

## Research Paper

## The Relationship Between Bullying Behaviors and Self-esteem Among Primary School Students in Iraq



Ridha M Lefta<sup>1,2</sup>, Ameer Salah-Aldeen Abdulrazaq<sup>3</sup>, Ahmed Mohammed Jasim Shlash<sup>3\*</sup>

1. Department of Health and Nursing, College of Nursing, University of Al-Ameed, Karbala, Iraq.

2. Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Karbala, Iraq.

3. Department of Adults Health Nursing, College of Nursing, University of Babylon, Babylon, Iraq.



**Citation** Lefta RM, Abdulrazaq ASA, Shlash AMJ. The Relationship Between Bullying Behaviors and Self-esteem Among Primary School Students in Iraq. *Iranian Rehabilitation Journal*. 2023; 21(4):655-662. <http://dx.doi.org/10.32598/irj.21.4.1708.4>

**doi** <http://dx.doi.org/10.32598/irj.21.4.1708.4>

**Article info:**

**Received:** 13 Jun 2023

**Accepted:** 05 Sep 2023

**Available Online:** 01 Dec 2023

**Keywords:**

Bullying behaviors, Nursing, Primary school students, Self-esteem

**ABSTRACT**

**Objectives:** This study aims to determine the relationship between demographic data and self-esteem levels among school-age students.

**Methods:** A descriptive research design (correlational design) was conducted using probability random sampling included 240 participants. The study instruments were the index of self-esteem (ISE) and the bully scale. The statistical methods included a percentage test, normal distribution test, Mean±SD test, t-test and Spearman test using SPSS software, version 26.

**Results:** The study results showed the analysis of the demographic characteristics of the target sample, a large number of the samples were in the age group of 10-11 years and boys. Also, the study results showed the evaluation responses for the study subject about bullying victims and self-esteem that most students suffer from strong bullying (65.5%) and most students have low self-esteem (81.2%). However, a significant relationship is observed between evaluation responses for bullying victims and self-esteem domains at a  $P < 0.05$ .

**Discussion:** The present study concludes that most students' responses to bullying victims are strong bullying, the study highlights the potential effect of bullying on students' self-esteem and raises potential problems. The results suggest that increasing students' self-esteem may be an effective strategy to enhance student outcomes. The study recommends that further studies are required on the nature of this event that lead to defining the etiology of bullying victims. It should include family dynamics and other situations of vulnerability, as well as qualitative strategies for early detection and investigation of bullying behaviors.

**\* Corresponding Author:**

**Ahmed Mohammed Jasim Shlash, PhD.**

**Address:** Department of Adults Health Nursing, College of Nursing, University of Babylon, Babylon, Iraq.

**E-mail:** [ahmed.shlash@alameed.edu.iq](mailto:ahmed.shlash@alameed.edu.iq)

## Highlights

- Bullying behaviors can have a major impact on the self-esteem of primary school students. Repeated incidents of bullying can cause a child to feel ashamed, isolated, and insecure.
- Students who experience bullying behavior are at higher risk of developing mental health and emotional problems, including depression and anxiety.
- Schools can play a key role in bolstering self-esteem and preventing bullying behaviors. By creating a safe and supportive environment, teachers and administrators can help students feel more confident and empowered.
- Parents can also play a role in helping their children develop a positive sense of self-worth. Encouraging kids to try new things, praising their efforts and achievements, and offering consistent emotional support can all contribute to stronger self-esteem.
- Intervention programs can also be implemented to address bullying and related issues in schools. For example, peer mentoring programs can help to empower students and provide support for those who are struggling.

