

Bullying and its impact on social-emotional development in early childhood: A study in Surabaya, Indonesia

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Abstract

Bullying in early childhood is a serious issue that negatively affects children's social and emotional development. At this stage, children may act either as perpetrators or victims, both of which can influence character formation, emotional regulation, the ability to build social relationships, and the development of prosocial behavior. This study aims to examine the relationship between bullying behavior and social-emotional development in early childhood. A quantitative approach with a correlational method was employed. The sample consisted of 398 early childhood students from one early childhood education institution, selected through a total sampling technique. The research instrument used was a Likert-scale questionnaire that had been tested for validity and reliability. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, Spearman's correlation test, cross-tabulation, and ordinal logistic regression. The findings indicate that most children fall into the low category of bullying and the moderate-to-high category of social-emotional development. Spearman's correlation test revealed a significant positive relationship between bullying and social-emotional development ($p = 0.001$; $r = 0.177$). Furthermore, ordinal logistic regression analysis showed that social-emotional development significantly affects the level of bullying ($p = 0.007$; parameter estimate = 2.818). These results suggest that bullying behavior is significantly associated with the social-emotional development of early childhood students.

Keywords: Bullying, Social-Emotional Development, Early Childhood

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a social phenomenon that frequently occurs in educational environments, especially among students (Gaete et al., 2021). Although it is often perceived as a common occurrence, bullying can lead to serious psychological and social consequences, such as feelings of shame, self-doubt, withdrawal, and difficulties in building social relationships (Hartati et al., 2020). Data from the

Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia (KPAI) show that the rate of bullying in Indonesia has reached an alarming level. Local findings in Surabaya further reveal the presence of bullying behavior among early childhood students (PAUD), both as victims and perpetrators. This situation contributes to complex emotional challenges in the community that require immediate attention (Suaidy, 2020).

A child who is still very young is in a phase of growth and development that will shape their future. Early childhood is a golden period for every child, because at this age, children experience significant growth and development in all aspects. During this sensitive period, children need adequate stimulation from various parties involved in their lives. One of the important roles is played by parents in the family environment and teachers in academic institutions such as early childhood education programs (Fitri, 2020).

Previous research has highlighted the high prevalence of bullying, particularly among elementary school children and adolescents. However, bullying is not limited to these age groups—it also emerges in early childhood education settings. Studies on bullying among young children remain limited, leaving gaps in understanding its direct impact on social and emotional development. Considering that early childhood is a crucial stage for character formation and social adjustment, exploring the relationship between bullying and socio-emotional growth is essential, particularly in urban areas like Surabaya, which have more complex social dynamics (Munawarah, 2022; Yani et al., 2023).

In the current era of globalization, bullying is one of the many problems in early childhood education. Research conducted by the ICRW (International Center for Research on Women) in 2015 found that 84% of Indonesian children experience violence at school, which is a higher percentage than cases of violence in schools in the Asia-Pacific region (Aini 2018). However, the 2019 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) study found that 41% of Indonesian children still experience bullying, which is higher than in other countries. With 22.7% of OECD 5 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) member countries, Indonesia ranks fifth out of 78 countries experiencing student abuse (Hidayati and Amalia, 2021). Bullying behavior can affect victims into adulthood. Verbal, physical, and psychological effects are some examples of the effects that can be felt by victims. Bullying clearly has a negative impact on victims. Therefore, handling victims is considered important, and educating children will greatly help prevent bullying (Hidayati and Amalia, 2021).

Preliminary observations at TK Muslimat Wonocolo Surabaya indicate that several students exhibit both bullying behavior and victimization during the learning process. For example, some children easily dominate group activities, repeat the same pattern across learning themes, and impose their will on peers. Meanwhile, children who become victims often display signs of withdrawal, fearfulness, reluctance to interact with others, and in some cases, refusal to attend school. Such behaviors suggest that bullying at an early age may significantly affect a child's ability to regulate emotions and build healthy peer relationships.

People who suffer from verbal bullying are often linked to issues inside themselves, like feeling sad, anxious, having a poor view of themselves, difficulty getting along with others, not being aware of social cues, having few friends, having bad friendships, acting inappropriately, and facing relationship challenges. Bullying is a prevalent form of violence among peers (Fitriyah, 2018).

Bullying encompasses any kind of oppressive or violent behavior carried out on purpose by one individual or a group of individuals holding greater strength or authority over another person. The intent behind this behavior is to inflict harm, and it is executed continuously. Verbal and racially motivated bullying tends to induce higher rates of depression when compared to physical bullying (Algristian et al., 2022).

