

## Verbal school bullying and life satisfaction among Brazilian adolescents: Profiles of the aggressor and the victim

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### Abstract

**Background:** Bullying is a common occurrence in adolescence that may damage the physical and emotional health.

**Objective:** The purpose of the present cross-sectional study was to analyze the profile of the adolescent aggressor only, aggressor/victim, victim only, and those not involved in verbal school bullying, and to associate their profiles with life satisfaction and familial characteristics evaluated through socioeconomic status.

**Subjects and methods:** A cross-sectional study was carried out with 366 Brazilian adolescents between 13 and 15 years. Verbal school bullying was identified using the Brazilian National School-Based Adolescent Health Survey (PeNSE) questionnaire. The life satisfaction of the adolescents was assessed using the Multidimensional Life Satisfaction Scale for Adolescents (MLSSA). Statistical analyses involved the chi-square test, Fisher's exact test and the Poisson regression with robust variance.

**Results:** Sixty-six adolescents (18%) were aggressors, 5.5% were victims, 2.7% were both aggressor and victim, and 73.8% were not involved in verbal school bullying. Most aggressors were male (PR = 1.97, 95% CI: 1.23–3.14) and were satisfied with their family life (PR = 2.13, 95% CI: 1.18–3.8). Victims of verbal school bullying exhibited a low prevalence of non-violence (PR = 0.24, 95% CI: 0.09–0.64). Those who were both aggressors and victims were associated with factors of family support (PR = 0.25, 95% CI: 0.07–0.89) and self-efficacy (PR = 6.29, 95% CI: 1.54–25.6). Most of the adolescents who were not involved in verbal school bullying were female (PR = 1.32, 95% CI: 1.16–1.51).

**Conclusions:** Boys tend to be aggressors and girls tend not to get involved in verbal school bullying. Family satisfaction, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and levels of violence are important factors that can influence the profile of adolescents in relation to verbal school bullying.

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### 1. Introduction

School bullying is a phenomenon that occurs in an educational setting and is common in adolescence [1]. There are four main types of school bullying: physical; verbal; relational; and indirect, which involves the spreading of rumors [2].

In adolescence, there is a clear need to feel accepted by the group, particularly in a school environment, where adolescents spend a large part of their time and maintain

personal relationships [1,3–5]. The acceptance of an adolescent by his or her peers is influenced by factors such as physical characteristics and socioeconomic status. When these characteristics do not correspond to the expectations of the group, the individual may be rejected and bullied [5–8]. Verbal school bullying episodes can be motivated by physical characteristics [5–8], such as obesity or excessive thinness [3,9]. Oral characteristics, including the position, color, and shape of teeth, can also affect self-image and quality of life [10,11]. Racial prejudice, religious, fashion clothing, height and hair type are some features that can also trigger verbal school bullying [12].

The prevalence of school bullying among adolescents from different countries ranges from 5.4% to 67.5% [11,13–15]. Cultural differences and different diagnostic methods related to school bullying in the population may explain this discrepancy. According to a national survey carried out in Brazil in 2009, 5.4% of adolescents were victims of school

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bullying [16]. School bullying manifests itself through demeaning behaviors [13–15]. Therefore, the use of nicknames that degrade the image of the adolescent, verbal provocation, and sexual harassment characterize episodes of school bullying, possibly leading to stress and affecting the physical and emotional health of the individual [2]. Victims of verbal school bullying may suffer from depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, or may drop out of school or even commit suicide [1–3,5,14].

Although school bullying occurs in an educational setting, the family exerts an important influence on this activity. Some individual characteristics of the behavior of adolescents may be influenced by family environment [4]. Thus, when the family environment is not harmonious, it becomes a source of stress for the adolescent, who becomes embroiled in matrimonial conflicts, financial crises, jealousy among siblings, and problems with neighbors [4,14]. This adolescent becomes more short-tempered, which can influence their relationships within the school environment [4]. The behavior of an adolescent at school is not always known by their family [12], who usually only find out in cases of extreme violence [4,12].

The school and the family are important support systems in the life of an adolescent, and any alteration in these mainstays can affect their life satisfaction [17–19], possibly leading to stress and depression [4,18]. Dissatisfaction with the family environment affects the attitudes of adolescents in the school environment [20]. Aggressors could use the vantage of being male [5], their size and physical force [7] as well as better socioeconomic status (SES) [5,6]. Therefore, knowledge about socioeconomic status as well as life satisfaction of the adolescent in relation to their family, school, and self-image can enable the identification of adolescents who may have the profile of an aggressor, as well as those that may be the victims of school bullying [4,5,21]. In recognition of the factors related to verbal school bullying, as well as victimization, it is important to elaborate prevention policies for school bullying and its negative consequences [7].

Thus, controversies over results, cultural differences, as well as the lack of standard methodological criteria or study designs regarding verbal school bullying in adolescents, demonstrate the need to encourage research on this subject. Therefore, the purpose of the present cross-sectional study was to analyze the profile of the adolescent aggressor only, aggressor/victim, victim only, and those not involved in verbal school bullying, and to associate their profiles with life satisfaction and familial characteristics evaluated through socioeconomic status.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The study population included adolescents between 13 and 15 years of age, regularly enrolled at five randomly selected

schools. Itabira has a total of 22 schools (2 private and 20 public). The sample size was computed for a standard error of 4% and a 95% confidence interval. Based on the pilot study results, the prevalence of verbal school bullying was estimated at 8.0%. A multistage sampling method was adopted rather than a simple random sampling. Due to design effect, a correction factor of 2.0 was applied to increase the precision resulting in a minimum sample of 354 adolescents [22]. Moreover, an additional 20.0% of adolescents were asked to participate ( $n = 425$ ) to compensate for potential refusals.

### 2.2. Sample recruitment

The participants were selected at random using drawings from a list of public and private schools in the city of Itabira in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. This list was provided by the Provincial Department of Education. The multistage sampling method was conducted to ensure the representativeness of the adolescents from Itabira. A sample was randomly selected respecting the distribution of the total number of adolescents in public and private schools. Classes were randomly chosen at each selected school. All adolescents in selected classes who were in the range age of the study were invited to participate. Sampling was completed when the target number was reached.

The managerial school sent consent forms to the parents who returned the signed forms to the school and the adolescents in the required age group also signed consent forms after being invited to participate. Questionnaires for parents were sent to their homes and were instructed to answer and return them to the school. Investigators returned to the schools and collected the completed questionnaires. Three attempts to resend the questionnaires were made to parents who did not respond to the first attempt but had signed consent forms. The adolescents were approached during lecture classes. The participation was voluntary.

### 2.3. Pilot study

A pilot study was carried out prior to the data collection process and involved 98 adolescents enrolled in one school in the same city. The pilot study was important to test the methodology and to provide consistent input to calculate the sample size in the study population. The adolescents in the pilot study were not included in the main sample. The results of the pilot study indicated no changes were needed to the proposed methods.

### 2.4. Instruments

#### 2.4.1. Brazilian National School-Based Adolescent Health Survey (PeNSE) criteria

Prior to the application of the questionnaire, the adolescents received explanations about what school bullying actually entails. Verbal school bullying was considered to be the occurrence of episodes in which the teen was bullied or harassed by a colleague or a group of adolescents in the school. Repeated provocation was also considered as

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