



## Article

# Bullying Behaviors of Adolescents: The Role of Attachment to Teachers and Memories of Childhood Care

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**Abstract:** Bullying is a social phenomenon that involves the repetition of aggressive, intentional and harmful behaviors directed at a specific person. Currently, one in three children is a victim of bullying. The present study aimed to analyze the relationship between the quality of the relationship with teachers, memories of childhood care and bullying in adolescents. The sample consisted of 416 adolescents aged between 12 and 17 years old. Data were collected using a sociodemographic questionnaire, the Cuestionario de Evaluación de la Violencia entre Iguales en la Escuela y en el Ocio, the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment and the Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale. The results demonstrated that bullying behaviors are more often perpetrated by males and with higher levels of aggression in private schools. They also revealed that students who perceive higher levels of support, understanding, trust and openness from teachers tend to be less likely to be targets of bullying. The results also demonstrated a relationship between positive memories of childhood care and students' perceptions of greater support, understanding, trust and openness from their teachers. An analysis of the results was discussed considering attachment theory due to the implications of memories of primary care and the quality of teacher–student relationships regarding bullying.

**Keywords:** childhood care memories; teachers; quality of the relationship; bullying



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## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a period of developmental transition marked by challenging cognitive, emotional, biological and psychosocial changes (UNICEF 2011). that increase one's vulnerability to risk (Mota et al. 2019). In this way, young people may experience emotional maladjustment, raising their likelihood of engaging in bullying behaviors (Mota et al. 2019; Silva 2015).

Bullying is a term used to refer to a standard, serious and complex social phenomenon that concerns society (Martins 2005), particularly the educational community since it occurs mainly in the school environment (Chan and Wong 2019). In the world, one in every three children is a victim of bullying (UNICEF 2019), and in Portugal, on average, three cases are identified per week. However, these numbers are underestimated as numerous cases have yet to be reported (APAV 2019).

Bullying can be defined as a phenomenon that concerns deliberate and repeated exposure to aggressive, intentional and negative attitudes carried out by a person or group of people perceived as having greater power or greater strength than the other person or groups of people (Olweus 1993). Several actors are involved in bullying: aggressors, victims (Dervishi et al. 2019) and observers (Salmivalli 2010). Bullying is directed at a victim,

and the aggressor exploits the power imbalance between the two, be it physical, social or mental, to cause harm (Berger 2007; Gaffney et al. 2019). The dynamics of interaction between the two entail a series of consequences, both for the aggressor (feelings of power and domination) and for the victim (depression, as well as feelings of helplessness, fear and loneliness) (Dervishi et al. 2019). However, observers of bullying also play an important role in this phenomenon as they can remain neutral, help the victim or reinforce the bully's behavior (Salmivalli 2010).

Contrary to popular belief, bullying is not a modern phenomenon; it has always been present (Gadelha et al. 2019). According to Koo (2007), information about the 19th and early 20th centuries described bullying as "natural" and inherent to human nature. The attacks reported in these documents were mainly physical in nature and were often associated with social isolation, death or extortion among students (Esteves 2019; Koo 2007). Physical violence was considered an acceptable way of demonstrating strength and power over others; however, it is important to highlight that this understanding of bullying as something natural and tolerable is related to a specific historical perspective (Koo 2007). Over time, as society has advanced, there has been an increased awareness of the harmful effects of bullying and the need for prevention and intervention (Cretu and Morandau 2022).

This concept is understood more broadly and includes different manifestations, covering direct and indirect behaviors, with significant repercussions on the mental and physical health of the individuals involved (Freire and Aires 2012; Harth et al. 2022; Martins 2009; Simão et al. 2004). In terms of direct forms, physical, verbal and sexual aggression stands out, while indirect forms include, for example, social exclusion and the dissemination of harmful rumors (Diaz-Aguado et al. 2004; Koo 2007; Simão et al. 2004).

### *1.1. Role of the Quality of the Relationship with Teachers in Bullying Behaviors*

The quality of one's relationship with their teachers can be observed according to attachment theory, which highlights that in situations of threat or danger, such as bullying, there is a tendency to seek proximity to significant figures of affection (Bowlby 1988). According to Bowlby (1973, 1988), attachment is an intrinsic need for human beings to establish and develop emotional bonds with other individuals, which tend to be maintained over time and are influenced by the care provided. When attachment figures are perceived as available, sensitive and responsive in times of need, the child develops a secure attachment; however, when perceived as unavailable and unresponsive, insecure attachment patterns may emerge, thus increasing feelings of individual vulnerability (Bowlby 1973, 1988).

Since bullying occurs mainly in a school environment, teachers have a leading role in its prevention and intervention, as they occupy a central leadership position, significantly influencing the educational environment (Olweus 1993). The quality of the teacher–student relationship plays an important role in students' development, including their academic performance, social behavior and emotional well-being (Olweus 1993; Zheng 2022). They can thus become significant and important figures in the lives of their students (Machado et al. 2012).

Research conducted by Martin and Collie (2019) investigated the relationship between student involvement in school activities and the quality of teacher–student relationships. The results of this study highlighted the importance of a supportive and respectful relationship in promoting greater student involvement in school activities (Martin and Collie 2019). This manifests as active participation in the classroom, completing tasks more effectively and developing a genuine interest in the content covered (Silva 2015). This positive relationship also creates a safe environment and promotes a feeling of belonging and trust (Zhao et al. 2020).

