Research article

Parenting styles and bullying. The mediating role of parental psychological aggression and physical punishment[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

Studies concerning parenting styles and disciplinary practices have shown a relationship between both factors and bullying involvement in adolescence. The scarce available evidence suggests that abusive disciplinary practices increase teenagers' vulnerability to abuse in school or the likelihood of them becoming abusers of their peers in the same context. However, there is a lack of knowledge about the indirect effect of parenting styles in adolescents' bullying involvement through disciplinary practices, although a relationship between parenting styles and disciplinary practices has been shown. The aim of this research was to determine the mediating role of punitive parental discipline (physical punishment and psychological aggression) between the dimensions of parents' parenting styles and their children's involvement in bullying victimization and aggression. We used a sample comprising 2060 Spanish high school students (47.9% girls; mean age = 14.34). Structural equation modeling was performed to analyze the data. The results confirmed the mediating role of parental discipline between the parenting practices analyzed and students' aggression and victimization. Significant gender-related differences were found for aggression involvement, where boys were for the most part linked to psychological aggression disciplinary practices and girls to physical punishment. Victimization directly correlated with parental psychological aggression discipline behavior across both sexes. In conclusion, the results seem to suggest that non-democratic parenting styles favor the use of punitive discipline, which increases the risk of adolescents' bullying involvement. Therefore, intervention programs must involve parents to make them aware about the important role they play in this process and to improve their parenting styles.

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The phenomenon of bullying has attracted much scientific interest over the last four decades. Developments in this field have allowed us to obtain a far more accurate picture of the underlying characteristics of this type of interpersonal violence, the involvement roles at play, prevalence data on an international level, and the consequences such violence may have for the school-goers involved (Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, & Del Rey, 2015). Several studies have also highlighted the relevance of certain individual factors which can behave as a protective or risk factors of bullying involvement, such as personality (Book, Volk, & Hosker, 2012), empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2011), self-esteem (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012), and emotional intelligence (Elipe, Ortega, Hunter, & del Rey, 2012). Moreover, the factors which emerge from the immediate social context, such as the

school climate, peer relations and dynamics (Casas, Del Rey, & Ortega, 2013), and, to a lesser extent, the family environment (Yubero, Larrañaga, & Martínez, 2013), have also been shown to be related with the bullying phenomenon.

The analysis of family influence on bullying involvement begins with the impact that the basic primary attachment process has on the child's sociability (Ireland & Power, 2004; Walden & Beran, 2010), the emotional climate in the home (Boel-Studt & Renner, 2013; Cava, Musitu, Buelga, & Murgui, 2010), and the social support that children are likely to find in this context (Holt & Espelage, 2007). In addition, most family-oriented studies have mainly focused on analyzing parenting styles (Nickerson, Mele, & Osborne-Oliver, 2010), defined by Darling and Steinberg (1993) as the attitudes that the mother and father exhibit – together or separately – and which create the socio-emotional climate in which the children find themselves immersed. Thus, it has been reported that a high perception of parental support, acceptance, and dedication is associated with less bullying involvement in general (Baldry & Farrington, 2005) and victimization in particular (Lereya, Samara, & Wolke, 2013), whereas negative communication with the father increases the likelihood of involvement in school violence (Estévez, Murgui, Moreno, & Musitu, 2007).

The effects of parental control, however, are not so readily identifiable. While some authors point to a lack of parental supervision as a risk factor (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000), others find no correlation between control and bullying involvement, with psychological control deemed the only parental practice that appears to be linked to this kind of violence (Gómez-Ortiz, Del Rey, Casas, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2014; Kawabata, Alink, Tsen, Van Ijzendoorn, & Crick, 2011; Samper-García, Mestre-Escribá, Malonda, & Mesurado, 2015). These results may be explained on the basis of gender differences, with recent evidence suggesting that parental monitoring could involve a risk effect only in girls (Boel-Studt & Renner, 2013)

