

# The Association Between Bullying Victimization and Subjective Well-Being Among Children: Does the Role of Child Religiosity Matter?

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## The Association Between Bullying Victimization and Subjective Well-Being

### Among Children: Does the Role of Child Religiosity Matter?

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#### Abstract

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Bullying is a major risk factor in poor psychological development issues for both children and adolescents worldwide. The current study, based on data from the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB), explores the association between victimization through peer bullying and subjective well-being as well as the moderating role of the child religiosity in this context among a sample of 2,733 children aged 10–12 years old in Israel. Data was collected from children using self-reporting questionnaires, adopting a random stratified sampling method. A PROCESS moderation analysis was performed using SPSS to test the moderating role of child religiosity on the correlation between child bullying victimization by peer and children's subjective well-being. This produced two key findings: first, children's subjective well-being is negatively associated with their experience of bullying by their peers; second, children's religiosity serves as a protective factor, moderating the association between bullying victimization with subjective well-being. These results bolster the importance of developing culturally and religiously-sensitive anti-bullying programs among young children that also raise awareness of its negative consequences for self-perceptions.

#### Keywords

religiosity; children; well-being; bullying

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Subjective well-being among children

Children's subjective well-being is a substantive factor in their psychosocial development and includes cognitive and emotional aspects that reflect the children's perceptions of their life circumstances and satisfaction (Savahl et al., 2019). In the past decade, there has been extensive interest in exploring and understanding the factors that shape children's subjective well-being (Casas & González-Carrasco, 2019; Dinisman et al., 2015; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017). There is growing evidence that children's well-being is affected by range of factors, including family relationships, peer relationships, and school environment (Lee & Yoo, 2014).

Despite the importance of importance of children's well-being, previous studies relied mainly on adult perceptions of it in addition to focusing on objective descriptions instead of exploring children's own subjective experience (Ben-Arieh, 2008; 2012). Furthermore, most studies have focused on well-being among adults and adolescents, with less known about subjective well-being among younger children.

The current study is based on the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB), which has explored the subjective feelings of well-being of over 54,000 children from 16 countries. This study explores the association between victimization by peer bullying and subjective well-being among children aged 10–12-years-old in Israel and the moderating role of the child religiosity on this.

### 1.2 Bullying, victimization and subjective well-being among children

Bullying is a major risk factor in poor psychological development for both children and adolescents worldwide (Cohen et al., 2019; Przybylski & Bowes, 2017; Tucker et al., 2018; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Bullying is defined as a type of aggressive behavior that

is intentional, repeated over time, and engaged in by individuals<sup>25</sup> or peer groups<sup>8</sup> with more power than the victim (Olweus, 1993). Bullying can be physical (e.g., hitting, pushing, kicking), verbal (e.g., name-calling, teasing), or relational (e.g., the spreading rumors, gossiping). Child victims may experience bullying in many contexts, including from peers at school (Wolke & Samara, 2004; Borualogo & Casas, 2021). In this study we focus on three indicators of victimization by peer bullying at school that include physical bullying, verbal bullying, and social bullying by exclusion.

There is an extensive body of knowledge about the<sup>1</sup> impact of bullying on children's mental health and psychosocial development. Studies have shown that victimization by peer bullying is linked<sup>33</sup> to a wide range of mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety (Wolke & Lereya, 2015; Zwierzyńska et al., 2013), in addition to behavioral outcomes, such as hyperactivity and conduct problems<sup>59</sup> (Menesini et al., 2010; Wolke & Skew, 2012).<sup>6</sup> For example, a study conducted among 505 Israeli adolescents showed that<sup>4</sup> victimization through bullying was associated with depressive symptoms and suicide ideation (Cohen et al., 2020).

Since<sup>1</sup> children spend a substantial amount of time at school, bullying there<sup>1</sup> is a major factor in children's subjective well-being (Hueber et al., 2014; Huang, 2021).<sup>1</sup> Studies have shown that children who have positive relationships with their peers<sup>13</sup> tend to report higher levels of subjective well-being (SWB) and life satisfaction (Nickerson & Nagle, 2004). Conversely, children who experience hostile relationships and aggressive interactions with their peers<sup>1</sup> tend to report lower levels of subjective well-being (Martin & Huebener, 2007). For instance, a study conducted among 12,058 15-year-olds in China found that bullying at school<sup>44</sup> was associated with lower levels of SWB and life satisfaction (Huang, 2021).