The study by [Martin and Collie \(2019\)](#) also highlights that student involvement in school activities is associated with better academic results and the development of important skills. When students are more involved, they are more likely to absorb the content, develop critical and creative thinking skills and achieve better academic performance ([Francisco and Araújo 2016](#)). Teachers who create a positive learning atmosphere can maximize each person's potential and promote a more stimulating and effective educational environment ([Francisco and Araújo 2016](#); [Martin and Collie 2019](#)).

A study conducted by [Hughes and Kwok \(2018\)](#) also found a significant association between a supportive and close relationship with teachers and a lower occurrence of anxiety and depression in students. Recent research has also shown that a positive relationship between teachers and students is associated with developing prosocial behaviors in students ([Hughes and Kwok 2018](#); [McCombs et al. 2008](#)), such as cooperation with, empathy for and respect for their classmates ([McCombs et al. 2008](#)). Thus, when students experience a positive relationship with their teachers, they are more likely to internalize these positive behaviors and attitudes ([McCombs et al. 2008](#)).

Prosocial behaviors have a positive role in the individual well-being of students and the quality of the school environment ([Hughes and Kwok 2018](#); [McCombs et al. 2008](#); [Olweus 1993](#)). The supportive relationship between teachers and students creates a safe and welcoming environment in which students feel valued, understood and supported ([McCombs et al. 2008](#)). This allows them to engage in healthy interactions with their classmates and develop important social skills for harmonious coexistence ([Lereya et al. 2013](#)). The teacher–student relationship goes beyond academic teaching; it plays a crucial role in the development of students as citizens and promoting mutual respect and cooperation between young people ([McCombs et al. 2008](#)).

One of the reasons why the quality of one's relationship with teachers can reduce the occurrence of bullying is the establishment of a supportive and protective environment ([O'Brennan et al. 2009](#)). When students feel close to and supported by teachers, they have a figure of reference and trust they can turn to in difficult situations ([Francisco and Araújo 2016](#)). This emotional connection promotes safety and trust, helping victims cope with bullying and seek help when needed ([Bowlby 1973, 1988](#); [O'Brennan et al. 2009](#)).

The quality of bullying victims' relationship to their teachers also strengthens their resilience ([Allen et al. 2013](#); [Zhao et al. 2020](#)). When students have a close and supportive relationship with their teachers, they feel valued and understood, increasing their self-esteem, confidence and ability to face adversity, making them less susceptible to the negative consequences of bullying ([Francisco and Araújo 2016](#); [Zhao et al. 2020](#)). Bonding with teachers also promotes a feeling of belonging to the school community, strengthening the student's identity and bond with the school, as students feel part of a community that supports and values them ([Allen et al. 2013](#)).

Teachers can assume important roles complementary to those of parents, becoming a source of reference and support ([Machado and Figueiredo 2010](#)). Although adolescents prefer to ask for help from friends, classmates, and family, they also turn to teachers ([Martins 2005](#)). For example, talking to an adult at school is beneficial in bullying, often leading to protection ([Shaw et al. 2019](#)).

Although teachers are transient figures in students' lives, their intervention can cause lasting effects by identifying bullying behaviors, as they are present in one of its primary contexts of occurrence ([Ansari et al. 2020](#)). By building this relationship, teachers play an essential role in preventing and combating bullying, contributing to a safer and more welcoming school environment ([Allen et al. 2013](#)).

### 1.2. Memories of Care in Childhood and Their Role in Adolescence

Memories of childhood care play an important role in adolescents' emotional and social development. Memories of safe experiences, such as a stable family environment, adequate emotional support and secure attachments, increase the likelihood of healthy emotional and social development (Garlen et al. 2021). These experiences also help develop socio-emotional skills, such as self-regulation, empathy and communication (Cunha et al. 2014). On the other hand, adolescents with memories of experiences of physical abuse, neglect, domestic violence, rejection, criticism and bullying are more likely to develop psychopathology, maladjustment in adulthood and emotional and social difficulties (Gilbert and Perris 2000). These can also negatively affect emotional regulation and the establishment of healthy relationships (Gilbert and Perris 2000). Furthermore, adolescents with negative experiences are significantly more likely to engage in bullying behavior (Lereya et al. 2013). This involvement can manifest as aggressors' aggressive behavior towards classmates and victims being the target of intimidating behavior (Lereya et al. 2013).

Cunha et al. (2012) add that adverse experiences within the family and with peers can trigger emotional states of defeat in individuals who perceive themselves as inferior and believe that others are hostile and belittling them. Memories of these negative experiences can harm the development of a child's self-esteem and self-image and impact how they relate to others (Zhao et al. 2020). Furthermore, these emotional states and defensive behaviors can have harmful consequences for the child's psychological well-being, namely through symptoms of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and difficulties in relating (Shaw et al. 2019). Furthermore, children who suffer mistreatment by caregivers have a greater risk of being rejected by their peers and suffering bullying (Cunha et al. 2012).