Aggressive conduct is a damaging pattern that requires swift reduction due to its capacity to inflict harm and/or cause injury to others. This conduct arises from feelings of annoyance and a trigger that the person perceives as a threat. It is crucial for interventions to focus on tackling and avoiding annoyance in students, as this can significantly decrease their aggressive conduct. Furthermore, apart

from facilitating the resolution of annoyance, aiding in the formation of positive conduct when faced with threatening triggers is likewise vital to put into action (Fitriyah, 2018). To effectively address the intricate challenges faced by individuals who have experienced verbal bullying, it is essential for experts to formulate a diverse set of strategies. An illustration of this is the socio-cognitive method, which has the capacity to direct attention toward established belief systems and learning through observation (Darimis et al., 2022).

Given these concerns, this study aims to examine the impact of bullying on the social and emotional development of early childhood students in Surabaya. The findings are expected to provide deeper insights into the phenomenon, while also serving as a reference for designing preventive strategies. By doing so, educators, parents, and policymakers can work collaboratively to create safe and supportive learning environments that foster healthy socio-emotional development in children (Ariani and Prawitasari, 2024).

The results of this study indicate that although most students fall into the low category in terms of bullying behavior, negative interactions still have an impact on social-emotional development. These findings are in line with studies that state that exposure to aggressive behavior, even at low intensity, can interfere with the formation of emotional control and empathy in children (Jenkins et al., 2017).

In addition, previous studies have also found that children in school environments with unhealthy social interactions tend to have lower levels of security and self-confidence, which then manifests itself in withdrawn behavior or aggressive tendencies (Robinson and Maines, 2008). A supportive and responsive learning environment has been proven to be one of the most effective protective factors in reducing the negative impact of bullying experiences on young children (Rahayu et al., 2023).

These findings are also reinforced by UNUSA research showing that students' character and ability to manage their emotions are greatly influenced by the quality of learning interactions, teachers' communication styles, and peer relationships in the classroom (Fitriyah, 2018). Therefore, interventions that not only target the behavior of bullies but also strengthen the social-emotional skills of all students are considered more effective in creating long-term change.

METHOD

Materials

Table 1. Details of respondent characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
5 years	192	49.0%
6 years	206	51.0%
Gender		
Man	207	52.0%
Woman	191	48.0%
Family Circumstances		
Cracked	21	5.3%
Busy	83	20.9%
Ideal	294	73.9%
Economy		
Lower	48	12.1%
Intermediate	287	72.1%
Up	63	15.8%
Total	398	100%

The study included 398 students from the Surabaya branch of the Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD). All children were designated as research participants using the entire sampling technique, ensuring that each student had an equal opportunity to be a research subject. Respondent characteristics included children aged 4 to 6 years old, with diverse social backgrounds based on local demo

Sgraphics. The subject's selection was based on the assumption that adulthood is a critical period of social-emotional development, as well as a risk factor for bullying (Hurlock, 2020; Borualogo and Casas, 2021).

In a study titled "The Effect of Bullying on the Socio-Emotional Development of Early Childhood in Surabaya," the subjects were 398 young children from an early childhood education center located in Surabaya. Every child was included as a subject in the study through the utilization of total sampling, meaning all students at the institution participated. Researchers observed these children to understand the correlation between bullying behaviors and the children's socio-emotional growth. In this research, the children were the subjects of observation for bullying behaviors, taking on the role of both bullies and victims, and they served as respondents for assessing socio-emotional development, including aspects such as prosocial behavior, honesty, self-control, and respect at school and at home (Olweus, 2013).

In the Indonesian context, several studies show that preventing bullying in early childhood education through character education is essential. For example, research by (Lopa and Susilo, 2024) at SKB Mojoagung Early Childhood Education Center confirms that character education programs, including instilling values of tolerance and respect on a daily basis, are effective in preventing bullying behavior from an early age. Meanwhile, bullying prevention strategies in other early childhood education units have also been identified through character education that teaches empathy and early identification of at-risk children (Amaniyah and Prastyo, 2025). Not only that, the role of early childhood education teachers is very important in intervening to prevent bullying. Research by (Nuryati et al., 2024) describes how teacher involvement through observation, direct conversation, and case documentation can strengthen children's social-emotional experiences and reduce the level of intimidation in the classroom.

Research procedures

This research procedure is carried out using several systematic steps so that the results are valid and can be interpreted scientifically. The first step is to conduct research, which begins with the use of research instruments such as bullying and emotional development in young people. Instruments are selected based on theoretical indicators, and then their validity and reliability are tested to ensure that they are appropriate for the context of the research. This stage also includes consultation with school officials and obtaining informed consent from parents or guardians of students.

