between parent alcoholism and bullying by their offspring (Cheng & Lo, 2023; Eiden et al., 2010). A study conducted by Eiden and colleagues (2010) consisted of 162 families, both with and without alcohol problems. Results suggested a direct relationship between the presence of a father's alcoholism and heightened levels of peer bullying in their offspring. Researchers have also identified the risk for aggression and bullying in children who have parents with alcohol problems. These negative impacts of parental alcohol problems begin as early as the toddler years (ages 2-3) and continue to rise through elementary, middle, and high school (Edwards et al., 2006). Since the risk for aggression and bullying starts at such a young age, introducing moderating factors like forming a healthy relationship with other strong male figures in their lives can reduce the identified risks.

## **Parent-Child Relationship, Depression, and Bullying**

Research suggests that the parent-child relationship can positively and negatively impact bullying experienced by children (Cheng & Lo, 2023; Moran et al., 2018; Papadaki & Giovazolias, 2013). In a questionnaire completed by 201 5th and 6th-grade students, researchers found that maternal rejection was related to bullying others and victimization of self through the mediating effect of emerging symptoms of depression (Papadaki & Giovazolias, 2013). If the student reported high paternal acceptance, the negative effect that their mother's rejection had on them was moderated, suggesting that the parent-child relationships can serve as a buffer to negative life occurrences. Parental acceptance was correlated with a decrease in the student's depressive symptoms and the likelihood

of bullying others (Papadaki & Giovazolias, 2013). This idea furthers the notion of how crucial the positive impacts of a father-child relationship are regarding the child's behavior and emotional stability.

## **Purpose of Present Study**

Bullying in schools is an issue that is receiving increased attention from the public. Children's behaviors in school are often initially learned in the home. However, minimal research exists to identify the interplay of familial-level variables and how they relate to bullying. This study will look to answer the following research question: *How do familial level variables relate to the likelihood of a child experiencing bullying in elementary school?*

## **Methods**

### *National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project*

This study used data collected from the United States Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSRE), funded by the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF). The EHSRE project is a cross-site national study with the primary objective to investigate and assess the impacts of Early Head Start (EHS) on family and child outcomes. Families participating in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project were recruited from July 1996 through September 1998. Families who applied for Early Head Start services were screened to determine if they qualified for the program. Each Early Head Start site throughout the United States was allowed to determine its criteria, with income (using the federal poverty guidelines) as the primary factor in determining eligibility. A total of 3,001 families were initially recruited for the study (Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 2002). Data for the current study were collected when the child entered the 5th grade.

### *Participants*

Children who had data at the 5th-grade level for all measures utilized for this analysis were included in this study ( $n=598$ ). Of these children, 53.8% were female and 46.2% were male. These children were from the following ethnic groups: 36.7% white or Caucasian, 34.3% African American, 22.2% Hispanic, and 6.9% listed as "other." The mean age of caregivers in this study (typically mothers) was 34.4 years old (see Table 1 for more information).

**Table 1: Demographic Variables of Families Participating in Study**

| Variable         | 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Total(%) |
|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Child            | 598                            |
| Gender           |                                |
| Male             | 322 (53.8)                     |
| Female           | 276 (46.2)                     |
| Ethnicity        |                                |
| White            | 219 (36.7)                     |
| African Am.      | 205 (34.3)                     |
| Hispanic         | 133 (22.2)                     |
| Other            | 41 (6.9)                       |
| Caregiver        |                                |
| Age of Caregiver |                                |
| Mean age         | 34.4 years                     |
| Range of ages    | 23 to 58 years                 |

*Source: own compilation*

*Measures*

**Peer Bullying Scale.** The outcome variable for the study was the Peer Bullying Scale (PBS; Loeber et al., 1989). The PBS consists of four items asking children how often they have experienced bullying. Children respond to questions on a 1-4 scale where 1 = Never, 2 = Once or twice, 3 = A few times, and 4 = Many times. The four questions for this assessment ask how often the child has been picked on, hit by peers, had things taken, or purposely been left out at school or in their neighborhood. For this analysis, items were summed to indicate an overall bullying experience. Overall scores range from 4 – never experiencing bullying, to 16 – experiencing bullying many times. Authors reported internal consistency for this scale is  $\alpha = .62$ . This scale was completed by each reporting child.