In addition to affection and control, other parental attitudes such as humor and the promotion of autonomy appear to be related to bullying involvement. Specifically, most non-involved school-goers often describe their parents as using positive humor and displaying a greater tendency toward encouraging the promotion of autonomy. Moreover, these students were significantly more likely to voluntarily reveal information about their lives to their parents (Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2014). Other studies carried out from a categorical perspective have linked key parenting styles (authoritarian, neglectful, democratic, and permissive) to bullying involvement (Baumrind, 1968; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). In this regard, authoritarian, permissive, and indifferent styles seem to be much more common in parents whose children show aggressive behavior toward their peers or are the victims of such aggression, whereas the democratic style would be more characteristic of parents whose children are not involved in bullying (Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Kawabata et al., 2011; Lereya et al., 2013) specially those democratic styles low in psychological control (Gómez-Ortiz, Del Rey, Romera & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015).

Despite the limited available research, some studies suggest that discipline, understood as a parenting practice aimed at correcting a child's behavior (Calvete, Gámez-Guadix, & Orue, 2010), also has an impact on bullying involvement; most notably physical discipline. This approach is represented by behavioral displays such as shaking, pushing, slapping, punching, and using objects like belts, brooms, and sticks to beat the child. This practice, especially by mothers, has been linked to peer-led aggression and victimization (Duong, Schwartz, Chang, Kelly, & Tom, 2009; Espelage et al., 2000; Lereya et al., 2013). Parental psychological aggression, characterized by the use of manipulation techniques such as withholding affection, blaming, yelling, and throwing insults, have also been shown to be related to peer aggression in sons and daughters (Rogers, Buchanan, & Winchel, 2003; Zottis, Salum, Isolan, Manfro, & Heldt, 2014). To a lesser extent, other parental disciplinary practices, including compensation and taking away privileges, seem to be associated with peer aggression. This evidence suggests that discipline, and specifically punitive discipline, could be an important factor related to bullying. In this regard, it seems that to have been physically or psychologically victimized at home would increase the likelihood of becoming a bully or a victim of bullying in school. Determining what leads parents to exercise this kind of discipline would help to prevent its use and hence bullying.

Darling and Steinberg (1993) proposed an interactive model of parenting, in which some aspect of parenting would influence or moderate other aspects in their association with or prediction of child adjustment outcomes. Their theory posits that parenting styles (global or specific parental attitudes grounded in their own behavior or parental practices) determine parenting practices (behaviors defined by a specific content and based on socialization goals, such as attending children's sports events and school functions or using certain disciplinary procedures, such as reasoning with children so that they understand the inappropriateness of their conduct) that directly influence the child's development. Therefore, parenting styles would exert an indirect effect in children and adolescent adjustment through parenting practices. Several studies have examined some of the assumptions of this theory, showing how parenting styles can determine certain parental practices, such as disciplinary practices and their effects on children or adolescent psychosocial adjustment. Wade and Kendler (2001), for example, found an inverse relationship between parental warmth and physical discipline, with less warm parents using this type of discipline more frequently. In another study, Gaertner et al. (2010) checked the validity of the complete model by analyzing the relationship between different sources of parental control and children peer aggression. The authors found that parental solicitation (questioning and conversation with the goal of obtaining information about the child's free time and activities) moderated the association between parental psychological control and peer relational aggression. They reported that at high levels of parental solicitation, psychological control and relational aggression were positively related, whereas these two dimensions were unrelated at low levels of parental solicitation. Moreover, Rikhye et al. (2008) showed that adults who had suffered some kind of family maltreatment in their childhood described the parenting styles of their parents as authoritarian, indifferent, or low in affection and are more likely to develop anxiety or depression.

Although these studies suggest the validity of Darling and Steinberg's theory in establishing the influence of parenting styles on children and adolescents' adjustment, to the best of our knowledge there are no studies which have attempted