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A qualitative exploration of factors influencing bullying behavior in schools

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Abstract

Background: Bullying in schools is a growing global problem that affects victims, perpetrators, and the surrounding environment. Environmental and individual factors, such as family, mass media, and social pressure, play a significant role in the emergence of bullying behavior. In Indonesia, this phenomenon is still often overlooked, even though it has long-term consequences for students' psychological and academic well-being.

Purpose: To analyze the factors that contribute to bullying behavior in schools.

Method: A descriptive qualitative design with an exploratory focus was conducted in April 2025 at State Vocational High School 1 Banda Aceh. A total sampling technique was utilized, resulting in the selection of four participants, consisting of key informants including teachers and the headmaster. Data collection was carried out through triangulation, integrating multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical perspectives to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings. In-depth interviews served as the primary data collection method. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and the extraction of core meanings from the participants' narratives.

Results: Bullying behavior among students is influenced by family, media, and peer environments. A lack of support or harsh treatment at home can lead children to imitate negative behavior at school, while exposure to violent media and poor parental supervision further contribute to aggression. Peer pressure also plays a significant role, as teenagers often follow group behavior to feel accepted.

Conclusion: Preventing bullying requires a comprehensive approach involving families, schools and communities.

Keywords: Bullying behavior; Peer pressure; School environments; Student behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying behavior in school environments is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors. Bullying has become a global problem that continues to increase, including in Indonesia, although it often receives less attention. This phenomenon often occurs in school environments and is not something new, both nationally and internationally (Dewi, 2020). Violence in schools remains an unresolved problem and is increasing at an alarming rate. One form of behavior that is often discussed is bullying, which involves repeated acts of oppression against weaker individuals (Ruslan, & Rezkiani, 2023).

In social life, bullying is often considered a form of violence that is normal and often ignored. This term is increasingly widely known thanks to the many news reports in the media (Nickerson, 2019). The phenomenon of bullying has been going on in various countries for a long time. Almost all students have experienced or been involved in this action during their school years. Although educational goals have been well designed, the reality is that various problems still occur in the world of education, including cases of bullying (Hombing, & Yanti, 2023).

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Some people, even educators, still consider bullying as a common thing in teenage life and nothing to worry about. Some people think that bullying is just part of children's interactions or ways of playing (Saputri, Mustari, Sawaludin, & Kurniawansyah, 2024). Bullying is known by various terms such as extortion, exclusion, and intimidation. In the school environment, bullying cases can take the form of fights between students, seniors hurting their juniors, theft, and various other forms of violence. The impact of bullying is not only felt by the victim but also by the perpetrator. Students who are accustomed to bullying are at high risk of becoming criminals, both as teenagers and as adults (Syah, & Hermawati, 2018).

Both victims and perpetrators of bullying have their own characteristics. Victims of bullying tend to behave differently from most of their peers. Physically, they may be smaller, taller, or heavier than children their age. In addition, they may come from different ethnic, cultural, or religious backgrounds, have special talents, or experience certain disabilities such as learning disabilities or developmental delays (Dewi, Puri, Nurhaniza, & Susti, 2025).

Children who are victims of bullying are generally shy, anxious, lack self-confidence, quiet, and often feel insecure. On the other hand, bullies tend to show aggressive, hyperactive, and destructive behavior. They enjoy dominating others, get angry easily, have difficulty controlling their emotions, and have a low tolerance for frustration. They also often misinterpret other people's behavior as a threat, so they easily show hostility towards their peers (Nadia, 2024).

The phenomenon of bullying is not only influenced by one single factor, but is the result of various interrelated factors (Jenkins, Demaray, & Tennant, 2017). Individual factors, such as levels of aggression, lack of empathy, and the urge to dominate, are often the main triggers for bullying behavior. Children who have low self-control or often experience emotional

stress are more likely to engage in bullying (Killer, Bussey, Hawes, & Hunt, 2019). Biological factors, such as hormonal imbalances or certain behavioral disorders, can also increase a person's tendency to engage in bullying (Zhou, Zhou, Shen, Khairani, & Saibon, 2023).

The impact of bullying behavior is not only felt by the victim, but also by the perpetrator and the surrounding environment. Victims of bullying are at risk of experiencing psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and low self-confidence, which can impact their academic achievement and social life (Gursoy, Aral, Oz, Aysu, & Garcia, 2024). On the other hand, perpetrators of bullying also have the potential to experience behavioral problems in the future, including involvement in criminal acts or difficulty in establishing healthy social relationships (Rachmawati, 2024).

