

FAMILY VARIABLES AND BULLYING AMONG BRAZILIAN ADOLESCENTS: A MIXED STUDY

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Abstract

Bullying is a frequent public health problem in developing countries. This is the first mixed study that investigates the interaction between the quality of family interactions and bullying among Brazilian students. 2,354 adolescents participated in the study. Two scales and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Statistical analyses and content analysis using Atlas.TI software were developed. The Bioecological Theory of Development was adopted as the theoretical-methodological framework. The students not involved in bullying situations presented better family interactions. Negative communication, negative marital interaction, and corporal punishment emerged as critical factors for the involvement in bullying situations. Rules, parental supervision and positive family aspects are protective factors. The family is responsible for the process of moral development and providing essential support to victims. The debate should be broadened in the health field in order to organize anti-bullying interventions focusing on a family approach.

KEY WORDS: *school health, bullying, risk behaviors, family climate.*

Resumen

El acoso escolar es un problema frecuente de salud pública en los países en desarrollo. Este es el primer estudio mixto que investiga la interacción entre la calidad de las interacciones familiares y el acoso escolar entre estudiantes brasileños. Participaron 2.354 adolescentes. Se utilizaron dos escalas y entrevistas semiestructuradas para la recogida de datos. Se desarrollaron análisis estadísticos y análisis de contenido en el software Atlas.TI. La teoría bioecológica de desarrollo fue adoptada como referente teórico-metodológico. Los estudiantes no involucrados en situaciones de acoso escolar presentan mejores interacciones familiares. La comunicación negativa, el clima conyugal negativo y el castigo corporal surgieron como factores críticos para la participación en situaciones de acoso escolar. Las reglas, la supervisión parental y los aspectos familiares positivos aparecieron como factores de protección. La familia es responsable del proceso de

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desarrollo moral y del apoyo esencial a las víctimas. El debate se ha ampliado en el campo de la salud para que se organicen intervenciones antiacoso con el enfoque en la familia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *salud escolar, acoso, conductas de riesgo, clima familiar.*

Introduction

Bullying is a type of violence that affects the education and healthy development of school-aged adolescents. It is characterized by intention, repetitive aggression, and a power imbalance (Avilés, Irurtia, García-Lopez, & Caballo, 2011; Olweus, 2013). Exposure to bullying is linked to personal determinants (e.g., moral development, etc.), contextual determinants (e.g., school climate, etc.), and familial determinants (e.g., communication, parental style, etc.) (Oliveira, Silva, Sampaio, & Silva, 2017). Much existing research already identifies the reasons for the occurrence of bullying in schools, and has revealed that group organization and social issues are essential in the dynamics of bullying (Burns, Maycock, Cross, & Brown, 2008; Oliveira et al., 2015). It is a multi-determined phenomenon and this study focuses on familial interactions.

In the various developing countries in Latin America, this phenomenon has also been the object of studies, as increased prevalence rates have been verified together with an increase in the ways in which it is manifested; that is, it has assumed more severe aspects that reflect social inequalities (Fleming & Jacobsen, 2010). Specifically in Brazil, the National Survey of School Health (2012), conducted with 109,104 adolescent students, reports that 28% of the sample was involved with bullying, either as victims or bullies (Oliveira et al., 2015). Bullying has been the norm in social relationships and accepted as a way to resolve conflicts among students (Delprato, Akyepong, & Dunne, 2017).

The relationship between bullying and family variables has been documented from the time research began to address the phenomenon (Olweus, 1980). Factors associated with a lower occurrence of bullying, such as in the case of families in which both parental figures are present (Shetgiri, Lin, & Flores, 2013), families in which there are understanding and supportive parents, parents who check homework and are aware of how their children spend free time (Abdirahman, Fleming, & Jacobsen, 2013; Oliveira et al., 2017; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009), parents who establish good communication (Shetgiri et al., 2013), families in which there are feelings of involvement and protection (Yamagata et al., 2013), families that encourage positive relationships and a good family climate (Yamagata et al., 2013), have been verified. On the other hand, factors that favor vulnerability to the occurrence of bullying include: corporal punishment as a disciplinary strategy (Zottis, Sallum, Isolan, Manfro, & Heldt); family conflicts (Bibou-Nakou, Tsiantis, Assimopoulos, & Chatzilambou, 2013); lack of supervision (Tortorelli, Carreiro, & Araújo, 2010); communication problems (Shetgiri et al., 2013); negative perceptions regarding family (Oliveira et al., 2017); and domestic violence (Oliveira et al., 2017; Tortorelli et al., 2010).

