

# FAMILY INFLUENCES IN BULLYING BEHAVIOR

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**Abstract.** Bullying behavior is defined as a subset of aggression, where bullying is the assertion of power through aggression or intimidation. Bullying behavior is intimidation or victimization - both names are acceptable. The behavior is a deliberate action that causes others injuries, repeatedly performed, and developing physically, physical or psychological aggression. The phenomenon of bullying can be initiated by a perpetrator or by group of people, involving the non unequal power relations, whereas the victim does not have the (physical, psychological, social) resources to defend. Aggression behavior is widely learned and transmitted in the family. We seek the family characteristics and the type of bullying behavior relationship. The present study investigates the relation between family type and bullying behavior at secondary school level children. Data were collected during three months school year at one point. Behaviors (bullying perpetration and bullying victimization) and emotions (overt and internalizing anger) were measured with self-assessments. Having no parents or no father increases the score on the victimization scale.

**Keywords:** bullying, victimization, anger, aggressive behavior, school bullying.

## Introduction

The current situation of bullying research shows considerable investigation, first from the extensive studies made by Olweus (1994, 1997, 1999), and then continued by other predecessors. Bullying behavior is defined as a subset of aggression, where bullying is the assertion of power through aggression or intimidation (Mahady Wilton, Craig & Pepler, 2000).

This paper investigates school bullying related to family characteristics. First part of the paper is a theoretical approach where we present a general conceptualization

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of bullying behavior related to family characteristics, social and emotional links, followed by a practically approach containing data analysis and discussions.

### **Bullying behavior. Theoretical background**

Bullying is considered a form of physical and psychological violence, an intentional conduct meant to cause injury (destruction, damage) to some people (including oneself) with different causes that require new forms of violence. Studies show that half of all children are bullied and they become victims of bullying phenomenon, where at least 10% are constant victims of school violence (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2008).

#### ***Family related to children development***

It is required to address to the family characteristics and the type of bullying behavior relationship - in close liaison with the family functionality considering the impact of bullying behavior in social assembly.

It is already known that the quality of adolescent relationship with their family is significant for the entire experience, emotional comfort and safety for the first ones.

A study on Romanian teenager population claims that the teenager's relationship with their parents is estimated to be more problematic and unsatisfactory, as the level of aggression is higher (Stemate & Mitrofan, 2009).

The generic family is supporting power supply and affective dimensions, social and cognitive values to children and more than that, it is the first and the most powerful child's social model provider: " Individual personality is formed by submitting individuals to a social progressive learning process, within which necessary knowledge, skills and habits are derived for implementing statuses from the social roles of individuals to ensure coexistence in society" (Chipea, 2001, p. 109).

Theoretical models describe cognitive parental cognitions as predictors of parenting practices and children's behaviors default (Bugental & Johnston, 2000). They differ depending on the processing type, on the content and specificity. Murphey (1992) notices that the typology of parental cognitions or beliefs can be acquired through vicars learning or specific learning - and that these parental beliefs prescribe the parental role or the child's behavior. Therefore these parental beliefs about child behavior exists before childbirth, in a developed over time scheme. A parental schema prescription is formed based on individual childhood experience of parenthood including their interactions with their parents and other children (Kuhn & Carter, 2006) and is mediated through their life experiences and interactions.

The parental contribution is inherent to the development of child's personality. By contributing, initiating and shaping parents are the trainers that provide learning and child development and also they are responsible with the initiation and with the cognitive-social-emotional shaping of the processes.

The individuals who form a family are living together and meet certain economic-administrative functions, spiritual (ideological and psychological) functions. In context of the state and law existence, the family status is based on certain legal relationships provided in official documents (Chișea, 2001).

Typologies diversity and also the uniqueness of each family member thereof is a key factor in children attitude development and beliefs about life and society. Some authors discuss a bi-directional relationship propagation of family influences where parents influence the behavior of the child, and the child in turn influences their behavior. This process is related on interaction mechanism in all its forms (Tocai, 2014)

In these topics we emphasize the meaning of the socialization process as an individual child in the family is experiencing. Child's social and emotional development starts with its primary experiences and is family grounded, as the first reference group.

The family of origin is thus a prime learning provider. Therefore, the way children see their parents managing everyday problems is one of the most valuable resources they hold and it impacts the ways interactions and negotiations management.

### ***Family characteristics reflected in bullying behavior***

Aggression behavior is widely learned and transmitted in the family. It is evidence based that aggressive behaviors are more common in children with aggressive parents (e.g. Sudermann, Jaffe, & Schieck, 1996). Eron et al., 1991, (apud. Macklem, 2003) claim that aggressive patterns are already outlined up to the age of six.