Despite this extensive body of knowledge <sup>31</sup> on the impact of bullying victimization on children's well-being, most studies have focused on adolescents (Andreou et al., 2020; Huang, 2021), with few concentrating on SWB among young children. The findings have also been mixed. A large study conducted among 8–12-year-old schoolchildren from sub-Saharan Africa, southern Asia, and western Europe indicated a <sup>50</sup> negative association between bullying and life satisfaction. Children who experienced physical bullying and social exclusion from other children reported lower levels of SWB than those not exposed to this (Savahl et al., 2019). However, another study of 8–10-year-old Indonesian children found no significant <sup>24</sup> association between children's experience of bullying by peers and their subjective well-being (Borualogo & Casa, 2021).

The current study goes beyond much previous work by focusing on the experience of 10–12-year-old children in Israel <sup>15</sup> of bullying and its association with their own feelings of subjective well-being.

### <sup>11</sup> 1.3 Child religiosity as a protective factor

In the last decade, there has been <sup>1</sup> increasing interest in investigating the effects of the religious and spiritual dimensions on child and adolescent psychological development (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; <sup>42</sup> Koshier & Ben-Arieh, 2017; Massarwi et al., 2019; Strelhow & Henz, 2017). Religiosity has been defined as encompassing a number of dimensions associated with spirituality and religious beliefs, such as believing in higher power, religious practices and involvements, such as prayer, and the importance of faith in the individual's life (Lalayants et al., 2020). The current study examines religiosity among children by exploring their beliefs in God and higher powers, the <sup>54</sup> frequency of their attendance at religious services and places, and the extent to which a children's

religiosity might serve as a protective factor by providing a buffer between victimization by bullying and their subjective sense of well-being.

Granqvist (2014) seeks <sup>16</sup> to understand the impact of religiosity on mental health from an attachment viewpoint, indicating that belief in God might function as a symbolic attachment figure that provides the assurance and emotional security to enable adjustment in face of danger or confusion. Although this analogy has been made <sup>16</sup> to understand the impact of religiosity on mental health among adults, we assume that similar impact might be found among children and that religiosity might serve as secure basis for well-being in the face of negative experiences such as bullying.

Studies have found <sup>4</sup> to be associated with various positive psychosocial outcomes among children and adolescents, including well-being and happiness (Davis et al., 2003; Holder et al., <sup>6</sup> 2016; Kim et al., 2018). The findings of a longitudinal study of 1,352 Israeli adolescents showed that religiosity contributed to <sup>52</sup> higher levels of subjective well-being and pro-social behaviors (Kor et al., <sup>38</sup> 2019). In addition, a study of 2,811 Arab Muslim adolescents <sup>55</sup> showed a significant association between adolescents' religiosity and involvement in aggressive behavior against others (Massarwi et al., 2018). A study of 11-year-old Christians in western Scotland found that children's <sup>41</sup> weekly church attendance was positively associated with lower levels of aggressive behavior and depression (Abbott et al., <sup>1</sup> 2004).

Despite the growing body of knowledge on the direct association between child religiosity and psychosocial outcomes, less attention has been given to the buffer effect of religiosity on subjective well-being among children, especially those who are victims of bullying. There are different theoretical models of resilience among children that explain the <sup>10</sup> process of overcoming negative effects of risk factors. One of these is the

protective model where <sup>10</sup> assets or emotional resources moderate or reduce the effects of a risk factor on an outcome (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). In the current study we examine whether religiosity among children serves <sup>4</sup> as a protective factor by reducing or moderating the association between experiencing bullying victimization by peers (a risk factor) and subjective well-being among children. In following this approach, we are supposing that religiosity among children is an internal resource that may reduce the negative effects of bullying by helping them overcome it effectively.

Few studies have explored the <sup>14</sup> role of religiosity as a protective factor among children. One study conducted among 103 adolescent Turkish immigrants in Germany found that adolescents' religiosity serves as a protective factor among those who experience bullying by their peers at school by creating a buffer between victimization and depressive symptoms (Demmirsch & Akgül, 2020). This study addresses the lack of knowledge about the <sup>1</sup> moderating role of child religiosity on the association between bullying victimization by peers and SWB among young children in Israel.