## Plain Language Summary

Bullying is a harmful behavior, particularly for primary school students. It negatively affects their self-esteem and makes them feel less confident. Bullying is frequently characterized by repeated, unsolicited aggressive behavior, such as taunting, name-calling, harming others, and discrimination. Bullying may make youngsters feel depressed, frightened and lonely, leading them to miss school, suffer medical problems, or even consider self-harm. It is vital to protect children from bullying for their mental well-being. Parents, teachers, and other adult figures must collaborate in identifying and addressing bullying, as well as creating a supportive atmosphere for pupils to grow. Furthermore, assisting pupils in developing self-esteem via acceptance and encouragement protects them against bullying.

### Introduction

**B**ullying is usually referred to as intentional damaging conduct that is reproduced over a certain period by an individual or group who targets and victimizes a person who is less strong, bullying or indirect acts, such as psychological coercion can involve physical or verbal attacks or bullying in any environment where people interact. This involves schools, careers, families, and communities. Bullying can exist among social groups and between nations at a large level. It is essentially intentional, violence and power imbalances in relationships [1].

School bullying is a global issue that can have a detrimental impact on both the public school atmosphere and the students' right to learn without fear in a secure environment, even bullying may have lasting negative effects on both bullying students and victims. Since young children and young adults endured bullying in schools for the past quarter century, it has become the subject of international studies [2].

Bullying victims have the propensity to experience depression, anxiety, self-esteem, loneliness, low school results, ideal suicides, and attempted suicide [3].

Bullying increased in primary schools; it peaked in secondary schools and declined in grades 11 and 12 [4]. The awareness about bullying and the need for protection at schools has increased in recent years. The challenge for schools has always been that children do not report it. The students worry that the issue may come to light because they fear that the issue may occur several times, as it has recently been before the issue is ignored [5].

Self-esteem is characterized as the assessment of people on their value, competence, and desirability (also known as auto-respect). Self-esteem is a feature that psychologists and other social scientists have extensively researched. Different varieties of self-esteem exist, clear measures ask the respondents to rate their satisfaction with being a valuable person, have a good figure, and be optimistic about themselves and provide self-esteem measures to evaluate self-confidence below the conscious awareness of the respondents. Self-esteem tests

are not directly and indirectly interlinked. That means that people can believe that their self-esteem is high, but low self-esteem is “deep.” Similarly, people can believe that it is low, yet they can secretly love themselves [6].

Self-esteem means a global assessment of one’s worth or value as a person. Younger kids can assess their abilities in different fields, but cannot determine their self-worth. Self-esteem is a key theme relevant to children’s and young people’s academic success, social functioning, and psychopathology. Children with low self-esteem in school are less competitive regarding academic achievement [7].

High self-esteem and a healthy self-concept are key features of a person’s health [8]. People with low self-esteem have an uncertain self-concept, poorly think of themselves, sometimes choose unrealistic goals or fully shy away from goals, appear to be negative about the future, more negatively remember their experiences, and their negative moods flow. People with low self-esteem often appear to have stronger adverse reactions of emotion or behavior to criticism or other negative input from individuals. These individuals are less likely to receive positive reinforcement, care more about social effects for others, and are vulnerable to depression or rumination if they experience reversal or stress [9].

Evidence shows that a sense of appreciation from and near others is a fundamental human need that makes us work well and live well [10]. If children want to excel, they should feel comfortable in the learning environment. Principals, teachers, and others play a crucial role in ensuring that children are taught in healthy, violence-free environments [11]. In Iraq, where violence has become one of the most prevalent children’s cultures in Iraq today, it poses a risk of a serious slide on the genesis of those in the community [12].

In conclusion, the issue of bullying behaviors and low self-esteem among primary school students is a complex and significant problem that requires urgent attention. By understanding its causes, effects, and possible solutions, we can work towards creating a safe and supportive environment for all children. Through effective interventions, ongoing education, and collaborative efforts, we can make a positive difference and ensure that every child thrives and flourishes in their educational journey.

Recognizing the relationship between bullying and self-esteem is essential to address the underlying causes and better support students who are vulnerable to bullying behaviors. By understanding and addressing this complex issue, we can work towards creating a safer and healthier environment for children to learn and grow. Alongside bullying behaviors, investigating the impact of low self-esteem is crucial. This article aims to explore the relationship between bullying behaviors and self-esteem levels among primary school students.