Thus, memories of childhood care characterized by support, comfort, warmth, tranquility, affection and security seem to facilitate access to emotional self-regulation and self-care as a way of dealing with setbacks and failures; adolescents with positive memories learn how to be confident, trust others and experience more prosocial and peaceful social interactions (Gilbert and Perris 2000). This may be particularly relevant in adolescence, a period marked by significant changes physically, cognitively, interpersonally and socially (Mota et al. 2019; UNICEF 2011), which can bring new sources of stress and place adolescents at greater risk of experiencing difficulties, including involvement in bullying behaviors (Mota et al. 2019; Silva 2015; Wolfe and Mash 2006). Thus, interactions with significant people, such as parents, peers and teachers, characterized by warmth, care, affection and tranquility, can help young people deal with the changes typical of adolescence, making this period of life more manageable (Gilbert and Perris 2000).

Although bullying is an increasingly studied construct, the literature that explores its relationship with the quality of relationships with teachers and memories of care in childhood is scarce. Furthermore, this last variable has yet to be explored in the Portuguese context. Thus, the present study aimed to (i) explore significant patterns in bullying behaviors in the sample under study; (ii) understand whether there are differences in bullying depending on gender and the type of school; (iii) analyze the association between the quality of one's relationship with teachers, memories of childhood care and experience of bullying; and (iv) explore the predictive role of gender, the memories of childhood care and the quality of one's relationship with teachers in bullying behaviors.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The sample was collected in different classes of pupils in primary and secondary education. The final sample included 416 female participants aged between 12 and 17 ( $M = 14.04$ ;  $SD = 1.66$ ). Most individuals (86.5%) attended public school, with 13.5% studying in private schools. Their level of education varied between the 7th and 12th year of schooling (19% were in the 7th year, 32.7% were in the 8th year, 23.3% were in the 9th year, 5% were in the 10th year, 7.7% were in the 11th year and 12.3% were in the 12th year of school). Regarding their nationality, most subjects were Portuguese (96.9%), while 3.1%

had another nationality. Among the adolescents, 57.9% had one sibling, 16.6% had 2, 4.1% had 3, 1% had 4, 0.2 had five and 0.2 had 6, while 20% of the sample were only children.

## 2.2. Measures

The sociodemographic questionnaire, a self-reported measure, aimed to collect information on variables such as gender, age, education, nationality, household structure, parents' marital status and the type of school attended.

The Cuestionario de Evaluación de la Violencia entre Iguales en la Escuela y en el Ocio (Díaz-Aguado et al. 2004; adapted for the Portuguese population by Martins 2005) is a self-report scale that aims to evaluate behaviors of victimization, aggression and the observation of victimization/aggression in the school environment (Martins 2005). It consists of 57 items, the first 12 of which are evaluated using a 7-point Likert scale, whose response ranges from 1 (very bad) to 7 (very good). The remaining items are evaluated using a four-point Likert scale, ranging between one and four, with response rates ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (almost always). This instrument consists of 15 items distributed across three dimensions that assessed behaviors of victimization, aggression and observation of victimization/aggression, with the total score varying between 57 and 264 points (Martins 2005). Regarding the values for reliability in the present sample, it presents a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88; the victimization scale presented an alpha of 0.90; the aggression scale presented an alpha of 0.83, and the observation scale presented an alpha of 0.89. Regarding the confirmatory factor analysis, it indicates adequate adjustment indices with the following values:  $\chi^2 (154) = 551.37$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 3.58$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.91; TLI = 0.89; RMR = 0.01; and RMSEA = 0.08.

The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden and Greenberg 1987; adapted and validated for the Portuguese population by Machado and Figueiredo 2010) is a self-report instrument that aims to evaluate the perception of the quality of one's relationship built with parents, peers and teachers. Considering the purpose of the present study, only the teacher version was used. It consists of 25 items evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, with response rates ranging from 1 (never true) to 5 (always true). The items are distributed across three dimensions: Communication and Affective Closeness; Mutual Acceptance and Understanding; and Withdrawal and Rejection, with a total score between 25 and 125 points (Machado and Figueiredo 2010). The IPPA-R teacher version presents a total alpha of 0.83 and the subscales' alpha values are as follows: Communication and Affective Closeness  $\alpha = 0.88$ ; Mutual Acceptance and Understanding  $\alpha = 0.82$ ; and Withdrawal and Rejection  $\alpha = 0.68$ . Regarding the confirmatory factor analysis, it indicates adequate adjustment indices with the following values:  $\chi^2 (23) = 99.72$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 4.34$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.93; RMR = 0.05; and RMSEA = 0.09.

The Early Memories of Warmth and Safeness Scale (Richter et al. 2009; adapted and validated for the Portuguese population by Cunha et al. 2014) is a self-report instrument designed to assess positive emotional memories of warmth, care and safety within family relationships that occurred from childhood to adolescence (Cunha et al. 2014). It consists of 21 items, evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from 0 (no, never) to 4 (yes, most of the time), with a total score ranging from 0 to 84 points (Cunha et al. 2014). The scale demonstrated good psychometric properties, such as its excellent internal consistency, with a total alpha of 0.97. Regarding confirmatory factor analysis, it indicated adequate fit indices with the following values:  $\chi^2 (186) = 729.05$ ; CMIN/DF = 3.92;  $p = 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.92; RMR = 0.04; and RMSEA = 0.08.