It is noted that the scientific literature shows that the way in which family relationships develop can become a protective or risk factor for the practice of bullying, victimization or the construction of responses to interpersonal conflicts (Patton, Hong, William, & Allen-Meaers, 2013; Uribe, Orcasita, & Gomés, 2012). In this sense, when family relationships are not positive, students tend to partner with peers to engage in violent behavior in an attempt to alleviate tensions or respond to family-related frustrations or conflicts. One of the possible explanations for this is that students who engage in bullying have learned in the family to use violence as a response to conflicts and social tensions (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010; Erginoz et al., 2015).

In this study, the interface among the variables investigated was analyzed from the perspective of the bioecological theory of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). This approach privileged a set of processes through which singularities and contexts interact, influencing the development of aggressive behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). The bioecological theory of development is structured with five interconnected components: i) individual; ii) microsystem (families, schools); iii) mesosystem (family and school); iv) exosystem (the parents' professional activities); and v) macrosystem (system of beliefs and culture, public policies) (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

The objective was to assess the association between the quality of family interactions and bullying among Brazilian adolescents. This is the first mixed Brazilian study investigating the existence of protective and vulnerability factors of family interactions in regard to bullying. We hypothesized that students not involved in bullying situations have better quality indices of family interactions compared to bullies, victims and victims-bullies of the bullying situations.

Method

Participants

A total of 2,354 primary and middle school students (girls=50.7%), aged between 10 and 19 years (mean age=14.5 years old, $SD=2.0$ years), from 11 public schools located in a Brazilian city took part in the study's quantitative stage. The majority of the students were in primary school (58.9%). The sample was stratified according to the location and number of students enrolled in the schools. The Probability Proportional to Size sampling method was used. Five students (from each school) participating in the quantitative stage, that is, 55 students, (girls= 47.0%, mean age $M= 15$ years old, $SD= 2.0$ year) were randomly drawn to take part in the qualitative stage, as well.

Instruments

- a) *Aggression and Victimization Among Peers Scale* (Cunha, Weber, & Steiner Neto, 2011) is an instrument composed of 18 questions, 10 items of which assess bullying behaviors (subscale, $\alpha=.83$) and eight items assess victimization (subscale, $\alpha=.84$). Examples of affirmative questions were: I

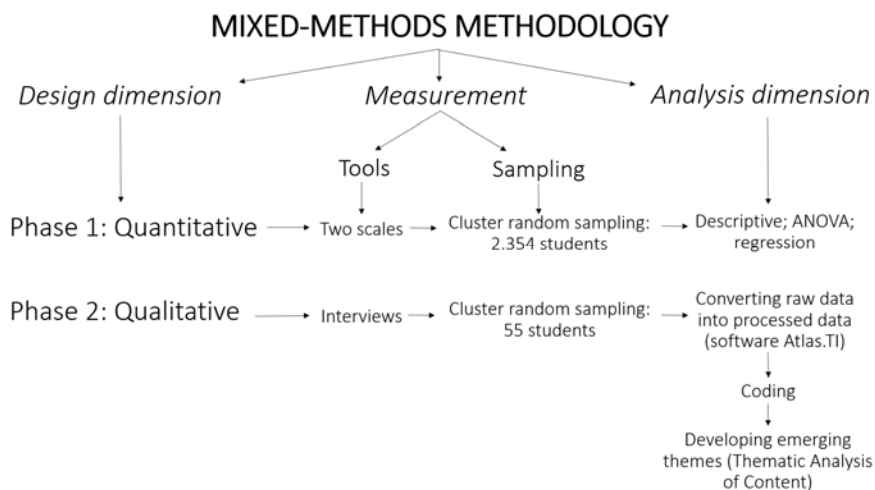
- provoked my schoolmates; I cursed at my schoolmates; my schoolmates stole, messed up or ruined my things. The scale is assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1= never; 2= almost never; 3= sometimes; 4= always; 5= almost always). The structure of the scale in relation to the sample, was tested through factor analysis and the degree of fit was verified by KMO (.90 and .89) and Bartlett's Test ($p=.00$).
- b) *Family Interaction Quality Scale* (Weber, Salvador, & Brandenburg, 2011) is an instrument composed of 40 questions, 28 items assessing positive aspects (subscale, $\alpha=.84$) and 12 items assessing negative aspects (subscale, $\alpha=.65$) of family interaction. Examples of affirmative questions include: my parents are affectionate to each other; my parents use profanity toward me; my parents thank me when I help them. The scale is assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1= never; 2= almost never; 3= sometimes; 4= always; 5= almost always). The scale structure in relation to the sample was tested using factor analysis and degrees of fit were verified by KMO (.86 and .60) and Bartlett's Test ($p= .00$).
 - c) *Semi-structured interviews* were held in which a script was used to guide the interviews and included statements/questions such as: Please, tell me how is your relationship with your parents. What is bullying, in your opinion? Do you think that the manner in which things happen at home influences the way things happen at school with you? Follow-up questions were also used to clarify, illustrate or explore the participants' answers (e.g., what do you mean? Can you give me an example?).