RESEARCH METHOD

A descriptive qualitative design with an exploratory emphasis was carried out in April 2025 at State Vocational High School 1 Banda Aceh. Employing a total sampling strategy, four key informants—comprising teachers and the headmaster—were included.

Data were gathered through triangulation, integrating diverse sources, methods, and theoretical lenses to bolster the study's validity. The primary means of data collection was in-depth, open-ended interviews, which probed participants' perspectives on potential interventions and on the multifaceted origins of verbal bullying—namely, personal, familial, social, school-related, and academic influences.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis technique to identify important information and understand the core meaning of each data.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 1. Informants' Characteristics (N=4)

Informant Code	Department
N	Head Master
NH	Teacher
FR	Teacher
RJU	Teacher

Table 1 elicits the informants characteristics, consisting of a head master and three teachers.

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Table 2. Results of Indepth Interview

Structured Interview	Outcome	Data review	Conclusion
Do you think the family culture plays a role in the rise in bullying behavior at school? If so, how does it impact it?	Some students grow up in a less supportive family environment, where parents often use harsh language or are harsh to their children. Actions such as shouting or intimidating treatment can make children feel stressed, so they tend to imitate this behavior in the school environment. Given that most of the child's time is spent at home and interacting with parents, family factors are one of the main causes of bullying behavior	Observation	Some students come from unsupportive families where parents use harsh language or behavior. This can cause stress and lead children to imitate such behavior at school. Since children spend most of their time at home, family influences are a major factor in the development of bullying behavior.
Does smartphone use influence students' social and academic life?	The use of smartphones often disrupts students' concentration in learning. Some students even experience social jealousy towards their friends who have cellphones, which can encourage them to take negative actions, such as stealing or forcing their parents to buy them cellphones so they don't feel left behind	Observation	The use of smartphones can distract students from learning and create social jealousy, leading to negative behaviors like stealing or pressuring parents to buy them phones to avoid feeling left out.
How does mass media influence aggressive behavior in children, and what role does parental supervision play?	Mass media, along with family factors, influences aggressive behavior in children. Smartphones can distract students and cause social jealousy, leading to negative actions like stealing or pressuring parents. Violent content on TV, video games, and movies also affects children's behavior, especially when parental supervision is lacking. Research shows that about 80% of negative behavior in children is influenced by media. Therefore, parental supervision and guidance about media impact are crucial.	Observation	Mass media, including smartphones and violent content on TV and games, significantly influences aggressive behavior in children, often causing distraction and social jealousy. Parental supervision and guidance are essential to mitigate these negative effects and promote healthy behavior.
How do peer groups influence student behavior?	Playgroups have a big influence on student behavior. Many students feel freer when they are out of parental supervision, so they tend to follow whatever their friends do. In this social environment, peer pressure often makes students feel like they have to follow the will of the group in order to be accepted. If they refuse, they can be considered unsolid and ostracized. Because they are still in the stage of emotional development, teenagers are more easily influenced by their environment and tend to imitate the behavior of their friends without thinking twice.	Observation	Playgroups strongly influence student behavior because students feel freer without parental supervision and tend to follow their friends. Peer pressure makes them want to fit in, and if they refuse, they risk being excluded. Since teenagers are still developing emotionally, they are more easily influenced and often imitate their friends' behavior without much thought.

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The table presents findings from structured interviews, revealing that bullying behavior among students is shaped by multiple interrelated factors. The family environment emerges as a significant influence, particularly in cases where children experience harsh treatment or a lack of emotional support at home, prompting them to replicate such behaviors within the school setting. Additionally, mass media—including smartphones, violent television programs, video games, and films—can impair students' focus and contribute to the development of negative behaviors, such as social envy and aggression, especially when parental supervision is limited. Furthermore, peer influence plays a crucial role, as adolescents are often pressured to conform to group norms, leading them to imitate peers' behavior in pursuit of social acceptance. Collectively, these findings highlight the family, media exposure, and peer group dynamics as central contributors to the occurrence of bullying among students.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that the main factors contributing to bullying behavior among students are family environment, mass media, and peer influence. Family environment plays an important role in shaping bullying behavior among students. Harsh and intimidating parenting patterns can trigger aggressive behavior in children (Lee, Kim, Hong, & Marsack, 2021). The study shows that family factors, such as parental support and a disciplined atmosphere at home, have a significant effect on bullying behavior. When children do not receive adequate emotional support from their parents, they are more vulnerable to engaging in bullying behavior, either as perpetrators or victims (Aidomojie, Oghounu, & Akpochafo, 2022).