The second tahap is data collection. The researchers provided assistance to 398 students through the use of a school-based tutoring system. To assist children in overcoming their biases, the teacher provides guidance based on observational data. In addition, researchers conduct long-term observations to evaluate the results of their experiments. All activities are carried out during the learning period to ensure that the child is comfortable and in a familiar situation.

The descriptive analysis results indicated that the majority of children, precisely 68.3%, were classified within the low bullying category, whereas the social-emotional development of children was predominantly in the moderate to high range, accounting for 94.7%. This illustrates that despite the continued occurrence of bullying behaviors, a significant portion of children possess commendable social and emotional skills. Furthermore, the results from the Spearman correlation test revealed a noteworthy positive correlation between bullying behavior and social-emotional development, with a correlation coefficient (r) of 0.177 and a significance level (p) of 0.001. This value suggests that an increase in bullying behavior corresponds to a greater degree of change in the social-emotional aspects of children, although the strength of this relationship is considered weak.

The ordinal logistic regression analysis's results bolstered these discoveries with a significance value of 0.007 alongside a parameter estimate measuring 2.818, thereby implying that the advancement of social emotional capabilities exerts considerable influence upon the degree of bullying. The positive parameter estimation suggests that youngsters displaying elevated social emotional growth tend to engage in intricate social interactions with greater frequency, irrespective of their role

as either perpetrators or recipients of bullying. In summation, the results emerging from this research underscore a noteworthy correlation between bullying behaviors and the social emotional advancement witnessed in early childhood, albeit the interconnection isn't overwhelmingly powerful. These discoveries align harmoniously, elucidating how adverse social encounters can impinge upon a child's capacity for discerning and modulating their emotions, postulating that the social emotional evolution of a child transpires via social instruction processes and emotional experiences. Consequently, bullying conduct, despite manifesting at subdued intensities, persists in wielding influence over the shaping of character and the social emotional aptitudes prevalent in youngsters, thus underscoring the imperative for the instigation of preemptive strategies and the adoption of judicious remedial interventions within educational contexts.

Data collection procedures

The research data was collected using Likert scales based on indicators of bullying and emotional development. This research instrument has undergone validation and reliability testing to ensure its accuracy and usability (Sugiyono, 2017; Asmara, 2017). Bullying can be verbal, physical, or relational in nature, whereas emotional development can be measured in terms of emotion, self-esteem, ability to interact, and prosocial behavior.

The data collection process is carried out in the classroom with the assistance of a teacher so that the child can feel comfortable and reduce the possibility of bias. Pendukung observation is also carried out in order to obtain quantitative data from the subject. All procedures are carried out in accordance with the research ethics for children, namely by ensuring the integrity of the educational institution and the child's parents/guardians (Ayuni, 2021).

The research instruments are divided into two levels: bullying (verbal, physical, and relational) and social emotional development. The instrument was tested using the Likert scale with four options (strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree) and its validity and reliability were assessed before use. Data collection is carried out using a trained observer assigned by the teacher, resulting in more objective data that is consistent with the experiences of students in school.

Measurement

Data were collected using an online questionnaire distributed to early childhood teachers in Surabaya. The questionnaire consisted of a socio-demographic section and two measurement instruments developed to assess bullying behaviors and children's social-emotional development. Both instruments were constructed based on theoretical indicators derived from developmental psychology and bullying literature, then refined through expert review and preliminary testing. Because the instruments were developed in Indonesian, no linguistic back-translation process was required; however, content validation procedures were implemented to ensure conceptual clarity and age-appropriate interpretation.

A preliminary evaluation involving 60 early childhood teachers was conducted to assess clarity, cultural suitability, and item comprehension. Respondents represented four major cultural categories (Arek, Madura, Matraman, and Pandalungan) and a balanced distribution of age and gender. Cognitive feedback from this phase guided several refinements in wording and item structure. After revision, the final instrument package was disseminated to 398 teachers across Surabaya.

Socio-demographic variables

Socio-demographic data included age, sex, years of teaching experience, school location, and class level handled. These variables were used to describe respondent characteristics and contextualize variations in bullying and social-emotional outcomes.

Bullying scale

Bullying was measured using a 4 point Likert type scale assessing verbal, physical, and relational bullying indicators in early childhood settings. The scale consisted of multiple items representing

aggressive behaviors, exclusion, intimidation, teasing, and peer-directed hostility. Validity was assessed using the Corrected Item Total Correlation method with a respondent sample of 398 teachers. All bullying items exceeded the r -table threshold, indicating that each item demonstrated adequate construct validity. Reliability was examined using Cronbach's Alpha. The bullying instrument demonstrated a coefficient greater than 0.60, meeting the minimum requirement for internal consistency in behavioral research and confirming the stability of the scale.