Procedure

Addressing bullying by using the mixed method enables the identification of different types of evidence. Therefore, two scales were first applied to 1) identify bullying or victimization and 2) assess the quality of the adolescents' family interactions. Afterward, semi-structured interviews held with a group of participants more deeply revealed aspects related to bullying and victimization and aspects from the adolescents' family context. Figure 1 presents the study's flowchart.

Data were collected between August and October 2014. The scales were applied collectively in each classroom and took 50 minutes, on average (the duration of a class). Afterwards, a group of students was drawn from among those who completed the scales, to respond to the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted by the primary researcher in a private room without the presence of schoolmates or teachers. Each interview took 12 minutes on average. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The excerpts of interviews selected for this manuscript were edited to facilitate making the translation to English. Previously, the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of São Paulo (Report 301/2013) and complied with recommendations for research involving human subjects.

Figure 1
Flowchart of the research design. Brazil, 2017



Data analysis

The quantitative analysis occurred in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences versão 21.0 software (SPSS Inc., 2012), and included descriptive data, variance analysis (ANOVA and Turkey's post hoc test) and logistic regression models. Significance was established at $p < .05$.

The qualitative analysis occurred in Atlas.TI version 7 (Friese, 2015) software and involved two levels: 1) coding based on exhaustive reading of the interviews; and 2) establishment of thematic categories according to the principles of thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2011). In the construction phase of the thematic categories, the codes were grouped by thematic similarity into minimal categories that expressed a central idea, in the following steps: pre-analysis; analytical description; and inferential interpretation (Bardin, 2011). Three thematic categories emerged from the data: 1) Inter-relationships and how family influences what happens at school; 2) Family as a space for ethical and moral development; 3) Synergies and family- and school-based coping. The analysis and interpretation of results were guided by the bioecological theory of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

Results

Findings regarding the quantitative stage

The 2,354 participants were assigned to four groups (clusters): 1) bullies (10.3%); 2) victims (10.1%); 3) victim-bullies (5.4%); and 4) non-involved individuals (74.2%). Boys were more frequently played the role of bullies (7.4%) and victim-bullies (3.9%), while the girls were more frequently victims (5.2%). Most

participants (57.2%) had both parents at home. The maternal figure was present in 90% of the students' families.

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) and *post hoc* comparisons revealed statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) between the groups of students in regard to the quality of family interactions (Table 1).

Table 1

ANOVA according to the group of students and in relation to the quality of the general family interaction. Brazil, 2017