**Parental Monitoring Subscale.** Children were asked about the extent to which their parents monitor their behavior utilizing items from Kerr and Stattin’s (2000) assessment. This assessment uses a 4-point Likert scale where 4 = Always or almost always, 3 = A lot of the time, 2 = Some of the time, and 1 = Almost never or never. Three questions were utilized to

assess how much parents monitor their child's behaviors: "Do your parents know what you do during your free time", "Do your parents know who you have as friends during your free time", and "Do your parents know what you spend your money on?" Scores were summed to gauge overall parental monitoring and ranged from 12 – parents highly monitor their child, to 3 – parents minimally monitor their child.

**Child Reported Relationship with Father.** An assessment of the child's relationships with their father figure was created from the larger EHRSE study. This assessment was created using a Likert scale from "4 – very true" "1 – not true at all." In addition, children could respond with "Don't know" or not answer at all. A total of 8 questions were included in this scale and were answered by the child. A child who answered all of the questions scores could range from 32 (meaning a positive relationship with their father) to 8 (signifying a less positive relationship with their father; (Administration for Children and Families, 2009).

**Parental Alcohol Use.** The primary parent was asked three questions about their alcohol use. These questions were derived from the World Health Organization's Composite International Diagnostic Interview (Kessler et al., 1998). In the initial questions the term, "alcoholic drink" is defined as "a bottle of beer, a wine cooler, glass of wine, shot of liquor, or a mixed drink". Participants were then asked the largest number of drinks they had consumed in any single day over the past year. The next question the participants were asked was if their drinking had caused work or relationship problems and if a family member or loved one had requested the primary parent decrease their drinking. Higher scores on this measure were indicative of problem drinking.

**Child Externalizing Behaviors.** The Child Behavior Checklist – Externalizing Scale (CBCL) was utilized to identify externalizing behaviors (Achenbach, 1991). The CBCL/4-18 was normed on a nationally representative sample of 2,368 children. Test-retest reliability was reported between  $r = .95$  to  $r = .9$  (Achenbach, 1991). Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency has been reported between  $r = .72$  to  $r = .96$ . Support for the construct validity was also supported in the CBCL by correlating its corresponding scales with already established measures (Achenbach, 1991). Correlations between the scales of each measure ranged from  $r = .59$  to  $r = .89$  (Achenbach, 1991). Possible externalizing behavior scores ranged from 0-22. The child's primary parent filled out this questionnaire.

## Results

### *Regression*

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the role that reported familial relationship plays in bullying incidents in elementary school. In addition, we wanted to identify other variables that may contribute to the increase in children's bullying incidents. (see Table 2). To this end, the variables included in the regression equation for this study were the child's reported levels of parental monitoring, parental alcohol use, the child's externalizing behaviors, and the child's reported relationship with their father. This secondary, longitudinal dataset helps address our hypotheses because the sample from which it is drawn is nationwide and has had consistent data gathered over a long period. A regression analysis was chosen as it allowed us to look at the interplay of our selected predictors and outcome variables within the context of our dataset. This model accounted for 11% of the variance in the Peer Bullying Scale and was statistically significant,  $F(4, 599) = 27.463$ ,  $p < .001$ . Variance inflation factors (VIF) were examined to assess the likelihood of multicollinearity influence. VIF values exceeding five are considered evidence of collinearity (Montgomery et al., 2001). No values exceeded 1.2.