## Materials and Methods

A descriptive study design (correlational design) was conducted to investigate the bullying behaviors of victims and the self-esteem rate of victims among students and to determine the relationship between demographic data and self-esteem levels among school-aged students from September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 to October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The study was conducted on a sample of 240 male and female students at schools in Karbalaa City, Iraq using a probability random sampling manner from the total study population, which consists of 627 male and female students, of which 125 boys and 115 girls were selected. The data were collected via a questionnaire format developed by the investigator for bullying victims and the self-esteem domain via interview with the students, and

**Table 1.** Distribution of individuals according to their social and demographic characteristics (n=240)

Characteristics		No. (%)
Gender	Female	115(47.9)
	Male	125(52.1)
	Total	240(100)
Age (y)	10-11	122(50.9)
	12-13	118(49.1)
	Total	240(100)

the time spent for each participant was about 10-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

### Part 1: Type of demographic data

The demographic data sheet contains several items listed as general information, such as gender and age.

### Part 2: Index of self-esteem scale (ISE-19-items)

This study used the self-esteem index (ISE), which included [10] things to determine the level, severity, or extent of a self-esteem problem. The Arabized image was used, Rosenberg's self-esteem scale, translated into Arabic version by Oweis and others [13], and modified by adding 2 items, "I certainly feel useless at times" and "I think I am no good at all". Consequently, the final scale contained 12 items with a Likert scale, which, in addition to indicating internal consistency, shows content validity, where the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the scale was 0.81. Regarding the scale in its original form, this scale was developed by Rosenberg [14] in the mid-sixties of the last century to measure the trait of self-esteem among high school students in New York State in the United States of America. Later, it was considered as a model for the development of other scales to measure the same trait in different cultural environments [15]. The scale consists of ten items that measure the self-esteem of adolescents and adults, five items formulated positively, and five paragraphs phrased positively through the individuals' responses. The phrases are formulated in the speaker's language. Half of the individual's feelings correspond to a four-way verbal grading, strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, expressed quantitatively in degrees (4, 3, 2, 1), in order. The total score on the scale represents the sum of the scores on the ten items after reversing the quantitative grading of the negatively formulated items.

### Part 3: Bullying child scale

A rough image of the scale of a bully and victim was designed through a review of previous studies and tools used in these studies. This scale was used for students

aged 10-18 years after being approved to experience injury (physical, verbal, and emotional) [16].

This scale consists of 24 items that use a 3-point Likert scale (3-1), including always, sometimes, never. This arrangement is according to the direction and responses to the items. Therefore, this area is to achieve the objectives of the study which includes the assessment of victims of bullying.

### Statistical data analysis

To analyze and evaluate study results, the statistical analytical methods (SPSS software, version 26), including frequencies and percentages, normal distribution test, Mean $\pm$ SD test, t-test, and Spearman test were used.

### Results

According to the results, 125 participants (52.1%) were boys and 115 participants (47.9%) were girls. Regarding age, most samples were in the age range of 10-11 years (50.9%), and the rest were in the age range of 12-13 years (49.1%) (Table 1).

Table 2 presents that the self-esteem of primary school students participating in the study is low, while most primary school students are exposed to a high level of bullying (Table 3).

The results showed a statistically significant difference between boys and girls regarding self-esteem at the  $P=0.04$ . Male students have lower self-esteem than female students. A statistically significant difference is observed between male and female primary school students regarding bullying. Male students are more exposed to bullying than female students. No significant difference is observed between self-esteem and age groups at  $P=0.08$ , while a significant difference is observed between bullying in age groups at  $P=0.0$ . The age group of 10-11 years is more exposed to bullying than 12-13 years (Table 4).