Dimensions - quality of family interaction	Clusters								Z	p
	Non-involvement		Bullies		Victims		Victims-bullies			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Involvement	3.94 ^b	0.89	3.62 ^a	0.91	3.73 ^a	1.04	3.71 ^a	1.04	12.39	.00
Rules and monitoring	4.21 ^c	0.78	3.85 ^a	0.82	4.06 ^{bc}	0.87	4.00 ^{ab}	0.85	17.07	.00
Physical punishment	1.51 ^a	0.74	1.72 ^b	0.85	1.96 ^c	1.00	2.06 ^c	1.20	38.52	.00
Positive communication	3.03 ^b	1.11	2.66 ^a	1.08	2.88 ^{ab}	1.15	2.82 ^{ab}	1.07	9.35	.00
Negative communication	2.02 ^a	0.84	2.51 ^b	0.92	2.54 ^b	1.09	2.70 ^b	1.09	56.24	.00
Positive marital climate	3.22 ^b	1.24	3.00 ^a	1.25	3.02 ^{ab}	1.28	3.06 ^{ab}	1.29	3.80	.01
Negative conjugal climate	1.96 ^a	0.92	2.33 ^b	1.05	2.25 ^b	1.12	2.42 ^b	1.20	20.48	.00
Model	3.98 ^b	0.89	3.73 ^a	0.96	3.84 ^{ab}	0.94	3.79 ^{ab}	1.13	7.86	.00
Feeling of sons	4.46 ^b	0.74	4.24 ^a	0.89	4.31 ^{ab}	0.85	4.21 ^a	1.06	10.42	.00

Note: In the lines, the means with equal letters do not differentiate each other by Tukey's post-test ($p < .05$), being a < b < c.

The students not involved with bullying presented greater means on all the positive scales, separating them from the remaining groups, according to ANOVA. Bullies, victims and victim-bullies acquired higher means than students not involved with bullying in regard to the negative scales.

Logistic regression revealed that the variable "sex" was significantly associated with the four groups of students. Being a male was significant associated with being a bully, a victim, and a victim-bully. Girls were associated with the group of non-involved students. These data demonstrate greater male vulnerability to involvement in bullying when compared to girls. Age was significantly associated only with the groups of victims and non-involved students. The lower the age of the students, the greater the possibility of victimization, and with increasing age were smaller the chance for students to be qualified in one of three groups of involvement with bullying situations.

In regard to the variables concerning the quality of family interactions, negative communication, negative marital climate, and corporal punishment were dimensions associated with this and dimensions that predicted the status of students, i.e. bullies, victims, or victim-bullies. Only the dimension "rules and supervision" appeared as a protective factor in relation to the non-involvement of students in bullying situations, especially in regard to the practice of bullying (Table 2).

Table 2
Quality factors of family interaction associated with the involvement or non-involvement of students in bullying situations. Brazil, 2017

Variables	Bullies			Victims			Victims-bullies			Non-involved			
	OR	CI 95%		OR	CI 95%		OR	CI 95%		OR	CI 95%		
		I.L.	U.L.		I.L.	U.L.		I.L.	U.L.		I.L.	U.L.	
Intercept	0.01			0.12			0.00			12.47			.00
Sex	3.69	2.83	4.80	1.57	1.23	2.00	3.23	2.12	4.90	0.41	0.33	0.50	.00
Age	1.05	0.99	1.12	0.87	0.81	0.92	1.00	0.91	1.11	1.07	1.01	1.12	.02
Involvement	1.07	0.84	1.35	1.05	0.83	1.33	1.27	0.87	1.84	0.98	0.80	1.19	.83
Rules and monitoring	0.80	0.67	0.94	0.97	0.81	1.15	0.98	0.75	1.29	1.21	1.04	1.40	.01
Physical punishment	1.09	0.94	1.26	1.26	1.09	1.45	1.22	0.99	1.51	0.84	0.74	0.95	.01
Positive communication	0.92	0.80	1.05	1.00	0.88	1.14	0.96	0.78	1.18	1.05	0.94	1.17	.40
Negative communication	1.69	1.43	2.01	1.81	1.52	2.15	1.80	1.38	2.34	0.53	0.46	0.62	.00
Positive marital climate	1.04	0.93	1.16	0.97	0.87	1.08	1.01	0.85	1.21	1.01	0.92	1.10	.92
Negative conjugal climate	1.17	1.02	1.33	1.01	0.89	1.16	1.08	0.88	1.33	0.91	0.81	1.02	.09
Model	0.97	0.80	1.16	1.03	0.85	1.24	0.99	0.74	1.32	1.00	0.85	1.17	.96
Feeling of sons	1.14	0.90	1.44	1.09	0.86	1.39	0.92	0.64	1.32	0.84	0.68	1.03	.09

Note: I.L.= Inferior limit; U.L.= Upper limit.