## 2.3. Procedures

The protocol was submitted to the ethics committee. Furthermore, a verbal discussion was carried out to evaluate their graphic and semantic understanding of the protocol and assess the time required for its application. This meticulous approach attested to our commitment to the methodological quality of the research, guaranteeing both the ethical adequacy and reliability of the data obtained. The data were collected in several middle

and high school Portuguese institutions, geographically distributed in the north of the country and the Lisbon metropolitan area. In the first phase, institutional authorizations from the schools were obtained, and then, informed consent forms were given to parents or guardians and the participants. It is important to highlight that all procedures regarding the participants' privacy, confidentiality and voluntary participation were respected, safeguarding them and ensuring the ethical considerations inherent in psychological research. Upon receiving authorization, the surveys were administered to the adolescents in a classroom setting for around 30 min, with the presence of a researcher.

#### 2.4. Statistical Analyses

Data processing was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences—IBM SPSS, version 28.0. We coded the instruments and created the database with this program. Initially, the collected sample was cleaned to identify missing items and outliers that could jeopardize the study and the results' reliability. Outliers were analyzed by determining Z scores and the Mahalanobis distance.

Next, the data normality assumptions were checked through the asymmetry and flattening values, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, histograms and boxplots, for which the significance level was set to  $p < 0.05$ . After the normality of the data was confirmed for all dimensions under study, parametric statistical analysis tests were used. Confirmatory factor analyses were carried out using the AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) program (version 27.0). Through these analyses and Cronbach's alpha, psychometric analyses were also carried out, using the parceling technique in two of the instruments—the IPPA and the CEVEO—to improve the adjustment of the model (Ximénez 2009). Regarding data analysis, descriptive analyses were carried out for bullying behaviors, and *t*-tests were carried out to compare means of independent samples. Intra-scale Pearson correlations were also carried out in which, according to Cohen (1988), correlations with values between 0.10 and 0.29 are small, between 0.30 and 0.49 are medium and between 0.50 and 1.0 are high. Hierarchical multiple regression was also carried out to verify the predictions of gender and memories of bullying in childhood care.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Descriptive Analysis

Figure 1 presents a summary of behaviors related to having experienced situations of victimization or aggression or having observed these at school. Since there were four answer alternatives (1 = never; 2 = sometimes; 3 = often; 4 = almost always), only the summed percentages relating to the answer alternatives sometimes, often and almost always were selected, having excluded the alternative never. As can be seen in Graph 1, the most frequent situations of victimization are "My classmates speak badly of me" (54.09%), "My classmates hide things from me" (48.56%) and "My classmates ignore me" (47.84%). Regarding behaviors related to aggression at school, the percentages are similar to those for victimization; the most frequent situations of aggression are as follows: "I spoke badly about a colleague" (54.33%), "I ignored a colleague" (47.6%) and "I hid things from a colleague" (27.4%). The behaviors related to the observation of situations of victimization/aggression at school present higher percentages, both for the victim's conduct and for the aggressor's conduct, among all the conduct listed in the questionnaire. In particular, "Speaking badly about a colleague" (70.19%), "Ignoring a colleague" (56.73%) and "Insulting and making fun of a colleague" (54.57%) stand out.