Interparental violence, parental substance abuse, and physical and psychological neglect of children are positively associated with bullying behavior in children. These adverse childhood experiences may increase a child's risk of engaging in bullying behavior (Nocentini, Fiorentini, Di Paola, & Menesini, 2019). Disharmonious parenting, lack of deep communication, and conflict within the family can encourage children to engage in bullying. Conversely, positive parenting and a warm family atmosphere can reduce this risk (Dedova, & Banik, 2024).

Mass media also contributes to bullying behavior. Exposure to violent content on television, video

games, and movies can shape negative attitudes in students. The duration of time spent on social media during weekends was correlated with an increased risk of involvement in bullying. Without parental supervision, children can imitate aggressive behavior that they see in the media (Sabramani, Idris, Ismail, Nadarajaw, Zakaria, & Kamaluddin, 2021).

Several studies have shown a positive relationship between exposure to media related to bullying and bullying behavior, both in traditional and cyber forms. A study among adolescents in China found that exposure to media related to bullying was associated with increased bullying behavior, especially among adolescents with weak anti-bullying attitude (Teng, Nie, Stomski, Liu, & Guo, 2023).

Peer influence is another significant factor. Students often follow group behavior to be accepted in society, even if the behavior is negative. Research shows that status hierarchies and group norms within the classroom can influence bullying dynamics. Students who feel pressured to conform to the group are more likely to engage in bullying behavior (Saarento, Garandeau, & Salmivalli, 2015).

Peer pressure has a significant relationship with bullying behavior in early adolescence. In the school environment, adolescents often spend time with peers, which can influence their behavior, including bullying. This study found that there was a significant relationship between peer pressure and bullying behavior, indicating the importance of education about healthy peer relationships to prevent bullying (Nurhidayah, Aryanti, Suhendar, & Lukman, 2021).

Research also shows that previous experiences of being a victim of bullying can increase the likelihood of someone becoming a bully in the future. This shows the importance of early intervention to prevent the ongoing cycle of violence. To overcome the problem of bullying, a comprehensive approach is needed that involves families, schools, and communities. Providing ongoing education about the dangers of bullying and instilling a sense of mutual respect in children are important steps. Reducing exposure to violent content in the media can also help (Wang, & Chen, 2023).

Factors in the results of this study can strengthen the tendency of bullying behavior in schools. For example, children who grow up in a less harmonious family environment and often get pressure from their parents tend to seek validation in their friendship environment. If they are in a group that supports

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aggressive behavior, their risk of being involved in bullying becomes higher (Pasaleron, Asril, Tuncer, Jaafar, Rustiya, & Rosmerina, 2023). The consumption of media content containing elements of violence further strengthens the mindset that bullying behavior is something that is acceptable or even socially beneficial. This shows that family environment, media, and peer factors are not stand-alone factors, but interact with each other in shaping student behavior (Dardas Shahrour, Al-Khayat, Sweis, & Pan, 2022).

The forms of bullying that occur are not only physical, but also verbal and psychological. Students who are exposed to social media intensively often use the platform as a means of online bullying (cyberbullying). This form of bullying is increasingly prevalent along with the increasing use of technology among adolescents. Students who experience peer pressure or who seek social attention often use social media to intimidate or demean others (Masalha, Al-Bashtawy, Al-Bashtawy, Shiyyab, Al-Bashtawy, Al-Khawaldeh, & Al-Bashtawy, 2021). The role of schools in providing education related to ethics in communicating in the digital world is becoming increasingly important in order to prevent the escalation of online bullying behavior (Said-Hung, Gonzalez, & Pallarez, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Bullying behavior among students is influenced by family, media, and peer environments. A lack of support or harsh treatment at home can lead children to imitate negative behavior at school, while exposure to violent media and poor parental supervision further contribute to aggression. Peer pressure also plays a significant role, as teenagers often follow group behavior to feel accepted.

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