

Bullying Experience as a Predictor of Psychosocial Difficulty Score (SDQ) in Adolescents

Yunias Setiawati*, Royke Tony Kalalo, I Made Wedastra,
Etty Christina Baboe, Dhenni Hartopo

Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Airlangga University, Surabaya, Indonesia

E-mail: yuniassetiawati12@gmail.com; drroykekalalo@fk.unair.ac.id;
madedewadestra1985@gmail.com; ettybaboe@gmail.com; dhen.hart@gmail.com

*Corresponding author details: Yunias Setiawati; yuniassetiawati12@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage often disrupted by bullying, a pervasive public health issue linked to adverse psychological outcomes. This study aimed to examine the relationship between bullying experiences and psychosocial difficulty scores among ninth-grade students at A junior high school in East Java, Indonesia. Using a cross-sectional design, 106 students (54.7% female, 45.3% male; aged 13–16 years) completed the Olweus Bully Questionnaire (OBQ) and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Bullying exposure was categorized into none, mild (1–2 types), and moderate-severe (≥ 3 types). Chi-square analysis revealed a significant association between bullying experiences and higher SDQ scores ($p < 0.05$), with a clear dose-response pattern: students exposed to multiple bullying types were more likely to report elevated psychosocial difficulties. Public humiliation ($p = 0.002$) and threats/coercion ($p = 0.008$) were the strongest predictors of high SDQ scores, followed by social exclusion ($p = 0.015$) and physical violence ($p = 0.038$). These findings confirm bullying as a strong predictor of psychosocial problems, highlighting the urgent need for school-based interventions that address not only physical but also psychological and relational forms of bullying. Preventive strategies should integrate educators, parents, and policymakers to foster safer learning environments and support adolescent mental health.

Keywords: bullying prevention; adolescent well-being; psychosocial strength; mental health.

BACKGROUND

Adolescence is a critical transition period characterized by rapid biological, cognitive, and social changes. At this stage, adolescents face various important developmental tasks, such as the formation of self-identity, the achievement of emotional independence, and the development of relationships with peers. However, these developments are often hampered by a destructive social phenomenon, namely bullying. Bullying is not just an ordinary conflict between peers, but has become a global public health problem that has a serious impact on adolescents' psychological well-being [1,2].

UNICEF data shows that 50% of students aged 13–15 years in Indonesia have experienced bullying at school. The findings of the Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) also reported that the prevalence of bullying victims among Indonesian adolescents reached 19.9% [3,4,5]. In fact, Indonesia ranks fifth out of 78 countries with the highest number of students who experience bullying [6]. The report of the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) also strengthens this condition, with 226 cases of physical and psychological

violence including bullying, recorded in 2022 [7]. The complexity and high rate of bullying indicate the urgency of researching the mechanisms and impacts of bullying on mental health, especially in the A junior high school environment in East Java.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To find out the relationship between the experience of bullying and the level of psychosocial difficulty in grade IX students at A junior high school in East Java.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Bullying is defined as deliberate, repetitive, aggressive behavior and is characterized by a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim. The main elements of bullying include: (1) the intent to hurt, (2) the repetition of the action, and (3) the imbalance of power. The form of imbalance can be physical (body size, strength), social (status, popularity), or psychological (verbal ability, intelligence). Bullying can be categorized in various forms, such as physical, verbal, relational, and cyber (cyberbullying). Bullying has a negative impact on adolescent mental health. Victims of bullying often show emotional symptoms such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and an increased risk of

social isolation. In addition, bullying can also affect academic achievement, emotional regulation, and long-term psychosocial development [1].

Psychosocial difficulties are defined as obstacles in aspects of emotions, behaviors, attention, and social relationships that can interfere with an individual's well-being and adaptive functioning. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) instrument is widely used to measure this aspect, with four main difficulty subscales: emotional symptoms, behavioral problems, hyperactivity, and peer relationship problems. The total SDQ score is then categorized into low or high levels to assess the overall level of psychosocial distress.

Several studies have found a positive correlation between bullying experiences and high psychosocial difficulty scores in adolescents. The more frequent and diverse the types of bullying experienced, the greater the negative impact on mental health. This indicates a dose-response relationship between the frequency/spread of bullying and the severity of psychosocial disorders [6,7].

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative design with a cross-sectional approach. This design was chosen because it is suitable for measuring and analyzing the relationship between the experience of bullying as an independent variable and the level of psychosocial distress as a dependent variable in a period of time. The research sample was all grade IX students of A junior high school in East Java as many as 106 respondents. It consisted of 58 female students (54.7%) and 48 male students (45.3%), with an age range of 13–16 years, the majority of whom were 14 years old (57.5%) and 15 years old (40.6%).

The research instruments include the bullying questionnaire and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The experience of bullying was measured using the Olweus Bully Questionnaire (OBQ), which consisted of 23 items with a 5-point Likert scale, covering four forms of bullying: physical, verbal, social, and threatening. Respondents were categorized into three groups, namely no bullying, mild bullying (1–2 types), and moderate-severe bullying (≥ 3 types). The level of psychosocial difficulty was measured by the

Indonesian version of SDQ, which consisted of 25 items. The total score was calculated from four difficulty subscales (emotional symptoms, problematic behaviors, hyperactivity, and peer problems), then classified into two categories: low scores and high scores.