Findings from the qualitative stage

Thematic category 1: Inter-relationships and the influence of families on what happens at school

Data analysis revealed that the families of adolescents were perceived as positive, with good quality family interaction. The participants reported their parents verbally and physically manifested affection, were sensitive to acknowledge and provide support for the children's problems, and maintained good communication with children and a good marital climate. According to the adolescents, the family seems to be what exerts the most influence and is related to the way students act at school so that conflicts or extreme situations (e.g., lack of communication, fights, corporal punishment, etc.) may result in bullying. Parents who experience excessive work hours and poor maternal health were also reported as being part of negative experiences within the family sphere.

Excerpts of the adolescents' reports:

My mother likes me and I like her. (Girl 43, 16 years old, non-involved)

My parents have never fought, never spanked or scolded me. (Boy 16, 12 years old, victim)

At home, all conflicts are resolved through dialogue. (Girl 38, 17 years old, bully)

Relationships in my family are good. (Girl 46, 14 years old, bystander)

My mom and I do not talk. (Girl 47, 17 years old, bystander)

When parents spank their children, they provide a bad example. (Girl 28, 13 years old, victim)

We do not spend much time with my mom because she works a lot. (Boy 40, 18 years old, bully)

My mom has stress problems and yells at me a lot. (Girl 13, 13 years old, victim)

Thematic category 2: Family as a space for ethical and moral development

The transmission of principles, values and what is "right or wrong" reported by the participants revealed the family's educational function and its role in ethical and moral development. Nonetheless, a good formative family base did not stop students from practicing bullying. Bullies used moral disengagement to justify their aggressions. Boys were more apathetic or indifferent to bullying situations they witnessed at school.

Excerpts of the adolescents' reports:

You inherit customs and values from your family (Girl 9, 17 years old, bully)

The family influences your education, the way you treat your classmates. (Girl 21, 12 years old, victim)

You keep mocking, but we're just joking. (Girl 38, 17 years old, bully)

I excluded the guy because he was annoying. (Boy 18, 13 years old, bully)

I was influenced by the others: I followed like a sheep. (Girl 38, 17 years, bully)

I think it's a good thing not to do anything when I witness bullying, so I won't be bullied, as well. (Boy 15, 12 years old, bystander)

Thematic category 3: Synergies and family- and school-based coping

Some victims asked their families for help and some asked adults at school for help. In general, they had few people in their support networks. The strategy most frequently used in these cases was reporting the aggressions they faced. Parents or legal guardians went to the schools and sought a solution together with the schools' principals. Some adolescents did not ask for help. The victims reported that parents often encouraged them to ignore the aggressions.

Excerpts of the adolescents' reports:

My mom went to the school to solve the problem. (Boy 42, 16 years old, victim)

I talked to the teachers but they did not solve the problem. (Girl 7, 16 years old, victim)

I didn't tell my mom, to avoid being even more ridiculed. (Girl 23, 18 years old, victim)

My mom told me to lay low and ignore them. (Boy 35, 13 years old, victim)

Discussion

This study employed mixed methods to analyze and understand the relationship between the quality of family interactions and the involvement of adolescents in bullying situations. The results showed that aspects of family interactions are associated with the phenomenon. The family and the behavior of parents were perceived by adolescents as a space to develop ethics and morality. The support of parents was also a relevant aspect for the victims.

The main results strengthen the hypotheses proposed in the literature regarding the influence of family interactions on the occurrence of bullying. In agreement with the Bioecological Theory of Development and previous studies, most of this study's findings are concentrated in the microsystem sphere. Repeated experiences in the family microsystem lead adolescents to internalize behavior patterns and attitudes that guide social conduct (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2015; Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Patton et al., 2013). According to the ecological model of development, the strategies learned and values shared in the family context are reproduced in interaction with schoolmates (Brubacher, Fondacaro, Brank, Brown, & Miller, 2009).

Studies revealed that the families of bullies and victims were less functional than those of students not involved with bullying (Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2010; Uribe, Orcasita, & Gomés, 2012). The more dysfunctional a family perceives itself to be, the greater the likelihood of students becoming involved in bullying situations (Higueta-Gutierrez & Cardona-Arias, 2017). Family dysfunction is associated with difficulties in negotiating and cooperating with parents, poor social skills, inappropriate or nonexistent communication patterns, or lack of demonstrations of love and affection.