Experts opine about the existence of some patterns of parent-child interactions that facilitate the development of aggressive behavior. Thus, the authoritative style is responsible for a child's defensive behavior, meanwhile the coercive parenting style prescribes an avoidant attitude (Goodman, 1999; Mullin-Rindler, 2001). These parenting styles enhance children who are eager for affirmation in other circumstances in which they are allowed (at school, for example), developing children who defy the authorities and the rules. Herein, the bullying behavior involves an instrumental function of status gaining through victims intimidating (Tocai, 2014). Ross (1996) notices that parents who exhibit rejection attitudes and neglecting of their children are influencing them to exhibit aggressive behavior and inappropriate response to frustration, as a compensation mechanism.

Other evidence support that bullies come from an authoritarian style families, less empathetic, who apply harsh disciplinary strategies (Baldry & Farrington, 2000; LeBianc, 2001). Therefore parental fingerprints lead to an inhibited and restricted child behavior developing, wherein the child becomes oppositional and he's seeking to an object to exercise his authority – such as the victim. Children espouse these oppositional behaviors such defying rules and authorities through interactions they have with critical and prone to conflicts or extra punitive parents.

Parents favorable environment created by their attitude conflicts, so the baby "gets used" to fight back. Evidence show that those boys whose mothers did not adopt affectionate attitudes, but rather manifests coercive styles exhibit aggressive behaviors more frequently in the early years of school, while both girls and boys who have negative relationships with their fathers tend to be more aggressive with peers (Ladd, 1999).

Family influence is much stronger at preadolescent age child, when the teenager is strongly influenced by environment and school culture so that the family should be able to shape the correct attitude and to take action against bullying perpetrator conduct/victim. Parenting style is correlated with child's social competences and his school functioning, which in turn is related to bullying behaviour (Haynie et al., 2001, apud. Macklem 2003).

The parent model is the primary reference and it is representing a reporting system for the child, therefore, a parent who wants to teach children how to protect themselves and how to compete for status and rewards, is most likely a parent who does not consider bullying as a problematic behavior (LeBianc, 2001), but maybe an instrument in aim achieving. Ignoring bullying behavior it is also a form of acceptance or minimizing its significance, and inflicts to the child that the behavior is not problematic, but an age characteristic or a tool to a purpose.

This attitude can have serious damage on the aggressor as it strengthens the practice of behavior and also on the victim ("It's normal" to suffer in silence, not take action, etc.)

Other significant scientific evidence proving the studied behavior that children who are subjected to family violence are more likely to manifest in bullying behaviors, and other aggressive behaviors (Delligatti, Akin-Little & Little, 2003). This generates to problems at school, peers relations difficulties and emotional control problems.

After studying aggressive behavior in boys, Olweus (1991), highlights four factors that are related to the development of aggressive behavior patterns as so: negative emotional attitudes of parents towards their children during infancy, the parents missing rules and limits to the child acting when they behave aggressively towards them and / or to others, negative disciplining within the use of negative punishments such as raising the tone, hitting; and other psychological factors related to temperament.

When children are disciplined through aggressive methods, they internalize these methods and they hold the belief that these are targets to achieve some goals (Schwartz et al., 1999).

Entourage, community and media course are other influences in shaping children attitudes towards aggression.

### ***Social and emotional links to bullying behavior***

Rigby (2003) notes that regularly bullied students present low level of psychological well-being, low level of general health and of social adaptation and high levels of stress.

Scientific evidence support that exposure to bullying can cause problems of physical and mental health among victims and that it can also affect social development and educational evolution of these. Researchers note that bullying is an indicator of social exclusion defined as a lack of social participation, of social attachment, and delays in social development that can have negative influences on social development and on the employment of the future adult (Due et al., 2005).

The interconnections between anger and aggressive behavior have been supported by many studies. A study conducted by Trip et al. 2015, emphasizes how anger dysregulation is associated with concurrent and later externalizing problems in school. They discuss how expressed anger and aggressive behavior are associated with social skills deficits, poor anger management and depression (Flanagan, Allen & Henry, 2010 apud. Trip et al., 2015). Aggressive children often endorse goals that involve revenge, dominance, and self interest; their response decisions are less prosocial. The pattern of aggressive behaviors is different for bullies and bully victims; the first are more goal oriented and the last are more impulsive (Trip et al., 2015). They conclude that cognitions, emotions and behaviors are interrelated and should be treated as so, in anti-bullying prevention programs.