Data collection was carried out by distributing questionnaires directly at schools. The collected data is then analyzed using the Chi-square (χ^2) test to test the relationship between independent and dependent variables. This test was chosen because it is suitable for categorical data, with a significance level set at $\alpha = 0.05$. The results of the analysis are considered significant if the p-value < 0.05 .

RESEARCH RESULTS

This study involved 106 respondents of grade IX students at A junior high school in East Java. Based on gender distribution, respondents consisted of 58 female students (54.7%) and 48 male students (45.3%). In terms of class distribution, the number of respondents was divided relatively evenly in six classes, with the highest number in classes IX A (21.7%) and IX C (20.8%), while the lowest number was found in classes IX B and IX F (11.3% respectively). By age, the majority of respondents were 14 years old (57.5%) and 15 years old (40.6%), while only one respondent was 13 years old (0.9%) and 16 years old (0.9%), respectively.

The results of the analysis showed a significant relationship between the experience of bullying and the level of psychosocial difficulties of students. In particular, the four forms of bullying analyzed: humiliated, spanked, ostracized, and threatened/coerced showed a meaningful relationship with SDQ scores ($p < 0.05$). Respondents who experienced bullying in any form tended to have higher SDQ scores compared to those who had never experienced bullying.

In addition, the frequency of bullying also showed a significant relationship with SDQ scores ($p = 0.001$). Students who had never experienced bullying had a lower SDQ score, while those who experienced moderate-severe bullying (≥ 3 types of bullying) tended to have high SDQ scores. This pattern indicates a dose-response relationship, that is, the more types of bullying experienced, the heavier the psychosocial difficulties felt.

TABLE 1: The Relationship of Bullying Experience with Total Psychosocial Difficulty (SDQ) Score.

Variable Bullying	Low SDQ score (n=53)	High SDQ Score (n=53)	p-value (Chi-square)
<i>Ever been humiliated</i>			0.002*
Never	32 (60.4%)	16 (30.2%)	
1-2 times	15 (28.3%)	22 (41.5%)	
≥ 3 times	6 (11.3%)	15 (28.3%)	
<i>Ever Been Beaten</i>			0.038*
Never	45 (84.9%)	36 (67.9%)	
≥ 1 time	8 (15.1%)	17 (32.1%)	

Variable Bullying	Low SDQ score (n=53)	High SDQ Score (n=53)	p-value (Chi-square)
<i>Ever Been Alienated</i>			0.015*
Never	40 (75.5%)	28 (52.8%)	
≥1 time	13 (24.5%)	25 (47.2%)	
<i>Ever threatened/forced</i>			0.008*
Never	44 (83.0%)	32 (60.4%)	
≥1 time	9 (17.0%)	21 (39.6%)	

Overall, chi-square analysis showed that the experience of being publicly humiliated ($p=0.002$) and the experience of being threatened/coerced ($p=0.008$) were the most powerful factors associated with an increase in psychosocial distress scores. Thus, this study confirms that the experience of bullying has a significant impact on the psychological well-being of adolescents, so bullying prevention interventions in schools are very important to protect students' mental health.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study at A junior high school in East Java show a significant relationship between the experience of bullying and a high score of psychosocial difficulties, in line with national and international findings that affirm bullying as a strong risk factor for adolescent mental health [1,8,9]. Research in Indonesia also supports this, where victims of bullying have higher levels of psychological problems. The data showed that the proportion of students with high SDQ scores increased from 15.1% (not bullied) to 47.2% (moderate-severe bullied), showing a pattern of risk escalation, as large-scale studies have shown that severe bullying increases the likelihood of psychosocial problems by 11.35 times [7].

The most influential type of bullying was public humiliation ($p=0.002$), which attacked adolescents' social identity, lowered self-esteem, and triggered social anxiety to isolation. The next factor is threat or coercion ($p=0.008$), which creates continuous psychological terror, causes hypervigilance, feelings of helplessness, and has the potential to trigger anxiety and PTSD. Meanwhile, social exclusion ($p=0.015$) increases the risk of depression and loneliness due to the loss of the need to be accepted into the group [9,10], while physical violence ($p=0.038$), although not dominant, still causes fear and interferes with learning concentration [3,10]. These findings confirm that psychological and relational bullying can be more damaging than physical violence, and reflect conditions that may also occur in other schools in Indonesia, given the high prevalence of bullying [4,11,12]. Preventive interventions must therefore target all forms of bullying, not just physical violence. However, this study was limited by cross-sectional designs that could not prove causality as well as the use of potentially biased self-reports. Longitudinal research is needed to strengthen evidence of causality [13,14,15].

CONCLUSION

Research conducted at A junior high school in East Java shows that bullying has been proven to be a strong predictor of psychosocial difficulties in adolescents, with all forms of bullying experiences, both physical and non-physical, significantly correlated with higher psychosocial difficulty (SDQ) scores. There is a clear dose-response pattern, where the more frequent and diverse forms of bullying are experienced, the greater the risk of adolescents experiencing psychosocial disorders.