On the other hand, rules and parental supervision, as verified in the quantitative analysis, and good levels of involvement, communication and positive marital climate, as observed in the adolescents' reports, are examples of aspects of family interactions that can be explored as protective factors. Studies reveal that when these aspects are present in families, they improve the satisfaction of children in the domestic environment and modulate good relationships for these adolescents with

their schoolmates (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2013; Losel & Bender, 2014; Oliveira et al., 2017), indicating that a positive perception of family functionality and climate is an indicator of less involvement in bullying (Higueta-Gutiérrez & Cardona-Arias, 2017).

The role of parents and legal guardians in helping adolescents to cope with bullying shows the relevance of the family not only as a factor that can facilitate or inhibit bullying, but also as an element that is able to change the histories of students already involved with the phenomenon. This aspect is important especially when victimized students seem unable to break the cycle of violence or find appropriate coping strategies on their own, which requires effective intervention on the part of parents or legal guardians (Borsa, Petrucci, & Koller, 2015). Therefore, family environments perceived to be negative do not favor reporting or encourage students who are experiencing victimization to request help.

Moral and ethical development that is initiated in the family microsystem can also be included in the macrosystem sphere. These issues are expressed in the individual sphere but are interconnected with values and beliefs disseminated socially and culturally. These values and beliefs are shared at home and then interpreted and transported into the school universe. In this sense, students reported that their families helped them to understand social rules and standards, inducing positive behaviors or inhibiting deviant conduct. In the course of development, the behaviors of parental figures (fathers, mothers or legal guardians) can be internalized by children and adolescents and applied in their interactions with schoolmates (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Patton et al., 2013).

Objective aspects of families in developing countries, however, do not allow them to be efficient in raising their children all the time. Less efficient upbringing may not occur due to neglect, but rather may be due to ecological issues that overlap and do not allow for greater affection and involvement (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Patton et al., 2013). These ecological issues are manifested by work overload that parents and legal guardians must face in order to support their families, or by populations that are psychologically ill. This is a context that brings with it important implications for policymaking and social programs intended to strengthen bonds, rather than strictly being focused on disease or individual vulnerability. Additionally, this context demands of two or more sectors (e.g., health, education) actions to debate complex topics such as bullying.

It is emphasized that, in relation to other investigations about the interface between bullying and family, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies is the strength of the study. The use of mixed methods improved understanding of bullying among adolescents and the interface with family interactions. In addition, the study is one of the first from this perspective with a large number of participants in a developing country in Latin America.

Also noteworthy is that students from families presenting negative interactions may increase the risk of this phenomenon occurring in schools (Oliveira et al., 2017). Some positive aspects, however, may have an inverse effect (Oliveira et al., 2017). In this sense, information concerning the different determinants of this phenomenon is necessary for planning effective anti-bullying interventions based on the health promotion of students (Oliveira et al., 2017). Such information can be obtained through studies such as this one to contribute to the debate concerning

bullying in the field of health and to improve understanding regarding bullying. This study's results present insights for the practice of PHC workers and those working in schools in developing countries, such as Brazil, where it is seldom the case that there is healthcare staff in the exclusive service of schools.

Therefore, the creation of an anti-bullying culture requires actions such as: 1) home visits focusing on the strengthening of family bonds; 2) providing guidance to parents addressing symptoms that favor the identification of bullying or victimization; 3) promoting information regarding the protective power of parental supervision, the establishment of rules, keeping open positive communication channels and manifesting affection; 4) developing greater awareness among students concerning the importance of asking for help or helping victims; and 5) promoting actions in schools regarding healthy lifestyles, including aspects concerning ethical and moral values, as well as tolerance of diversity.

Other studies focusing on the interface between family interactions and bullying are encouraged. In these cases, more objective measures concerning other aspects from the family environment that are not addressed in this study could be included, such as socioeconomic aspects. Another perspective could be longitudinal studies able to provide an overview of the causes and effects of family variables regarding school bullying.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the interpretation of the results presented should take into account three main limitations. First, even though significant effects were reported, the cross-sectional design impedes causal inferences. The second limitation is the exclusive use of self-reported data collection. Third, data were collected only in public schools, an aspect that limits generalization to private schools. Fourth, the results are contextual and should be analyzed considering the characteristics of the country under study and its educational policies and policies intended to fight bullying.

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