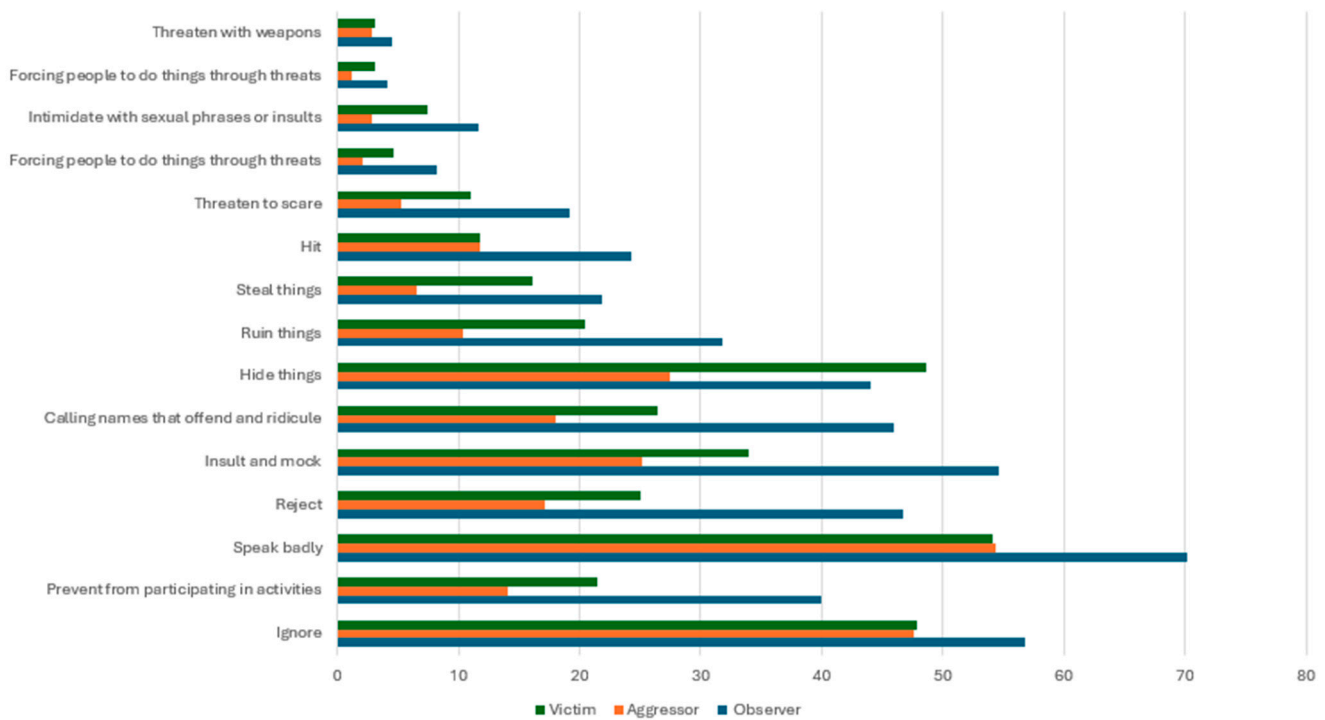


Figure 1. Behaviors related to role type in bullying.

### 3.2. Differential Analysis of Bullying According to Sex

A *t*-test was carried out to analyze the difference in the occurrence of bullying depending on the sex of the adolescents (Table 1). Regarding the frequency of being a victim, the results obtained allowed us to verify that there are no significant differences in the occurrence of bullying between female and male adolescents. Regarding the frequency of being an aggressor, there were significant differences between the sexes [ $t(312.60) = 2.73$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ], with a 95% CI [0.02, 0.12], with males being the main perpetrator ( $M = 1.24$ ;  $SD = 0.28$ ) when compared to females ( $M = 1.17$ ;  $SD = 0.20$ ).

Table 1. Differential analysis of bullying according to sex.

CEVEO	Sex	M ± SD	95% CI	Direction of Significant Differences	N
Victim	1-Male	1.28 ± 0.35	[−0.08, 0.06]	n.s.	1–179
	2-Female	1.29 ± 0.36			2–237
Aggressor	1-Male	1.24 ± 0.28	[0.02, 0.12]	1 > 2	1–179
	2-Female	1.17 ± 0.20			2–237

Note: CEVEO—Cuestionario de Evaluación de la Violencia entre Iguales en la Escuela y en el Ocio; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval. n.s. no significant.

### 3.3. Differential Analysis of Bullying Depending on the Type of School

A *t*-test was conducted to analyze the difference in the occurrence of bullying depending on the type of school (public or private) (Table 2). Regarding the frequency of being a victim, the results obtained allowed us to verify that there are no significant differences in the occurrence of bullying between adolescents who attend public schools and those who attend private schools. Regarding the frequency of being an aggressor, there were significant differences between the types of school [ $t(414) = -2.999$ ;  $p = 0.003$ ], with a 95% CI [−0.17, −0.04], with a higher mean of bullying reported by students from private schools ( $M = 1.29$ ;  $SD = 0.23$ ) compared to students from public schools ( $M = 1.18$ ;  $SD = 0.24$ ).

**Table 2.** Differential analysis of bullying depending on the type of school.

CEVEO	Type of School	M ± SD	95% CI	Direction of Significant Differences	N
Victim	1-Public	1.27 ± 0.36	[−0.20, 0.00]	n.s.	1–360
	2-Private	1.37 ± 0.31			2–56
Aggressor	1-Public	1.18 ± 0.24	[−0.17, −0.04]	2 > 1	1–360
	2-Private	1.29 ± 0.23			2–56

Note: CEVEO—Cuestionario de Evaluación de la Violencia entre Iguales en la Escuela y en el Ocio; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval. n.s. no significant.

*3.4. Association between the Quality of One’s Relationship with Their Teachers, Memories of Childhood Care and Bullying*

Regarding the correlations shown in Table 3, there were significantly low negative associations between social exclusion and verbal aggression towards a victim and communication and emotional closeness ( $r = -0.18; p \leq 0.01$ ); mutual acceptance and understanding ( $r = -0.22; p \leq 0.01$ ); and withdrawal and rejection ( $r = 0.11; p \leq 0.05$ ). Regarding the correlation between physical aggression towards a victim and mutual acceptance and understanding, there are significantly low negative associations ( $r = -0.14; p \leq 0.01$ ). There were also significantly low negative associations between social exclusion and verbal aggression in aggressors and communication and emotional closeness ( $r = -0.11; p \leq 0.05$ ). There were significantly low negative associations between social exclusion and verbal aggression in aggressors and mutual acceptance and understanding ( $r = -0.11; p \leq 0.05$ ) and mutual acceptance and understanding ( $r = -0.22; p \leq 0.05$ ). The correlation between social exclusion and verbal aggression in aggressors and withdrawal and rejection indicates significantly low positive associations ( $r = 0.14; p \leq 0.01$ ).

There were also significant positive medium associations between memories of care in childhood and communication and emotional closeness ( $r = 0.31; p \leq 0.01$ ) and mutual acceptance and understanding ( $r = 0.34; p \leq 0.01$ ).