A significant number of studies suggest that aggressive type bullying behaviors predispose adolescents to anti-social behavior, violent crime, drug abuse, feelings of loneliness and hopelessness (ex. Hazler, Hoover & Oliver, 1992).

The results of a Danish study argue that the increased prevalence of symptoms of physical and psychological damage on adolescents with low socioeconomic status is explained on account of their exposure to the phenomenon of bullying (Due et al., 2009).

A study conducted in 2009 on 1,655 students in seventh and eighth grades in Korea, examined the impact of bullying actions on the suicide intention and bullying type behaviors of self-aggression. Results indicated that bullying victims have increased risk of suicidal behavior / self harm, even after controlling for other factors that lead to suicide, such as anxiety and depression (Kim & Leventhal, 2008).

An Italian researcher notifies the importance of bullying as a social phenomenon of a group dynamics that may present a specific form of an intergroup conflict. Theory sustain that bullying is based on social interaction mechanisms of groups such as: social group pressure, social contagion, an answer to learning behaviors mechanism, adherence to group norms, with noticeable effects on the social members attitudes and behaviors (Gini, 2006; Ojala & Nesdale, 2004).

## **The Present Study: Social and emotional links to bullying**

The present study investigates the relation between family type and bullying behavior at secondary school level children. We also seek the impact of family type with emotional variables, namely anger.

### **Method**

#### ***Design***

Participants were a number of 804 children, ages 10 to 13 but with the majority of them aged 11 or 12 years old (96.5% of the sample) from the city of Oradea. 54.1% of them were male and 97.26% stated that the language they mainly use it Romanian (other speaking mainly Hungarian). Family type included most often both parents, in the case of 85.9% of the participants, with 11% of the participants living only with their mother, 2% only with their father and 1% with others.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 21.0.

#### ***Procedure***

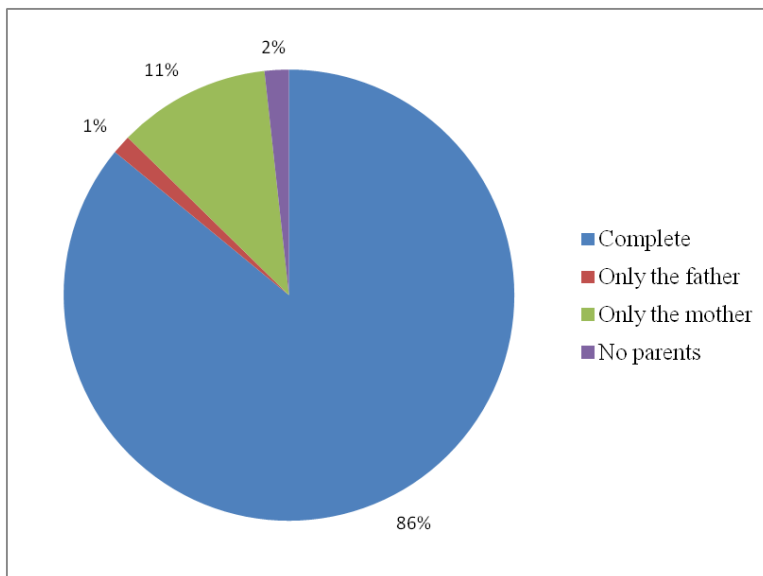
Schools from Oradea were contacted and asked for their participation in the study. Participation was based on active parental and child consent. Data were collected through questionnaires which were completed during one regular school hour in the classes under the supervision of the researchers. According the protocol, students were assured that their answers would be kept confidential.

#### ***Measures***

We use an adaptation of the scale of Olweus bullying and victimization designed by Strohmeier et. all also used in REBE-ViSC Program (Trip et al., 2015), translated and adapted for Romanian population. The answers are rated on a Likert-type scale. 1-5, where 1 means never, and 5 equals answer "almost every day". In measuring the behavior of bullying used a global item ("How often happened in the past two months to insult or physically hurting others?").

The measures were selected to capture the main behavior (bullying others), family type variable and emotions variables (anger). The scale of Olweus Bullying Perpetration and Bullying Victimization Scale and Anger Regulation and Expression Scale (DiGiuseppe & Tafrate, 2011) was adapted on Romanian population for measuring anger and we also used social-demographical indicators. The bullying and victimization scales consist of one global item and three specific items covering different forms of bullying. Answers to all questions were rated on a 5-point scale.

