

Bullying, Emotional Regulation, and Aggression Among Adolescents

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Abstract

With increasing incidents of serious crimes involving adolescents reported in national media, understanding psychological factors contributing to aggressive behavior has become critically important. This study examines relationships between bullying victimization, emotional regulation, and aggression among urban Indian adolescents. Analysis of clinical interviews with adolescents displaying severe aggressive behaviors revealed recurring themes: aggression was the preferred emotional expression due to lack of safe spaces, inadequate coping mechanisms, insufficient family and peer support, and poor emotional regulation skills. The present research quantitatively investigates these relationships using three validated instruments: the Illinois Bully Scale, the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, and the Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire. The study includes 105 adolescents aged 13-19 years from urban areas of Maharashtra. Google Forms were used for data collection, and SPSS 22 was used for statistical analysis. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between bullying victimization and aggression, indicating that adolescents who experience higher levels of bullying tend to display higher levels of aggressive behavior. The results also showed a significant negative relationship between emotional regulation and aggression, suggesting that adolescents with better emotional regulation skills are less likely to engage in aggressive behavior. Additionally, emotional regulation was negatively associated with bullying. Thus all the proposed hypotheses for the research were accepted. Understanding these relationships is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies addressing root causes rather than merely responding to consequences of adolescent aggression. The findings will help educational institutions, policymakers, and mental health professionals develop evidence-based interventions to reduce adolescent aggression and promote healthy emotional development.

Keywords: Adolescent Aggression, Bullying, Emotional Regulation

Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period characterized by rapid physical, cognitive, and emotional changes. While many navigate this transition smoothly with appropriate support, a concerning subset faces challenges manifesting as aggressive behavior, bullying involvement, and difficulty managing emotions. Increasing frequency of violent incidents involving adolescents reported in national media has brought urgent attention to understanding psychological mechanisms underlying youth aggression.

Today's adolescents face unprecedented challenges. Recent reports from *The Indian Express* and *The Hindu* document disturbing patterns of violence among youth populations. These incidents range from severe bullying resulting in victim trauma or suicide, to acts of physical violence in schools and communities, to participation in online harassment campaigns. What makes these cases particularly

alarming is not merely their occurrence but the apparent normalization of aggressive responses among certain youth populations.

Evidence from Recent News Reports

The Indian Express documented that childhood adversity—including neglect, exposure to violence, and abuse—significantly increases teen violence risk, with boys showing particularly high exposure and tendency to externalize distress through aggression. Combined face-to-face and cyber-bullying victimization more than doubles aggressive behavior likelihood, creating cycles where victims become perpetrators. Playing violent video games over extended periods increases teen aggression regardless of gender, while online radicalization through “manosphere” content draws boys into toxic masculinity fostering aggression, bullying, and gender-based violence.

The Hindu documented that media and real-life exposure to aggression normalizes violent responses when adolescents perceive them as effective and consequence-free. Social media, gaming, and influencer culture fuel school violence, cyberbullying, and misogyny, with unrestricted access leading to hate speech internalization and incidents including stabbings and threats. Earlier smartphone use correlates with increased aggression, anger, and irritability. Harsh parenting with insufficient warmth fosters aggression.

Clinical Interview Themes

Child psychologists’ interviews with adolescents displaying severe aggression revealed consistent themes explaining why aggression became the preferred emotional expression

Lack of Safe Spaces: Adolescents reported no environment—home, school, or community—where they felt psychologically safe expressing vulnerable emotions without judgment. Aggressive responses commanded attention, making them more adaptive than expressing sadness or fear.

Inadequate Coping Mechanisms: Adolescents consistently described never learning healthy emotional management strategies. When overwhelmed, they defaulted to aggression as the only known strategy.

Insufficient Family and Peer Support: Many felt disconnected from families due to communication breakdowns, parental unavailability, or conflict-characterized environments. Peer relationships involved social marginalization, bullying victimization, or association with peers reinforcing aggressive norms.

Poor Emotional Regulation Skills: Adolescents demonstrated significant deficits in recognizing, understanding, and managing emotions. Without these skills, emotions felt overwhelming, leading to explosive aggressive outbursts.