**Table 2.** Assessment of children's self-esteem and bullying (n=240)

Scale	Mean $\pm$ SD	Min	Max
Self-esteem	1.56 $\pm$ 0.63	1.00	4.00
Bullying child scale	3.49 $\pm$ 0.50	1.00	3.00

**Table 3.** The test of normality of children's self-esteem and bullying according to their socio-demographic characteristics (n=240)

Scale	Demographical Information	Group	No.	Mean	Sig.
Self-esteem	Gender	Female	115	0.54	0.00
		Male	125		
Bullying child scale		Female	115	0.53	0.00
		Male	125		
Self-esteem	Age (y)	10-11	122	0.53	0.00
		12-13	118		
Bullying child scale		10-11	122	0.51	0.00
		12-13	118		

Note: The study sample is subject to a normal distribution, therefore t-test was chosen.

Iranian Rehabilitation Journal

In Table 5, a significant correlation is observed between self-esteem and bullying at  $P=0.00$ . It is less than  $P=0.01$ , which means that a statistically significant relationship is observed between self-esteem and bullying in children.

## Discussion

Most primary school students participating in the study are boys, and most participants are in the age group of 10-11 years. In another study, the researchers found that most female participants were in the age group of 13-15 years [17].

The results showed that the self-esteem of primary school students is low. Compared to the study, the researcher found that African students who are exposed to

bullying, violence, and risky behaviors have a low level of self-esteem [18]. The results are also consistent with the study showing that the patients with amputation in the prosthetic center have a low level of self-esteem. They concluded that low self-esteem is a consequence of having a negative body image. The person's confidence and hopes for the future depend on how they feel about their personality and physical appearance. Victims of peer violence and bullying have a low level of self-esteem, a high level of psychological distress, behavioral problems, and negative attitudes towards the world [19, 20].

The results showed a significant difference between male and female students regarding their self-esteem. Male students have lower self-esteem than female students. This result is inconsistent with the study of cyberbullying victimization among Romanian adolescents.

**Table 4.** Distribution of children's self-esteem and bullying according to their socio-demographic characteristics (n=240)

Scale	Demographical Information	Group	No.	Mean±SD	t	P
Self-esteem	Gender	Female	115	2.16±0.37	-32.4	0.04
		Male	125	1.01±0.12		
Bullying child scale		Female	115	3.00±0.00	-31.4	0.00
		Male	125	3.95±0.21		
Self-esteem	Age (y)	10-11	122	1.00±0.00	5.17	0.08
		12-13	118	2.15±0.38		
Bullying child scale		10-11	122	3.97±0.15	-67.2	0.00
		12-13	118	3.00±0.00		

Iranian Rehabilitation Journal

**Table 5.** The relationship between self-esteem and bullying in children (n=240)

Variables		Self-esteem	Bullying Child Scale
Self-esteem	Spearman's rho correlation	1.00	-0.444**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
Bullying child scale	Spearman's rho correlation	-0.444**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Iranian Rehabilitation Journal

The researchers found that girls have low level of self-esteem because they are exposed to cyberbullying more than boys [21].

A significant difference is observed between boys and girls in primary school students regarding bullying. Boys are more exposed to bullying than girls. This result is inconsistent with the studies of [22, 23]. Girls are more exposed to bullying than boys, which leads to negative outcomes, such as truancy from school, low academic achievement, and low self-esteem.

A difference is observed between bullying among age groups. The age group of 10-11 years is more exposed to bullying than the age group of 12-13 years. Young children are affected by bullying more than those older than them due to immaturity, and thus their self-view is affected and a lack of self-confidence begins, and a strong correlation is observed between bullying and lack of self-confidence among children [21-23].

## Conclusion

Based on the research conducted on bullying behaviors and self-esteem among primary school students, a strong relationship is observed between bullying behaviors and self-esteem. Children who experience bullying are more likely to have lower levels of self-esteem, which can lead to a variety of negative outcomes. Teachers, parents, and other adults in positions of authority need to be vigilant and proactive in addressing bullying behaviors among primary school students. By promoting positive self-esteem-building exercises and working closely with students to prevent and intervene in cases of bullying, we can create a positive learning environment that fosters self-confidence and self-esteem among all students.