**Table 3.** Association between the quality of one’s relationship with their teachers, memories of childhood care and bullying.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	M ± SD
<b>IPPA</b>									
1. Communication and emotional closeness	-								2.74 ± 0.89
2. Mutual acceptance and understanding	0.68 **	-							3.46 ± 0.77
3. Withdrawal and rejection	−0.01	−0.26 **	-						2.76 ± 0.78
<b>CEVEO</b>									
4. Victim—Social exclusion and verbal aggression	−0.18 **	−0.22 **	0.11 *	-					1.44 ± 0.50
5. Victim—Physical aggression	−0.07	−0.14 **	0.07	0.68 **	-				1.18 ± 0.31
6. Aggressor—Social exclusion and verbal aggression	−0.11 *	−0.11 *	0.14 **	0.48 **	0.45 **	-			1.07 ± 0.19
7. Aggressor—Physical aggression	0.00	−0.22 *	0.08	0.26 **	0.44 **	0.50 **	-		1.35 ± 0.37
<b>EMPCS</b>									
8. Memories	0.31 **	0.34 **	0.11 *	−0.27 **	−0.21 **	−0.11 *	−0.15 **	-	4.01 ± 0.87

Note: IPPA—Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment; CEVEO—Cuestionario de Evaluación de la Violencia entre Iguales en la Escuela y en el Ocio; EMPCS—Early Memories of Warmth and Safety Scale; \*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ .

Finally, there were significant low negative associations between memories of childhood care and social exclusion and verbal aggression in victims ( $r = -0.27; p \leq 0.01$ ) with physical aggression against victims ( $r = -0.21; p \leq 0.01$ ) and with social exclusion and verbal aggression in aggressors ( $r = -0.11; p \leq 0.05$ ). Regarding the correlation between physical aggression in aggressors and memories of care in childhood, there were low significant negative associations ( $r = -0.15; p \leq 0.01$ ).

3.5. The Role of Sex, Memories of Childhood Care and the Quality of One’s Relationship with Their Teachers in Bullying

A hierarchical multiple regression was performed to evaluate the predictive capacity of childhood care memories, gender, age and the quality of one’s relationship with their teachers in bullying (Table 4). Block 1 corresponds to the dummy variable sex (0 being male and 1 female), block 2 corresponds to memories of childhood care and block 3 corresponds to the variables of communication and emotional closeness, mutual acceptance and understanding, and withdrawal and rejection.

**Table 4.** The role of sex, memories of childhood care, and quality of one’s relationship with their teachers in bullying.

	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Change	B	S. Error	β	t	p
<b>Victim</b>							
Block 1	0.00	0.00					
Sex ( <i>dummy</i> )			0.02	0.03	0.03	0.56	0.58
Block 2 (EMPCS)	0.07	0.07					
Memories of childhood care			−0.09	0.02	−0.23	−4.51	0.00
Block 3 (IPPA)	0.09	0.02					
Communication and emotional closeness			0.01	0.03	0.02	0.26	0.80
Mutual acceptance and understanding			−0.05	0.03	−0.12	−1.69	0.09
Withdrawal and rejection			0.03	0.02	0.07	1.32	0.19
<b>Aggressor</b>							
Block 1	0.09	0.02					
Sex ( <i>dummy</i> )			−0.06	0.02	−0.13	−2.71	0.01
Block 2 (EMPCS)	0.03	0.03					
Memories of childhood care			−0.04	0.01	−0.13	−2.65	0.01
Block 3 (IPPA)	0.07	0.04					
Communication and emotional closeness			0.02	0.02	0.09	1.36	0.18
Mutual acceptance and understanding			−0.06	0.02	−0.20	−2.82	0.01
Withdrawal and rejection			0.03	0.02	0.09	1.70	0.09

Note: IPPA—Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment; EMPCS—Early Memories of Warmth and Safety Scale; B, SE and β for a significance level of  $p < 0.05$ .

In regards to victims, block 1 does not make a significant contribution [ $F(414) = 0.14; p = 0.71$ ] and individually explains 0% of the model’s variance ( $R^2$  change = 0.00). The variable childhood care memories (block 2) explains 7% of the victimization variance ( $R^2 = 0.07$ ), presenting a significant contribution [ $F(413) = 31.02; p = 0.00$ ]. The variables in block 3 also have a significant contribution [ $F(410) = 2.80; p = 0.04$ ] and individually explain 1.9% of the model’s variance ( $R^2$  change = 0.02). Together, these variables explain 8.9% of the model’s variance ( $R^2 = 0.09$ ). Analyzing individually the contribution of each variable in the regression, it appears that only the variable memories of childhood care make a significant contribution ( $p = 0.00$ ) and negatively predicts victimization ( $\beta = -0.23$ ). The variable mutual acceptance and understanding makes a significant contribution ( $p = 0.09$ ) and negatively predicts victimization ( $\beta = -0.12$ ).