These themes suggest adolescents turn to aggression not from inherent violence but because developmental environments failed to provide necessary emotional scaffolding, skills, and support.

Theoretical Framework and Study Rationale

The General Aggression Model posits that aggression results from interaction between personal factors (emotional regulation capacity) and situational factors (violence exposure, bullying). Social Learning Theory suggests adolescents learn aggressive behaviors through observation and reinforcement. Emotional regulation theory explains how capacity to modulate emotions develops through childhood; disruption increases aggressive outburst likelihood.

While international research extensively studies these constructs, few studies examine them simultaneously within Indian adolescent populations. The present study addresses this gap by investigating

how bullying victimization, perpetration, and emotional regulation relate to aggression among urban Indian adolescents, providing evidence to inform prevention and intervention efforts.

Review of Literature

Bullying

Definition According to Olweus's "A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" and has difficulty defending him- or herself. The three core elements are:

Intentional negative/aggressive acts. Repetition over time. Imbalance of power (physical, psychological, or social).

Types (Olweus taxonomy):

- Direct/physical (hitting, pushing, stealing).
- Direct verbal (name-calling, threats).
- Indirect/relational (social exclusion, rumors, gossip).

Roles (Olweus identified four stable participant groups):

- Bullies (perpetrators).
- Victims (targets).
- Bully-victims (both).
- Bystanders (reinforce or defend).

Emotional regulation

Refers to the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them. This field is foundational in psychology, with James J. Gross's process model serving as a cornerstone framework. The model outlines five families of strategies: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change (including cognitive reappraisal), and response modulation (including expressive suppression).

-Cognitive reappraisal is an antecedent-focused strategy involving the reinterpretation or reframing of a situation to alter its emotional significance.

-Expressive Suppression

Expressive suppression is a response-focused strategy that inhibits the outward behavioral expression of emotions (e.g., facial, vocal, postural) after they have been generated. It does not alter the internal experience but conceals it, such as maintaining a neutral face during anger.

Aggression

Aggression is defined as behavior intended to harm another person who is motivated to avoid that harm. It encompasses a spectrum from verbal insults to physical violence, with violence representing extreme physical harm (e.g., injury or death)

The General Aggression Model (GAM), developed by Craig A. Anderson and Brad J. Bushman, is a comprehensive, integrative framework that unifies various domain-specific theories of aggression (e.g., cognitive neoassociation, social learning, script theory, excitation transfer, and social interaction theories). It explains how person and situational inputs interact to produce aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors through interconnected cognitive, affective, and arousal routes, ultimately leading to appraisal, decision-making, and outcomes

Adolescent aggression has been widely studied due to its increasing prevalence and its impact on psychological and social development. Several researchers have examined the patterns, causes, and associated factors of aggressive behaviour among adolescents.

A study conducted by Sidhu TK, Kaur P, Sangha NK, and Bansal AS reported that the overall prevalence of aggression among adolescents was 51.9%. The findings indicated that aggression levels were higher among adolescents living in urban areas. Gender differences were also observed, with males displaying higher levels of physical aggression, while females demonstrated greater levels of hostility. Furthermore, aggression was found to be significantly associated with factors such as age distribution and type of residence. However, although the study highlights the prevalence and demographic variations in aggression, it primarily focuses on distribution patterns and does not extensively explore the psychological or emotional factors contributing to aggressive behaviour among adolescents.

Similarly, research conducted by Robert F. Valois, Jan M. MacDonald, L. Bretous, Mary A. Fischer, and John W. Drane identified six major categories of factors associated with adolescent aggression and violence. These include individual, family, school or academic, peer-related, community and neighborhood, and situational factors. The study emphasized that adolescent aggression develops through a complex interaction of these influences. Based on these findings, the authors suggested that prevention programs should be theory-based, multisystem, and multicomponent, beginning in middle school and continuing through high school with a comprehensive evaluation design. Nevertheless, while the study identifies multiple ecological factors contributing to aggression, it provides limited understanding of how specific psychological variables interact with these environmental influences in shaping aggressive behaviour among adolescents.