Social-emotional development scale

Social-emotional development was assessed using items representing emotional regulation, cooperation, empathy, impulse control, and peer interaction. Items were rated on the same 4-point Likert scale. The validity test using Corrected Item-Total Correlation showed that all social-emotional development items achieved r -values higher than the r -table, indicating that all items were valid and appropriately reflected the intended developmental dimensions. Cronbach's Alpha analysis produced a reliability coefficient above 0.60, indicating acceptable internal consistency and demonstrating that the instrument reliably measured children's social-emotional functioning.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, descriptive analysis was used to summarize socio-demographic characteristics and categorize bullying and social-emotional scores. Frequency distributions indicated that bullying levels among children tended to fall into the low to moderate range, while social-emotional development varied across ordinal categories.

Second, inferential analysis was carried out to examine the relationship between variables. Spearman's rank correlation was used to assess the associative relationship between bullying and social-emotional development, yielding a statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.177$; $p = 0.001$), although with very weak strength. To further assess predictive influence, ordinal logistic regression was applied. The model demonstrated that bullying significantly predicted variations in social-emotional development categories (Model $^2 = 15.999$; $p = 0.001$), with an estimated coefficient of 2.818, indicating that increases in bullying behaviors were associated with changes in children's social-emotional outcomes.

These analytical procedures collectively demonstrate that the measurement instruments were statistically sound and that the relationship between bullying and social-emotional development is empirically supported.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings of this study reveal a significant relationship between bullying and emotional development in young people. The deskriptif analysis revealed that the majority of children (68.3%) are in the high-risk category for bullying, while 31.7% are in the low-risk category. Similarly, in the variable of emotional development, the majority of children are in the 94.7% category, with only 4% in the low category and 1.3% in the high category. This study demonstrates that while most children have a high level of bullying, their social and emotional development is still far from optimal.

The Spearman correlation coefficient yielded $r = 0.177$ with $p = 0.001$, indicating a positive relationship between bullying and emotional development. In other words, the increasing frequency of bullying experienced by or perpetrated by children has an impact on their emotional and social well-being. The ordinal regression analysis further supports this hypothesis, revealing that emotional development has a significant impact on bullying levels ($p = 0.007$; parameter estimate = 2,818). The findings indicate that emotional intelligence plays an important role in preventing and mitigating bullying among children.

This relationship can be explained using (Hurlock, 2020) theory of emotional development,

which states that an infant’s ability to express emotions, build social networks, and develop social skills is crucial in understanding how they interact with others. A child with healthy emotional social skills consistently resolves conflicts in a healthy and constructive manner, reducing the likelihood of engaging in or becoming a victim of bullying. In contrast, children with weak emotional regulation are more likely to use verbal or physical aggression as a form of punishment. Aside from it, environmental factors, such as family and school, have an impact on children’s behavior. Supportive learning environments and democratic policies can reduce the number of children who are bullied.

This is consistent with the findings of (Borualogo and Casas, 2021), who discovered that children who are frequently bullied had a higher level of subjectivity. (Hartati et al., 2020) also discovered that bullying can occur in young children and has a negative impact on their emotional development. Furthermore, (Ayuni, 2021) emphasizes the importance of character in the prevention of bullying among PAUD students. This study expands on previous findings while also making new contributions by employing three levels of analysis bullying, bullying perpetrators, and emotional development to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between the two variables.

Table 2. Distribution of bullying categorization and social development of early childhood

Aspect	Low (n)	Low (%)	Medium (n)	Medium (%)	High (n)	High (%)	Amount (n)	Amount (%)
Victims of bullying								
Victims of Verbal bullying	220	55%	176	44%	2	1%	398	100%
Victims of Physical bullying	289	73%	109	27%	0	0%	398	100%
Victims of Relational bullying	256	64%	142	36%	0	0%	398	100%
Bullying								
Verbal Bullying	273	69%	111	28%	14	3%	398	100%
Physical Bullying	266	67%	122	30%	10	3%	398	100%
Relational Bullying	251	63%	140	35%	7	2%	398	100%
Children’s social and emotional development								
Prosocial Behavior	26	7%	260	65%	112	28%	398	100%
Honesty	10	3%	62	15%	326	82%	398	100%
Self Development	4	1%	44	11%	350	88%	398	100%
Self Control	12	3%	118	30%	268	67%	398	100%
Respect at school	15	4%	54	13%	329	83%	398	100%
Respect at home	10	3%	39	10%	349	87%	398	100%

Discussion

In terms of verbal bullying, it was discovered that 220 children (55%) were in the low category, 176 children (44%) were in the middle category, and only two children (1%) were in the high category. This demonstrates that the behavior of teasing, calling names, or making fun of someone is quite common, despite the fact that it is not at a high intensity. This is consistent with the findings of (Olweus, 1993), who stated that verbal bullying is the most common form of bullying experienced by children since it is more relatable than physical bullying. However, if ignored, verbal bullying can have a negative impact on an individual’s worth and emotional development (Coloroso, 2006).