## Results



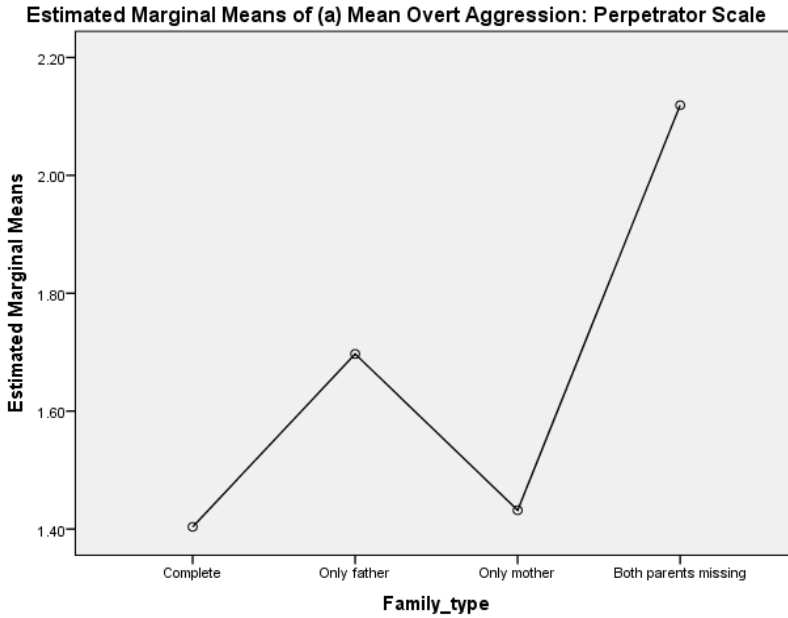
**Figure 1.** *Family type*

We began by investigating whether any difference in general aggression levels are present in function of family type. In order to test this hypothesis we resorted to an univariate ANOVA test, that yielded a significant main effect, with  $F(3,799) = 4.77, p = 0.003$ .

Post-hoc analyses indicated that the differences pass the required significance threshold in the case of children from families where both parents are missing and those that are complete or only the mother is present. As it is noticeable from the following figure in both cases those that come from a family where no parent is present have much higher overt aggression levels.

**Table 1.** *Anova test - dependent variable: Aggression perpetrator*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Family type	7.874	3	2.625	4.777	.003
Error	439.001	799	.549		
Total	2073.361	803			
Corrected Total	446.875	802			



**Figure 2.** *Estimated Means of bullying (perpetrators) compared to family type*

We replicated the same results in the case of bullying, again finding a main effect with  $F(3, 797) = 7.31, p < 0.01$ . After conducting the post-hoc tests we reached the same conclusion that is that the children whose families don't include both parents are significantly more prone to resorting to bullying behaviors when compared to those that have a complete family and those where only the mother is present.

**Table 2.** *Anova test - dependent variable: Bullying perpetrator*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Family_type	4.733	3	1.578	7.310	.000
Error	171.991	797	.216		
Total	1457.833	801			
Corrected Total	176.723	800			