In another study, Chung JE, Song G, Kim K, Yee J, Kim JH, Lee KE, and Gwak HS examined the relationship between aggression and anxiety among adolescents. The results demonstrated that a higher risk of anxiety was associated with higher total aggression scores. In particular, indirect forms of aggression, such as anger and hostility, were found to have a stronger association with anxiety than direct forms of aggression. Despite establishing this relationship, the study does not thoroughly investigate other psychological or contextual factors that may mediate or moderate the relationship between anxiety and aggression.

Another investigation reported that a large proportion of adolescents scored very high on the DIAS scale, indicating elevated levels of aggression. The results showed that total aggression scores were significantly higher among older adolescents aged 18–19 years, among males, among adolescents from lower-income groups, and among those whose mothers were working. Additionally, physical aggression was found to be higher among younger adolescents, whereas other types of aggression were more prevalent among older adolescents. Although this study identifies demographic and socio-economic differences in aggression levels, it does not adequately explain the psychosocial mechanisms or environmental factors that contribute to these variations in aggressive behaviour.

Overall, the existing literature highlights that adolescent aggression is influenced by multiple demographic, psychological, and environmental factors. However, there remains a need for further research examining the effects of cognitive reframing of the situation in order to curb aggression expression. Also there greater need to address the issues bullying online as adolescents are exposed to higher social media nowadays.

Statement of the Problem

To study the relationship between bullying victimization, emotional regulation, and aggression among adolescents in urban India.

Objectives of Study

1. To examine the correlation between bullying victimization and aggression among adolescents
2. To examine the correlation between emotional regulation and aggression among adolescents
3. To examine the correlation between bullying and emotional regulation among adolescents

Hypothesis

1. There will be significant positive correlation between victims of bullying and aggression among adolescents
2. There will be significant negative correlation between emotional regulation and aggression among adolescents
3. There will be significant negative correlation between bullying and emotional regulation among adolescents

Significance of Study

Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage characterized by significant emotional, social, and psychological changes. During this period, individuals are more vulnerable to behavioural and emotional difficulties, including aggression and bullying. Aggressive behaviour among adolescents can negatively affect their academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall psychological well-being. Bullying, whether physical, verbal, or relational, has also become a major concern in schools and communities, as it can lead to long-term emotional distress for both victims and perpetrators. Therefore, understanding the factors associated with adolescent aggression and bullying is essential for promoting healthier behavioural patterns and supportive social environments.

Another important factor related to aggressive behaviour is emotional regulation, which refers to an individual's ability to understand, manage, and express emotions in an appropriate manner. Adolescents who struggle with regulating their emotions may be more likely to display aggressive behavior or engage in bullying. Examining the relationship between aggression, bullying, and emotional regulation can provide valuable insights into the psychological processes underlying these behaviors.

Variable

1. Bullying
2. Emotional Regulation
3. Aggression

Sample

The sample selected for the study consisted of adolescents aged 13-19 years from urban areas of Maharashtra. The sample size of the study was 105 adolescents.

Sampling Technique

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed for participant selection. This technique

was chosen to ensure that participants met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives.

Psychometric Tools

Illinois Bully Scale

The Illinois Bully Scale is an 18-item instrument measuring bullying perpetration (9 items) and victimization (9 items) among adolescents across physical, verbal, and relational aggression forms. Respondents rate behavior frequency over the past 30 days on a 5-point Likert scale (0=never to 4=7 or more times). Higher scores indicate greater bullying involvement. The scale demonstrates good reliability with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.85 to 0.90 (Espelage & Holt, 2001).

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Short Form (ERQ-S)

The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire-Short Form (ERQ-S) is a brief 6-item self-report measure assessing two emotion regulation strategies: cognitive reappraisal (3 items) and expressive suppression (3 items). Respondents rate items on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Scores are calculated separately for each subscale. Higher reappraisal scores indicate greater use of adaptive cognitive strategies, while higher suppression scores indicate greater use of emotion inhibition strategies. The ERQ-S is suitable for adolescent populations and demonstrates adequate reliability.

Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ)

The Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire is a 29-item self-report measure assessing four aggression dimensions: physical aggression (9 items), verbal aggression (5 items), anger (7 items), and hostility (8 items). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=extremely uncharacteristic to 5=extremely characteristic). Scores range from 29 to 145, with higher scores indicating greater aggressive tendencies. The BPAQ demonstrates excellent reliability with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.72 to 0.89 (Buss & Perry, 1992).