## 2. Aims and hypotheses

The study's principal aim is <sup>20</sup> to explore the moderating effect of child religiosity on the association between bullying victimization by peers and subjective well-being by looking at a cohort of 10–12-year-olds in Israel. The study's hypotheses are that (1) bullying victimization and SWB are negatively associated; and (2) the correlation between bullying victimization and SWB differs according to nature of the child's religiosity.

## <sup>32</sup> 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Study design and sample

The current study is based on a sample of children in Israel obtained from the third wave of the ISCWeB. The sample of 2,733 10–12-year-olds was designed to be a representation of Arab and Jewish children from various areas. Data was collected from participants in elementary schools adopting a random stratified sampling method. Schools were randomly selected from a list and one classroom from each school was randomly selected. Children completed the questionnaires in their classrooms during school hours and were free to withdraw at any time for any reason. The children completed the questionnaires in Arabic or Hebrew, with self-reporting based on their own perspectives and perceptions only.

The study was approved by the Ministry of Education in Israel and by the Hebrew University ethics committee. Both parents and children received an explanation of the study's aims and procedures and the assurance that the study was voluntary and with guaranteed anonymity. Parents who did not agree that their child should take part in the study were asked to sign a consent form.

### 3.2 Measurements

Child SWB was assessed using two scales that measured two main domains of well-being: cognitive well-being and life satisfaction. The scale for measuring cognitive used Children's Worlds Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWBS) (Casas, 2016; Casas & Rees, 2015) based on the Student Life Satisfaction Scale, originally developed by Huebner (1991). The scale included six items ( $\alpha = .936$ ). Children were asked to indicate to what extent they agree with the statements about themselves and their lives, such as: "I enjoy my life," "My life is going well," "The things that happen in my life are excellent," and so on. Responses ranged from 0 ("do not agree at all") to 10 ("totally agree").



In addition to the cognitive <sup>22</sup> subjective well-being measurement, children were asked to indicate how satisfied they are with several aspects of their lives based using <sup>3</sup> the Children's Worlds Domain Based Subjective Well-Being Scale (DBSWB). This scale is based on the brief multidimensional student life satisfaction scale by Seligson, Huebner, & Valois (2003). The scale consists of five items measuring domain-based cognitive SWB to which respondents are asked to mark their level of satisfaction on an 11-point scale, from 0 ("not at all satisfied") to 10 ("completely satisfied"). The items used were: "How satisfied are you with the people with whom you live?", "How satisfied are you with your friends?", "How satisfied are you with your life as a student?", "How satisfied are you with the area where you live?", and "How satisfied are you with the way you look?". Cronbach's alpha for the sample is 0.66. While the internal reliability is not high, this measure captures SWB differently as it is based on domains and thus its use is important. Moreover, confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated satisfying fit indices as reported in Gross-Manos & Shimoni (2020). Both SWB scales were transformed into 0–100 scales based on the recommendations of Huebner (2001) and Cummins (2005). An <sup>1</sup> overall score was derived by computing the sum <sup>37</sup> of the items, higher scores reflecting higher levels of subjective well-being.

Bullying by peers was measured using three questionnaire items ( $\alpha = .70$ ). Children <sup>27</sup> were asked to indicate how often they experienced incidents of bullying by their peers at school based on the following questions: <sup>1</sup> How often have you been hit by other children in your school?, How often have you been called unkind names by other children in school? How often have you been left out by other children in your class? <sup>1</sup> Responses ranged from 0 ("never") to 4 ("more than three times"). This measurement was developed by the study's authors. <sup>1</sup> One overall score was derived by computing the

sum of the items, higher scores reflecting higher levels of bullying victimization by others.

Child religiosity was measured using 4 items ( $\alpha = .78$ ) based on the Brief Multidimensional Measurement (Holder, Colman, & Wallace, 2010). Items included inner dimensions of religiosity, such as: “I feel higher power presence”; “I believe in a higher power who watches over me”; “When you are worried do you depend on your religion to help you?”; “Do you think of yourself as a religious person?” Children were asked to indicate to what extent they agree with each one of these statements. Responses ranged from 0 (“don’t agree”) to 4 (“totally agree”). One overall score was derived by computing the sum of the items. Higher scores reflect higher levels of religiosity among children.

The children were also asked to provide information about their sociodemographic characteristics: age, grade, gender, family structure, place of dwelling, and religion affiliation.

All variables from the study were measured using reliable and valid measurements translated into Arabic and Hebrew.