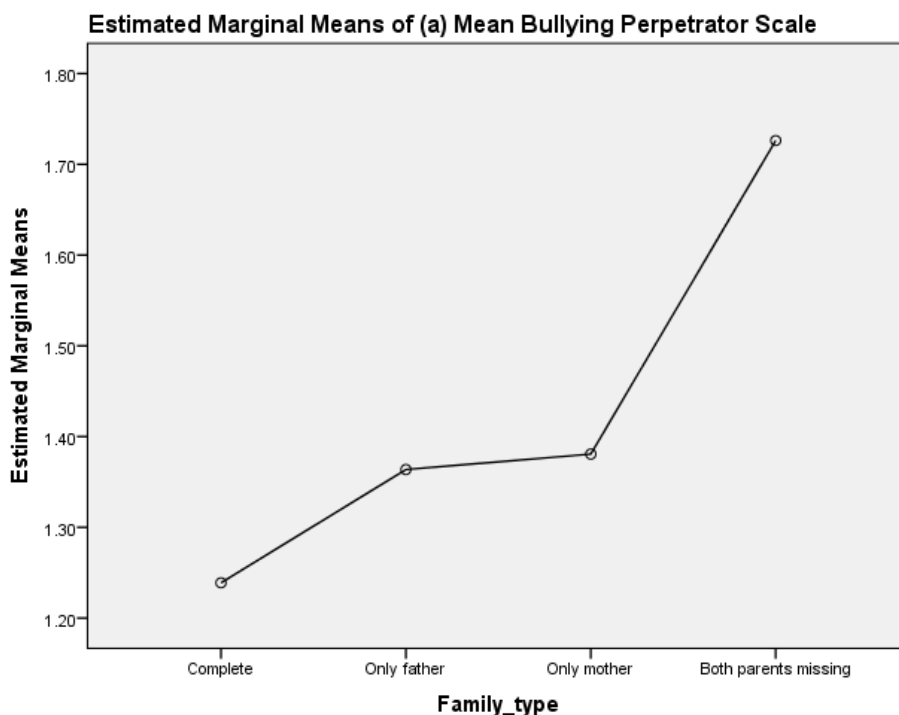


Figure 3. Estimated means of family type impact on anger

## Discussion

In order to further investigate the relation between family type and bullying we decided to resort to a multiple regression model, comparing the impact of family type with that of emotional variables, namely anger. Anger was conceptualized using a multiple dimension model, including externalized anger, internalized anger and extent of anger.

Our final model also included gender, as it has been shown to have an impact on the type of aggression and bullying.

The proposed model explains 34.2% of the variance of the dependent variable, therefore it has limited, albeit significant with  $F(4, 788)=104.104$  and  $p < 0.01$ , predictive capabilities. The variables Extent of anger, externalized anger and the family types of mother absent and of both parents present were excluded from the model due to them having a non-significant influence on the predictability of bullying.

**Table 3.** *Regression model for bullying*

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.748	.057		13.171	.000
Gender	.115	.027	.123	4.238	.000
No parents	.334	.107	.091	3.136	.002
Father absent	.107	.043	.072	2.490	.013
Internalized anger	.069	.004	.549	18.988	.000

By analyzing the model coefficients, we can see that most important contributor to our model is Internalized anger (Beta = 0.549), followed by gender (Beta = 0.123) and family type, with the largest impact having a family with both parents absent, followed by one with the father absent.

We also looked at the probability of one being a victim of bullying and constructed a model starting with the same variables. The final model predicted 20% of the variance in the dependent variable and model fit was adequate, with  $F(5, 787) = 41.231$  and  $p < 0.01$ . In this case however the excluded variables were internalized anger and the family types of mother absent and of both parents present.

**Table 4.** *Regression model for bullying victim*

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.684	.093		7.321	.000
Gender	.138	.039	.113	3.513	.000
No parents	.283	.153	.059	1.849	.065
Father absent	.175	.062	.090	2.815	.005
Externalized anger	.058	.008	.304	7.753	.000
Extent anger	.096	.023	.163	4.141	.000

In this case we can see that anger plays relatively the most important role in the prediction of victimization, followed by gender and the family type. However in this case the impacts of the variables are different. Being male increases the change of being a victim of bullying, as does externalizing the feelings of anger in an aggravated and prolonged manner.

## Conclusions

Looking at the raw impact of social, emotional and gender factors on bullying, one can see that being a male is a predictor of bullying acts, with being male increasing the score with 0.115, which is equivalent to less than 1 act per two months; Having

no parents however can increase the bullying score by 0.334, which is could be approximated as 1 more bullying act per month; Having no father impacts the bullying score approximately as much as gender does and thus has a lower impact than having both parents absent from the child's life.

Here is to see how a parental model, precisely the father's model is inherent to a proper children attitude, development and beliefs. Where a parental schema prescription (Kuhn & Carter, 2006) is missing, so are life experiences and interactions, emotions and attitudes affected in a negative way: Expressed anger and aggressive behavior are associated with social skills deficits, poor anger management and depression (Flanagan et. al., 2010 apud. Trip et al., 2015). Therefore, anger emotion and having a father/both parents absent represents risk factors for being bullied or for being a bully.

Craig, Peters & Konarski (1998) underline how children who become victims of the aggressor bully come from families who have benefited from positive interactions, the disciplinary framework is faint. In these situations some children become victims, victimized others. Insecure attachment style, the style hyper protective and authoritarian style, coercive parenting styles are associated with a child's risk of becoming a victim of bullying's (Perry, Hodges & Egan, 2001).

More studies results claim that bullying prevention programs should broadly address to all risk factors at the individual, family, school, and community levels (Craig & Pepler, 2007 apud. Trip et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2014 apud. Trip et al., 2015; Swearer & Espelage, 2004 apud. Trip et al., 2015). Considering bullying as a social complex phenomenon, it is required to be proper targeted by researchers and experts in order to be understood by community members. Social community needs to be educated and well challenged to identify, to prevent and to combat the phenomenon of bullying and to contribute to a social emotional development of the children.

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