## Study limitations

Because the data presented here were collected using a descriptive study design, no causal inferences can be

made. Participants were selected from the primary stage age group, but there may be an outbreak of this condition in the advanced stages. Before obtaining the sample, we did not assess the mental health of the participating students, given that some cases may be caused by mental disorders among the participants. In addition to the large number of students and the difficulty of reaching all students in the country's governorates, the study is limited to a single governorate in Karbala City, which may be biased. To extrapolate the situation in society as a whole, the results should be interpreted with caution.

## Recommendations

1. Greater awareness of bullying with self-esteem among parents and students to prevent bullying behaviors.
2. More studies of the nature of this event are required that lead to the definition of the etiology of bullying victims.
3. It should include family dynamics and other vulnerabilities, and qualitative early warning techniques, and should examine bullying conduct.
4. Parents and teachers should prioritize the prevention and reduction of children and adolescents' low self-esteem.
5. Cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health to apply a school health program for learning with students who have treated the victims of bullying and remove them; however, increased self-esteem for students who have low self-esteem.

## Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Al-Ameed (Code: JAM/EC/5/20/7). All par-

ticipants were informed about the objective and steps of the study. They were also confident in the confidentiality of their data and their ability to quit the study at any time. They were aware that the study results could become public. Informed consent was obtained from the participants.

### Funding

This research did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

### Authors' contributions

Data collection, investigation, methodology and resources: Ridha M Lefta and Ameer Salah-Aldeen Abdulrazaq; Writing, review, editing and supervision: Ameer Salah-Aldeen Abdulrazaq; Final approval: All authors.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

### Acknowledgments

The authors thank the [University of Al-Ameed](#) for supporting and facilitating the current studies and the students who were involved in the study for their patience throughout the data collection process.