The findings also confirm that psychological and relational aggression, such as public humiliation and threats or coercion, are actually the most damaging factors compared to physical violence. The results of this study demand integrated steps from schools, counselors, parents, the community, and policymakers to create a safe learning environment and support adolescent mental health, while strengthening regulations and further research so that bullying prevention in Indonesia is evidence-based and sustainable.

FUNDING

This research was funded by the Community Service Program in the 2025 Community Partnership Program Scheme (Program Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat Tahun 2025 Skema Program Kemitraan Masyarakat), Airlangga University, Surabaya, Indonesia, under grant number (Nomor Kontrak Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat) 9791/B/UN3.FK/PM.01.01/2025.

REFERENCES

- [1] Rahmawati, D., Setyaningsih, E.S. and Haryanti, F., 2023. "If it's really excessive, it can enter your heart": A mixed methods investigation of bullying among early adolescents in Semarang, Indonesia. PMC - PubMed Central. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9852103/> [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [2] Fatimah, S. and Latif, H., 2019. The relationship between School Well-Being and Bullying Behavior in Junior High School Students. Journal of Educational and Developmental Psychology. Available at: <https://journal.unair.ac.id/download-fullpapers-jpppcfc5638052full.pdf> [Accessed July 26, 2025].

- [3] Rachmawati, D., 2019. Bullying and Long-Term Impacts: The Connection to Violence and Criminality in Schools. *Journal of Islamic Education Studies*. Available at: <https://jurnalpps.uinsa.ac.id/index.php/joies/article/download/553/317/3293> [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [4] Lubis, F.R., Sirlubis, R. and Puspita, D., 2024. Socialization of Bullying Behavior Prevention in Elementary Schools. *Journal of Community Care*, 6(1), pp.33-38. Available at: <https://jurnal.globalhealthsciencegroup.com/index.php/JPM/article/download/2249/1696/> [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [5] Astuti, P., 2019. Prevalence and correlates of being bullied among adolescents in Indonesia: results from the 2015 Global School-based Student Health Survey. *ResearchGate*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335062351_Prevalence_and_correlates_of_being_bullied_among_adolescents_in_Indonesia_results_from_the_2015_Global_School-based_Student_Health_Survey [Diakses 26 Juli 2025].
- [6] Permatasari, M., Suarya, L.M. and Made, S., 2016. The relationship between parental authoritarian parenting and the tendency to be a bully in adolescents. *International Journal of Educational Policies*. Available on: <https://ejournal.undiksha.ac.id/index.php/JPP/article/view/87663/32773> [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [7] Fitria, C.A. and Ifdil, I., 2020. The Effect of Bullying on Student Mental Health. *Journal of Research and Community Service*, 3(1), pp.25-30. Available at: <https://journal.universitaspahlawan.ac.id/index.php/jrpp/article/download/41142/26218/137614> [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [8] Sari, Y., 2021. Adolescent Depression in Indonesia: Causes and Impacts. *Pangkalpinang Nursing Journal*, 4(1), pp.1-7. Available at: <https://jurnal.poltekkespangkalpinang.ac.id/index.php/jkp/article/download/502/pdf> [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [9] Agustina, M., Dartanto, T., Sitompul, P. and Hew, J., 2024. Perceptions of Mental Health Challenges and Needs of Indonesian Adolescents: A Qualitative Study. *PMCs*. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11747947/> [Accessed July 26, 2025]. [Retrieved 26 July 2025].
- [10] Putri, A.F., 2023. Literature Study on Violence Among Adolescents. *Journal of Basicedu*, 7(2), pp.1042-1051. Available at: <https://jbasic.org/index.php/basicedu/article/download/6354/3314> [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [11] Putri, R.M.I., 2024. The Relationship between Bullying Experience and NSSI Behavior in Adolescents. *Repository - UNAIR*. Available at: https://repository.unair.ac.id/133492/1/Repository_111911133093_Reyna%20Mahirajustin%20Imam%20Putri.pdf [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [12] Sari, N.K. and Purnomo, W., 2021. Incidents of Bullying and Self-Confidence in Adolescents. *SURYA MEDIKA: Scientific Journal of Nursing and Public Health Sciences*, 16(2), pp.93-99. Available at: https://journal.stikessuryaglobal.ac.id/index.php/SM/article/download/745/pdf_1/2076 [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [13] Putri, A.A., T, M.A. and R, M.I., 2022. Seniority and Violent Behavior Among Students (Case Study on Students of the Faculty of Social Sciences, State University of Makassar). *Pinsi Journal of Sociology Education Review*, 2(3), pp.193-203. Available at: <https://ojs.unm.ac.id/societies/article/download/19417/10263> [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [14] Williams, K.D., 2007. Ostracism. *ResearchGate*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233154258_Ostracism [Accessed July 26, 2025].
- [15] Sari, Y.I., 2023. Bullying Behavior in High School Students. *Journal on Education*, 5(4), pp.14022-14028. Available at: <https://jonedu.org/index.php/joe/article/download/8145/6340/> [Accessed July 26, 2025].