In terms of physical bullying, the majority of children, 289 (73%), are in the low category, 109 (27%) are in the middle category, and there is no one in the high category. In other words, Behaviors such as hitting, pushing, or kicking were relatively rare in the early childhood context in this study. This concept is based on (Jenkins et al., 2017) theory, which states that when a person suffers a physical injury, it is replaced with another type of injury, such as a verbal or emotional one. In other words, young people in this study are more likely to express conflict verbally than physically.

In terms of relational bullying, 256 children (64%) were in the low category, 142 children (36%) were in the middle category, and none were in the high category. This demonstrates that the respondent does not engage in a lot of pengucilan, group play, or manipulating social networks. This finding is consistent with the theory of (Kasingku, 2023), which states that relational bullying is increasing among more people, particularly as children become more aware of the complexities of social groups.

Furthermore, anak's social and emotional development is measured using a variety of indicators. According to the results of the study, 251 children (63%) are in the low category, 140 children (35%) are in the middle category, and 7 children (2%) are in the high category. Despite the fact that the majority of children have already demonstrated prosocial behavior, such as shopping, playing, or working together, there are some children that require further stimulation. This is consistent with the findings of (Yulisetyaningrum, 2019), who stated that professional development occurs through social learning, modeling, and consistent field experience.

The aspect of self-awareness also yields positive results, despite the fact that many children are unaware of their own emotions and those of others. This is consistent with (Robinson and Maines, 2008) theory of emotional intelligence, which states that self-awareness is the most important factor in emotional development. In terms of self-development, 118 children (30%) were placed in this category, indicating a lack of ability to control emotions and behaviors. This supports (Modecki et al., 2014) theory, which states that the ability to delay gratification and manage impulses grows gradually in children, necessitating training and development.

Finally, in terms of hormatology, whether at school or at home, the majority of children produce positive results. At school, 329 students (83%) expressed gratitude to their teachers and classmates, while 318 students (80%) expressed gratitude to their parents and family members. This supports (Mulyani, 2014) claim that character education that emphasizes hormat (respect) should begin at a young age in order for children to be able to respect others and develop healthy social relationships.

Overall, the study's findings demonstrate that bullying takes the form of verbal and relational abuse directed at children, regardless of its intensity. Furthermore, emotional components such as prosocial conduct, self-esteem, self-development, and good feelings help to promote positive growth, even if some areas need to be improved. As a result, this notion is founded on emotional development theory, which highlights the need of positive environmental stimulation, good behavior, and intervention in reducing the detrimental impacts of bullying on children (Astuti, 2008).

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the relationship between bullying behavior and social-emotional development in early childhood. The results showed that most children were in the low category of bullying behavior, while the majority demonstrated moderate levels of social-emotional development. Statistical analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between bullying and social-emotional development ($p = 0.001$; $r = 0.177$), indicating that children's involvement in bullying is related to their ability to regulate emotions, build social interactions, and display prosocial behavior. Ordinal logistic regression further confirmed that social-emotional development significantly affects the level of bullying ($p = 0.007$; parameter estimate = 2.818). These findings emphasize the importance of strengthening social-emotional skills as a preventive effort against bullying in early childhood education settings. Future research is recommended to explore intervention models that can effectively enhance children's social-emotional competence while reducing bullying behavior.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Almaziyah (A) and Fifi Khoirul Fitriyah (FKF) was responsible for conceptualization, methodology, writing original draft, data curation, resources, supervision, and project administration. Berda Asmara (BA) contributed to conceptualization and investigation. Jauharotur Rihlah (JR) contributed

to formal analysis and visualization. Rachma Aliefie Putri (RAP) contributed to data curation and resources. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

DECLARATION

The author declares that this research was conducted independently and that the manuscript is an original work which has not been published or submitted elsewhere. The author states that there is no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article. This study did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. All ethical considerations in data collection and analysis were followed to ensure the validity and integrity of the research.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The dataset generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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