### 3.3 Data analysis

First, descriptive statistics were examined regarding the dependent variable (child SWB), the independent and moderated variables (child religiosity and bullying by peers at school), and the control variables (child age and gender). Secondly, bivariate analyses were conducted to test the relationships between the research variables using Pearson’s correlations (see Table 1). Thirdly, a PROCESS moderation analysis was performed using SPSS (PROCESS-Model #1 developed by Preacher & Hayes, 2008) to test the moderating role of child religiosity on the correlation between child bullying

victimization and child subjective well-being (see Tables 2 and 3). In this analysis, child age and gender were held as covariates.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1 Descriptive statistics

The study sample included 2,733 children, with slightly higher sample of fourth-grade children (N=1429, 52.3%). The mean age was 10.62 (SD = 1.14), almost equal percentage of females (50.3%) and males (49.7%); 28.8% were Arabs, 71.2% were Jews; 5.5% of the children were not born in Israel. The study found that 17.9% of the children reported having been called unkind names by other children in their school more than three times, 10.2% reported that they had been hit by other children more than three times, and 7.6% reported they had been left out by other children in school more than three times.

##### 4.2 Bivariate analyses

Table 1 shows that bullying victimization by peers is negatively associated with all measurements of child subject well-being: DBSWB ( $r = -.303, P < .001$ ) and SWBS ( $r = -.273, P < .001$ ). The more the child has experienced bullying by peers, the lower the level of subjective well-being reported.

As for the association between child religiosity and all measurements of SWB, the findings show significantly positive associations: DBSWB ( $r = .172, P < .001$ ) and SWBS ( $r = .148, P < .001$ ). The higher the level of child religiosity, the higher the level of SWB. There were no significant correlations between child age, gender, and SWB (See Table 1).

##### 4.3 The moderating role of child religiosity

Tables 2 and 3 show the summary results for regression models for SWBS and DBSWB, presenting standardized coefficients after controlling for age and gender. The findings reported in Table 2 and illustrated in Figure 1 show that the correlation between bullying victimization by peers and DBSW is stronger among those who reported lower levels of religiosity ( $\beta = .067, P=.000, 95\% CI [.02, .11]$ ). This model explains 15% of the DBSWB variance. In a similar vein, the findings reported in Table 3 and illustrated in Figure 2 show that the correlation between bullying victimization by peers and DBSW is stronger among those who reported lower levels of religiosity ( $\beta = .101, P=.000, 95\% CI [.06, .14]$ ). This model explains 12% of the SWBS variance. Overall, the findings of the study show that child religiosity serves as moderating factor in the association between victimization by bullying and SWB (SWBS and DBSWB). In both models results were significant after controlling for child age and gender.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Key findings

The study produced two key findings. The first is that children's SWB is negatively associated with their experience of bullying by their peers. The more the children experienced bullying by other children, the lower their levels of SWB and life satisfaction. The second is that child religiosity serves as a protective factor by moderating the association between bullying on the one hand and SWB and life satisfaction on the other.

### 5.2 Victimization by bullying and SWB

Our findings provide additional empirical evidence on the association between bullying victimization and overall SWB and life satisfaction among young children. These are in line with those of previous studies showing that experience of bullying among

children <sup>23</sup> is linked to poorer well-being and lower levels of life satisfaction (Navaro et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2019). The more children experience bullying by their peers, such as being physically hit or socially excluded, the lower their level of SWB.

We can understand this association through the stress process model (Pearlin & Beirman, 2013) where one stressor, in our case bullying victimization, creates additional stressors and adverse social relationships with significant others in the child's environment, including their relationship with their parents, peers, and teachers. In turn, this stressful situation negatively affects the child's perceptions of themselves, their satisfaction with life, and their relationships with others. Therefore, bullying by peers can be a major risk factor that decrease children's well-being and prevent them from enjoying a happy and fulfilling life, particularly when bullying occurs in familiar environments such as schools (Huang, 2012; Heuber et al., 2014). We nonetheless recommend that future studies explore in more depth the mechanisms behind <sup>9</sup> the association between experiences of bullying victimization and well-being among young children.