**Table 2: Correlations for Coefficients for Predictor and Outcome Variables (N = 598)**

|                               | Bullying Scale | Externalizing Behaviors | Parental Alcohol Use | Child Reported Rel. W/ Father | Parental Monitoring Scale |
|-------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Bullying Scale                | --             | -.20***                 | .11**                | -.26***                       | -.18***                   |
| Externalizing Behaviors       |                | --                      | .18***               | -.22***                       | -.09*                     |
| Parental Alcohol Use          |                |                         | --                   | -.06                          | -.06                      |
| Child Reported Rel. W/ Father |                |                         |                      | --                            | -.31***                   |
| Parental Monitoring Scale     |                |                         |                      |                               | --                        |

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

All variables in the study were significantly related to the Peer Bullying

Scale (PSID) at the  $p < .001$  significance level (see Table 3). The only exception to this statement was “parental alcohol use”, which was significantly related to the PSID at the  $p < .05$ . Of note, “peer bullying” was significantly, positively related to “child externalizing behavior” ( $B = .05, p < .001$ ) and parental alcohol use ( $B = .28, p < .001$ ). In addition, “child reported relationship with dad” ( $B = -.88, p < .001$ ) and “child reported parental monitoring” ( $B = .51, p < .001$ ) were related negatively to “peer bullying.”

**Table 3: Predictors of 5th Grade Bullying (N = 598)**

| <i>Variable</i>                          | <i>Unstandardized<br/>B</i> | <i>Standardized<br/>B</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>P</i> |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------|----------|
| Bullying Scale                           | 10.86                       |                           | 13.809   | .000     |
| Externalizing Behaviors                  | .05                         | .13                       | -3.32    | .001     |
| Parental Alcohol Use                     | .284                        | .08                       | 1.99     | .047     |
| Child Reported Relationship w/<br>Father | -.88                        | -.19                      | -4.50    | .000     |
| Parental Monitoring Scale                | -.51                        | -.12                      | 2.85     | .004     |

## Discussion

The role of this study was to investigate familial-level variables that may contribute to the likelihood that a child experiences bullying in elementary school. The results of the analysis suggest that all four variables investigated were significantly related to children reporting that they had experienced bullying at the time of reporting. Specifically, related to parent-child interaction, it was identified that a child who reported a negative relationship with their father was also more likely to report having experienced bullying. The role of the mother-child relationship in fostering positive outcomes has been consistently stated in the literature base. However, the role that fathers play has been less researched. These findings support the notion that a positive father-child relationship also has far-reaching implications for children’s development and social interactions outside the home. In addition to the father-child relationship, children who reported having a more significant amount of monitoring from their parent(s) were less likely to report experiencing bullying. Previous research has been split on the role that parental monitoring can play in bullying experiences

(Bortolo, 2022; Espelage et al., 2012; Low & Espelage, 2015; Veenstra et al., 2005). However, this study adds support to the finding that parents who monitor their child's life are likely to reduce the risk of experiencing bullying. The mechanism through which this reduction occurs is not evident, but this finding is an essential first step.

In this study, parents who reported greater alcohol use that affected their daily lives were more likely to have a child who reported a more significant amount of bullying. Research has long suggested that the parent-child relationship suffers when alcohol becomes problematic in the home (Cheng & Lo, 2023; Eiden et al., 2010). However, researchers have not attempted to investigate the role that parental alcohol use may play regarding childhood bullying when also looking at the other variables investigated in this study. Findings suggest that increased alcohol use plays its own negative role independent of lack of father-child relationship, child social-emotional development, and parental monitoring. Taken as a whole, this analysis with all four variables accounted for 11% of the variance in children's reported experiences with bullying. Though directionality cannot be implied from these results, the results do suggest that children's bullying experiences are influenced by factors that fall outside of school. More plainly put, bullying may exhibit itself in the school, but components of bullying can begin at home. These findings also suggest that parents' habits and interactions with their children relate to how children experience peer relationships. Put plainly, bullying is a multifaceted problem where multiple variables contribute to a negative child experience.