Regarding aggressors, the sex variable (block 1) makes a significant contribution [ $F(414) = 8.11; p = 0.01$ ] and individually explains 1.9% of the model variance ( $R^2$  change = 0.02). The variable childhood care memories (block 2) explains 3.1% of the variance in victimization ( $R^2 = 0.03$ ), making a significant contribution [ $F(413) = 13.30;$

$p = 0.00$ ]. Block 3 has a significant contribution [ $F(4|10) = 5.57; p = 0.00$ ] and individually explains 3.7% of the model variance ( $R^2$  change = 0.04). Together, these variables explain 8.7% of the model's variance ( $R^2 = 0.09$ ). Analyzing the contribution of each variable individually, it appears that the three variables make a significant contribution: the variable childhood care memories ( $p = 0.01$ ) negatively predict aggression ( $\beta = -0.13$ ), the variable mutual acceptance and understanding ( $p = 0.01$ ) also negatively predicts aggression ( $\beta = -0.20$ ) and the gender variable ( $p = 0.01$ ) negatively predicts aggression ( $\beta = -0.13$ ). Since sex is a dummy variable, this means that being male positively predicts aggression. The variable withdrawal and rejection make a significant contribution ( $p = 0.09$ ) and positively predicts aggression ( $\beta = 0.09$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

Bullying has been widely studied due to its high occurrence and negative consequences on the lives and development of adolescents. Numerous studies have been dedicated to understanding its causes, consequences and prevention strategies, reflecting scientific interest and concern in addressing this social problem. However, only a few studies analyze its relationship with the quality of one's relationship with their teachers and their memories of care in childhood. Thus, the present study aimed to analyze the role of the quality of one's relationship with their teachers and their memories of bullying in childhood care.

Regarding the descriptive analyses of bullying, it was possible to verify that the types of victimization and aggression most frequently recorded by the students refer to an indirect or relational type in which social exclusion predominates as the most recurrent behavior. The behaviors most reported by students include "talking bad about" someone else and "ignoring" someone else, followed by the practice of "hiding things" and then verbal aggression through "insults". It is important to highlight that social exclusion, characterized by acts that aim to isolate or marginalize a person within the social context, occupied the prominent position in our study, aligning with the findings of [Diaz-Aguado et al. \(2004\)](#). It is a form of aggressive behavior that is prevalent in peer interactions over time. The phenomena of "speak badly" and "ignoring" someone else as prominent forms of victimization highlight the insidious nature of relational bullying, in which social manipulation and exclusion can be as harmful as physical aggression ([Diaz-Aguado et al. 2004](#)). The finding that verbal aggression, such as "insults", occupies a significant position reinforces the diversity of strategies used by aggressors to cause psychological harm ([Diaz-Aguado et al. 2004](#)).

In the present investigation, bullying behaviors are more perpetrated by male individuals, which is in line with several studies ([Berger 2007](#); [Gadelha et al. 2019](#); [Olweus 1993](#)). This trend can be attributed to various social and cultural influences that shape gender norms ([UNICEF 2019](#)). In many societies, a social expectation encourages males to express their dominance and assertiveness in ways that can sometimes manifest as bullying behaviors ([UNICEF 2019](#)). Furthermore, biological and hormonal factors can contribute to differences between the sexes when dealing with conflicts. However, it is essential to emphasize that generalizations should be avoided since significant individual variations exist and not all males are predisposed to bullying behaviors ([Melim and Pereira 2013](#)). This phenomenon is complex and influenced by social, cultural and individual factors ([Freire and Aires 2012](#)).

Regarding the type of school that the adolescents attended, this revealed significant differences in the aggressor dimension; that is, in the present study, there was a more significant occurrence of aggressors in private schools, which does not corroborate the results of the study by [Harth et al. \(2022\)](#), which showed a higher occurrence of bullying in public schools (65.6%). The disparity in results regarding the occurrence of aggressive behaviors between private and public schools can be attributed to a complex intersection of several factors that interact in complex ways, creating unique school environments that influence the prevalence and nature of bullying ([Harth et al. 2022](#)). The specific demographic characteristics of each educational institution, such as ethnic composition, the

socio-economic class of students and cultural diversity, can play a crucial role in shaping social interactions as these schools may face unique challenges in terms of integration and interaction between students from different backgrounds (UNICEF 2019). Cultural aspects also significantly influence accepted social norms and perceptions about aggressive behavior (UNICEF 2019). The diversity in educational methodologies adopted by private and public schools can also create distinct environments, affecting student social dynamics, as private schools may have more demanding curricula and place a greater emphasis on competitive extracurricular activities, which may increase pressure on students and potentially lead to aggressive behavior; conversely, public schools may face challenges due to resource limitations and a greater number of students, making adequate supervision and intervention difficult (Harth et al. 2022).

Regarding the relationship between victimization and one's bond with teachers, negative associations were observed both in communication and emotional closeness and in mutual acceptance and understanding. Students who perceive more significant support, understanding, trust and openness from teachers tend to be targets of bullying less frequently. These results align with previous research, particularly the study by Hughes and Kwok (2018), which shows the benefits of a positive relationship between teachers and students. Evidence suggests that a positive connection in this context is associated with several positive aspects, such as greater school engagement and performance, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and the development of prosocial behaviors in students (Shaw et al. 2019). This beneficial relationship can be explained by the fact that a supportive and understanding environment promoted by the teacher creates a solid foundation for students' emotional and academic well-being, stimulating their involvement and fostering an environment conducive to developing social and emotional skills (Shaw et al. 2019). Additionally, this evidence is also in line with what was observed by Longobardi et al. (2022), in which the quality of one's relationship with their teachers is an indicator of the number of victims of bullying, since students who feel supported and emotionally connected with their teachers are less likely to become a victim of bullying. This relationship can influence students' behavior, creating a more supportive and respectful environment, can develop greater self-esteem and social skills in adolescents, can strengthen the resilience of victims, can make them feel safer expressing concerns and reporting an incident and can promote a feeling of belonging to the school community, contributing to reducing their vulnerability to this phenomenon (Longobardi et al. 2022).