### <sup>11</sup> 5.3 Religiosity as a protective factor

The current study is among the first to explore <sup>21</sup> the moderating role of religiosity on the association between bullying victimization and SWB in young children. Its findings indicate <sup>49</sup> that the association between bullying victimization and all measures of SWB was stronger among those who reported lower levels of religiosity. In other words, the <sup>4</sup> findings of the study provide empirical evidence that child <sup>1</sup> religiosity serves as a protective factor that lessens the negative impact of bullying on young children on their <sup>43</sup> subjective well-being and life satisfaction. The findings of the study are in line with the

results of previous studies that found <sup>1</sup>religiosity as a protective factor for adolescents' mental health <sup>in</sup> stressful life situations (Ahmed et al., 2011; Bulter-Barnes <sup>36</sup>et al., 2018).

By interpreting <sup>the results of the study in</sup> light of a resilience approach (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), we see that religiosity serves as a protective factor in face of risk factors and negative social experiences, bullying in our case. Religiosity provides an internal “protection” and resilience that helps children overcome the negative impact of bullying by peers. It is an emotional coping strategy that helps children cope with <sup>4</sup>stressful life events better <sup>than those with</sup> lower <sup>levels of</sup> religiosity. Therefore, the harm caused to their SWB is lower. Our findings indicate that religious children are more resilient in face of negative experiences as they can draw on their faith to maintain a positive vision of a meaningful life (Davis et al., 2003). This coheres with studies of adolescents that indicate that those with higher levels of spirituality <sup>18</sup>tend to perceive <sup>their peers in a better light</sup> (Dutkova et al., 2017) and, therefore, tend to forgive them when they experience conflict situations, since forgiveness is an aspect of religiosity (Carter et al., 2013).

From an attachment point of view, belief in God and higher powers, as part of the child's religiosity, might function as a symbolic attachment that provides assurance and emotional security that enables adjustment in face of danger or confusion (Granqvist, 2014). In the context of negative social experiences, such as bullying by peers, this type of emotional attachment to God provides an inner source of strength by developing an image of God as protective, caring and responsive (Kirkpatrick, 1992). Relying on attachment to God seems to help bullied children regulate the emotional distress they experience in their lives, helping them to internalize a positive view of life and its meaning (Holder et al., 2010). This can help children cope with negative social experiences positively and thus lower the harm to their well-being and life satisfaction.

Similar coping mechanisms were found in studies of young children who suffer from different stressful life events such as orphanhood, chronic illness, and disability, where children's religious beliefs helped them to cope effectively (Renani et al., 2014; Yendork & Somhlaba, 2017).

Furthermore, the findings of the current study underline that, like adolescents and adults, young children also benefit psychologically from their religious and spiritual beliefs (Davis et al., 2018; Granqvist, 2020; Mahoney 2021).

#### 5.4 Study limitations and possible future research

The study was conducted among a large and representative sample of children, but it does have a few limitations that need noting. Firstly, as a cross-sectional design was utilized, causal inferences cannot be made. Future studies should, thus, be longitudinal in design to establish causality. Secondly, we recommend that future studies explore the mechanisms that underlie the impact of religiosity on SWB among young children. Thirdly, we recommend that future studies collect additional information from significant informants, such as parents and teachers, as we restricted ourselves to children's self-reporting to measure all research variables. Lastly, we recommend testing our model with children in different settings: since the study was conducted among children in a specific sociocultural context, its results cannot be generalized to apply to other such contexts.

### 6. Conclusions and implications for practice

This study has highlighted the importance of exploring risk and protective factors for SWB among young children, based on their own perceptions. The results show that bullying is a significant risk factor that causes harm to children's SWB and life satisfaction, indicating the importance of developing prevention and intervention

programs aiming at tackling bullying among young children. These programs must aim to reduce levels of peer <sup>47</sup>bullying in schools, but also raise awareness about the negative consequences <sup>46</sup>of different types of bullying on children's perceptions of themselves, their life satisfaction and quality of life, as well as helping children cope with these problems effectively. This is extremely important in Israel, where children are exposed to high levels of various types of bullying in different contexts, including schools (Cohen et al., 2021).

Since the study shows <sup>1</sup>that religiosity serves as a protective factor against the negative effects of bullying, it is vital to develop <sup>1</sup>sensitive interventions that take into consideration the cultural context in which children live, including the central role religiosity might play in their lives. Programs that aim to enhance well-being and life satisfaction should view religiosity as a resource for effective interventions, especially among children exposed to negative social experiences and environmental risk factors. <sup>4</sup>It is important for practitioners who work with children to understand and evaluate children's <sup>1</sup>religious norms and values, even if they do not match their own.

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