Subscales:

Physical Aggression: 9 items assessing physical harm behaviors

Verbal Aggression: 5 items assessing verbal harm behaviors

Anger: 7 items assessing emotional arousal and physiological responses

Hostility: 8 items assessing cognitive components including resentment and suspicion

The BPAQ demonstrates excellent reliability and validity across diverse populations.

Procedure

For data collection, Google Forms were circulated among adolescents in communities across Maharashtra. The questionnaire was created by compiling the three psychometric tools with items presented in their original order. The questionnaire was provided with precise instructions to be followed by participants while filling it out.

Participants and their parents/guardians were informed that responses would be kept confidential and used for educational and research purposes only. Informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians and assent from adolescent participants before they proceeded to complete the questionnaire. The data collection process took approximately one Month to complete.

The data sheets were then scored by the researcher according to standardized scoring procedures of each instrument. Scores obtained were entered into an Excel sheet for further analysis.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Bullying	105	0	54	18.32	14.117
Emotional Regulation	105	11	39	27.10	5.616
Aggression	105	55	132	86.54	19.362
Valid N (listwise)	105				

Correlation Analysis

Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation was used to find out the correlation between the variables i.e., bullying victimization, emotional regulation, and aggression.

		Bullying	Victim Subscale Total	Emotional Regulation	Aggression
Bullying	Pearson Correlation	1	.775**	-.442**	.670**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	105	105	105	105
Victim Subscale Total	Pearson Correlation	.775**	1	-.179	.479**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.067	.000
	N	105	105	105	105
Emotional Regulation	Pearson Correlation	-.442**	-.179	1	-.414**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.067		.000
	N	105	105	105	105
Aggression	Pearson Correlation	.670**	.479**	-.414**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	105	105	105	105

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion

After the analysis it was confirmed that there is a statistically significant moderate positive correlation between bullying victimization and aggression ($r = 0.479^{**}$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: 0.254 to 0.613). This indicates that adolescents who experience higher levels of bullying victimization also exhibit higher levels of aggressive behavior. The hypothesis is **accepted**. This relationship accounts for approximately 23% of the variance, supporting the theoretical understanding that victimization experiences can lead to increased aggression, either as a defensive response or through modeling of aggressive behaviors witnessed during

victimization. The analysis revealed a statistically significant moderate negative correlation between emotional regulation and aggression ($r = -0.414^{**}$, $p < .001$, 95% CI: -0.552 to -0.170). The hypothesis is **accepted**. This finding indicates that adolescents with better emotional regulation skills—particularly cognitive reappraisal abilities—exhibit lower levels of aggressive behavior. The correlation suggests that approximately 17% of the variance in aggression can be explained by emotional regulation capacity, reinforcing the critical role of emotional regulation as a protective factor against aggressive behavior. A statistically significant moderate negative correlation emerged between bullying and emotional regulation ($r = -0.442^{**}$, $p < .01$). The hypothesis is **accepted**. This relationship, accounting for approximately 20% of the variance, suggests that adolescents with poorer emotional regulation skills are more likely to engage in bullying behaviors, or conversely, that involvement in bullying may further impair emotional regulation capacity. This bidirectional possibility highlights the importance of teaching emotional regulation skills as part of bullying prevention programs.

Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between bullying victimization, emotional regulation, and aggression among adolescents. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between bullying victimization and aggression, indicating that adolescents who experience higher levels of bullying tend to display higher levels of aggressive behaviour. The results also showed a significant negative relationship between emotional regulation and aggression, suggesting that adolescents with better emotional regulation skills are less likely to engage in aggressive behaviour. Additionally, emotional regulation was negatively associated with bullying.

These findings highlight the important role of emotional regulation in reducing aggressive and bullying behaviours among adolescents. Therefore, promoting emotional regulation skills through school-based interventions and awareness programs may help in reducing aggression and creating a healthier social environment for adolescents.

Limitations

1. The correlational study limits causal inferences about relationships between variables
2. The reliance on self-report measures may introduce response bias and Social desirability bias
3. The sample was limited to urban Maharashtra, which may affect generalizability to rural or other regions
4. The study did not include longitudinal follow-up to assess long-term patterns

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