A positive association was also observed between victimization withdrawal and rejection in our study sample. This relationship can be attributed to the fact that students who perceive a lack of support from teachers in vulnerable situations, whether due to an apparent lack of attention to their mood changes or the belief that they would not be understood and helped, tend to report experiences of victimization more frequently (Shaw et al. 2019). The absence of a supportive environment contributes to the propensity for victimization among these students (Shaw et al. 2019). The association between aggression withdrawal and rejection appears to be positive. As seen in victimization situations, a poor perception of one's relationship with their teachers has adverse consequences on student behavior. It is related to episodes of aggression (Martin and Collie 2019) as these students may experience frustration and demotivation about school, resulting in a decline in academic performance and an increased likelihood of problematic behaviors (Shaw et al. 2019).

Regarding the relationship between one's memories of childhood care and their bond with teachers, there were positive associations between these and communication and emotional closeness, as well as between these and mutual acceptance and understanding. In contrast, a positive association exists between positive childhood care memories and teacher alienation and rejection. Positive memories of childhood care are related to students' perceptions of greater support, understanding, trust and openness from teachers. This result reinforces what Garlen et al. (2021) explained, in which one's memories of care in childhood play a fundamental role in shaping their personality and, therefore, affect their

relationships and emotional bonds developed in the future. Adolescents who report happy memories demonstrate a more trusting and close relationship with their teachers, more easily seek their help and have more positive opinions about them (Garlen et al. 2021). Positive memories of childhood care may facilitate and promote the development of close and secure relationships with teachers.

Regarding the association between memories of childhood care and bullying, there were significant negative associations between memories of childhood care and social exclusion and verbal aggression and physical aggression in victims. There were also significant negative associations between memories of childhood care and social exclusion and verbal aggression and physical aggression in aggressors. This means that negative childhood care memories are associated with being socially excluded or verbally and physically attacked, which corroborates several studies (Cunha et al. 2014; Gilbert and Perris 2000).

Regarding the predictive capacity of sex, memories of care in childhood, and the quality of one's relationship with their teachers in bullying in regards to victimization, only memories of care in childhood has a significant contribution; more specifically, positive memories of care in childhood translate into fewer instances of victimization, which is in line with the results of the study by Gilbert et al. (2006). Meanwhile sex, mutual acceptance and understanding, as well as memories of childhood care, negatively predict aggression. This means that males are more prone to aggression (Berger 2007; Gadelha et al. 2019; Olweus 1993). Adolescents who feel mutual acceptance and understanding from teachers are also less aggressive (Hughes and Kwok 2018). As with victimization, positive childhood care memories represent a lower probability of aggression since childhood memories marked by support, comfort and security can become a solid basis for dealing with adversity and failures, as well as for learning. This allows adolescents to trust themselves and others and engage in more positive and harmonious social interactions without bullying (Gilbert et al. 2006).

#### *Practical Implications, Limitations and Proposals for Future Studies*

The present study sought to analyze perceptions of the quality of one's relationship with their teachers and memories of bullying in childhood care. It is essential to highlight that, to date, we have yet to identify any study in the Portuguese context that has simultaneously analyzed these three variables.

Given these verified results, actions must be developed with communities (parents, teachers and adolescents themselves) to raise awareness of the magnitude of this problem and the harmful consequences it can have for those directly and indirectly involved. Investing in programs that strengthen positive relationships in childhood is also recommended, aiming to mitigate the impacts of memories of care in the formation of aggressive behaviors. Furthermore, it is proposed to use training strategies and emotionally close activities to improve the bond between teachers and students. Introducing parental and school education about bullying is essential for adults to identify and intervene effectively in this phenomenon. It is also suggested that inclusive school environments, community awareness campaigns and emotional counselling services should be promoted to deal with issues related to bullying. Encouraging open communication between generations is hoped to create a more empathetic and aware society in which bullying is less tolerated and readily addressed. When implemented comprehensively, these measures can positively transform the educational and family environment, effectively preventing bullying.

However, the present study has some limitations, namely the fact that it is a cross-sectional study, having been applied to a single collection of data. Another limitation of the study that should be accounted for is that the sample was not balanced for gender and year of schooling. Additionally, this design inhibits the establishment of causal relationships between the variables under study. Furthermore, the use of self-report instruments constitutes a limitation in the study, as the responses may be subject to different types of bias.

Also, the sample size means it does not represent the Portuguese population. It also needs to be more balanced regarding public and private education.

For future investigations, it would be relevant to increase the sample size and analyze the relationship between the variables investigated in quantitative and longitudinal studies capable of involving more extensive and more diverse samples in terms of age, type of school, family constitution and geographic area, among others. It is also recognized that the bullying construct, in its expressions of victim, aggressor and observer, has multiple facets that must be addressed in other studies complemented by qualitative methodologies that allow researchers to listen to children and adolescents involved in bullying behaviors.

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