## **Limitations**

Though we feel this paper's findings are exceptionally useful for human services workers, the study is not without its limitations. One limitation of our study was that the participants were from a large secondary dataset. As a result, we were not able to contact them to gain follow-up information. Further, due to the secondary nature of the dataset, additional information from participants was not available to us. This limited follow-up contacts for monitoring the lasting impacts on the children.

Both the Parental Monitoring Scale and the Parental Alcohol Use scales were specific to the primary caregiver. This could be the father the child

was reporting on their relationship with, or it could be another caregiver (typically the mother). It would be helpful to have individual measures of the father's monitoring behavior and alcohol use, but that data is not present in our dataset.

## **Implications**

The results reiterate the importance of a positive relationship with fathers. As the data demonstrate, children who are in homes at risk for low parental engagement and increased alcohol use are at a greater risk of experiencing bullying at school. This contributes to research previously conducted on the subject of childhood bullying behavior and further solidifies the concept that participating in bullying is heavily related to the home environment. In addition, the results suggest an emphasis on familial importance. All of the variables investigated were significantly related to children stating that they had experienced bullying at the time of reporting. These findings also suggest that parents' habits and interactions with their children relate to how children experience peer relationships.

Sharing this information with clinicians and human service workers who interact with families will give these workers a better idea of what indicators may predict bullying for children. Clinicians can also use these findings to find protective and risk factors for the children. From an educational standpoint, acquiring the knowledge that allows clinicians to explain to parents the importance of monitoring a child's behavior will benefit the family as a whole. Clinicians can also use these findings to explain how engaging in a positive father-child relationship will likely decrease the impact of bullying. In addition, workers who encounter parents with alcohol abuse issues can be cognizant of the fact that the children in these families may be negatively impacted not only in the home but outside of the home as well. This new information can lead workers to suggest additional services to help the children.

## **Future Directions**

Applying these findings to the creation of interventions and education programs is the likely next step. Eliminating these identified risk factors in the home is unlikely. However, professionals can use these results to create protective factors mediating the risks in the school or home. Specifically,

family educators can help parents understand how to effectively monitor their children's behaviors and react physically, verbally, and electronically when bullying is present. The results suggest that a father-child relationship can be an essential protective factor in helping children prevent bullying. Unfortunately, not all children have a father figure to turn to. Studies may investigate the role of having a solid male/father-like figure in a child's life. The presence of such a figure could likely serve the same protective role as a typically defined "father." However, until this research is conducted, little is known about substitutes for this relationship.

## **Conclusions**

Bullying in schools is a topic that has received increased attention from the public. Programs aimed at stopping bullying in schools are likely to proliferate. However, many emotional and social skills are fostered in the home through parent-child interactions. These familial-level variables are also likely to be fruitful in curbing the occurrence of bullying in schools. The research in this study should be used as an initial jumping-off point to utilize the home as a ground to combat bullying as well.

Many factors influence how a child experiences bullying in elementary school. However, this study suggests that a positive familial relationship may be a protective factor and put children at a lower risk. This is supported by Papadaki and Giovazolias' (2013) findings stating that parental acceptance was correlated with a decrease in the student's depressive symptoms and the likelihood of bullying others and Georgiou and Fanti's (2010) research positing the degree to which a parent is involved in their child's life has been negatively correlated with the likelihood of their child participating in bullying activity. Paternal relationships also influence the child's maladaptive behavior. Dewi and colleagues' (2015) results suggest that the father's affection and parent-child interaction are associated with aggressive tendencies in children. This influence can carry on through late adolescence (Williams & Kennedy, 2012), a future area of research that could be investigated. Not only is future research on the influence of a father's affection and parent-child interaction on youth in late adolescence anticipated, but also how the research on these crucial relationships can be used for intervention. With these interventions focusing on protective factors, pertinent strides can be made regarding childhood bullying.

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