### References

- [1] Carroll-Lind J. School safety: An inquiry into the safety of students at school. London: Office of the Childrens' Commissioner; 2009. [\[Link\]](#)
- [2] Guillory LA. An exploratory study of students and teachers attitudes toward three types of bullying: Physical, verbal and social exclusion [PhD Dissertation]. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Amherst; 2013. [\[Link\]](#)
- [3] Thompson MP, Sims L, Kingree JB, Windle M. Longitudinal associations between problem alcohol use and violent victimization in a national sample of adolescents. *The Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2008; 42(1):21-7. [\[DOI:10.1016/j.jado-health.2007.07.003\]](#) [\[PMID\]](#)
- [4] Selekmán J, Vessey JA. Bullying: It isn't what it used to be. *Pediatric Nursing*. 2004; 30(3):246-9. [\[PMID\]](#)
- [5] Eriksen TL, Skyt Nielsen H, Simonsen M. The effects of bullying in elementary school. *IZA Discussion Papers*; 2012; 1-47. [\[DOI:10.2139/ssrn.2114898\]](#)
- [6] Konrath, S. H. Self-esteem, culturally defined. In A. T. Scull (Ed.), *Cultural Sociology of Mental Illness: An A-to-Z guide* (1 edition). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc; 2014. [\[Link\]](#)
- [7] Arjan E, Bos R, Muris P, Mulken S, Schaalma HP. Changing self-esteem in children and adolescents: A roadmap for future interventions. *Netherlands Journal of Psychology*. 2006; 62(1):26. [\[DOI:10.1007/BF03061048\]](#)
- [8] Santrock JW. Language development. In: Little M, Maughan B, editors. *Child development 10th ed*. Boston: McGraw-Hill; 2004. [\[Link\]](#)
- [9] Oyadeyi Jb. Psychological Strategies for managing aggressive behaviour. In: Adeyemo DA, Oluwole DA, Busari AO, editors. *Counselling and contemporary social issues in multicultural settings*. Mokala: Eva-Top Communications; 2019. [\[Link\]](#)
- [10] Marujo HÁ, Neto LM. S. Roffey (ed.): *Positive relationships: Evidence based practice across the world*: Springer, Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London, & New York, 2012. *Applied Research Quality Life*. 2013; 8:403-405 [\[DOI:10.1007/s11482-013-9254-6\]](#)
- [11] Koonce GL, Mayo SS. Effects of elementary school students' gender and grade level on bullying. *American International Journal of Social Science*. 2013; 2(7):1-10. [\[Link\]](#)
- [12] Benaissa E, Abassour T, Belouad E, Maleb A, Elouennass M. Characterization of imipenem-resistant *Acinetobacter baumannii* and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* clinical isolates in a Moroccan hospital. *Acta Microbiologica et Immunologica Hungarica*. 2022; 69(2):118-26. [\[DOI:10.1556/030.2022.01748\]](#) [\[PMID\]](#)
- [13] Oweis A, Gharaibeh M, Alhourani R. Rosenberg self-esteem scale--modified arabic version. Washington: American Psychological Association; 2010. [\[DOI:10.1037/132871-000\]](#)
- [14] Rosenberg M. Rosenberg self-esteem scale. Washington: American Psychological Association; 1965. [\[DOI:10.1037/101038-000\]](#)
- [15] Henriques GR, Calhoun LG. Gender and ethnic differences in the relationship between body esteem and self-esteem. *The Journal of Psychology*. 1999; 133(4):357-68. [\[DOI:10.1080/00223989909599748\]](#) [\[PMID\]](#)
- [16] Taruna, Yadav VN. School bullying in relation to peer relation and self-efficacy. *Indian Journal of Health & Wellbeing*. 2016;7(12):1173-5. [\[Link\]](#)
- [17] Adea MK, Lefta RM, Younis NM. Impact of psychosocial aspect parameters on psoriasis patients' quality of life at outpatient clinic in Al-Dewania City, Iraq. *Rawal Medical Journal*. 2022; 47(4):892-5. [\[DOI:10.5455/rmj.88639.20220725105943\]](#)
- [18] Liang H, Flisher AJ, Lombard CJ. Bullying, violence, and risk behavior in South African school students. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 2007; 31(2):161-71. [\[DOI:10.1016/j.chiabu.2006.08.007\]](#) [\[PMID\]](#)
- [19] Salahuddin Abdulrazaq A, Jasim Shlash AM, Ahmed Hrefish Z, Mohammed MA, Obaid AF, Abdulameer Abdulrasol Z. Body image and its association with self-esteem among amputation cases at prosthetics center in Hilla City, Iraq. *Iranian Rehabilitation Journal*. 2022; 20(2):237-44. [\[DOI:10.32598/irj.20.2.1621.3\]](#)
- [20] Georgiou SN, Stavrinides P. Bullies, victims and bully-victims: Psychosocial profiles and attribution styles. *School Psychology International*. 2008; 29(5):574-89. [\[DOI:10.1177/0143034308099202\]](#)

- [21] Iorga M, Pop LM, Croitoru I, Hanganu E, Anton-Păduraru DT. Exploring the importance of gender, family affluence, parenting style and loneliness in cyberbullying victimization and aggression among romanian adolescents. *Behavioral Sciences*. 2022; 12(11):457. [DOI:10.3390/bs12110457] [PMID] [PMCID]
- [22] Berger KS. Update on bullying at school: Science forgotten? *Developmental Review*. 2007; 27(1):90-126. [DOI:10.1016/j.dr.2006.08.002]
- [23] Ang CS, Chong CP, Cheong SW, Lee CY, Tang ZH, Liew CY. Self-esteem and tendency of bullying among primary school children. *Romanian Journal of Psychology*. 2018; 20(1):11-7. [DOI:10.24913/rjap.20.1.03]