

The Role of the Family in Bullying Prevention in Early Childhood: A Literature Review Based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

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ABSTRACT

Bullying in early childhood is a real phenomenon with long-term psychosocial consequences that is frequently overlooked. This literature review analyzes the family's role in preventing early childhood bullying through three focal areas: the role of parenting styles in children's aggressive tendencies, family environment factors as primary bullying predictors, and parental attachment's role in empathy development. Twenty-three sources were selected based on topic relevance and full-text availability, covering publications from 2011–2025 across multiple countries including Indonesia, Norway, China, and Spain. The review employs Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Bowlby's Attachment Theory, yielding a four-pillar conceptual model: authoritative parenting, elimination of environmental risk factors, attachment reinforcement through emotion coaching, and instillation of religious-moral values as the macrosystem foundation.

ABSTRAK

Perundungan pada anak usia dini merupakan fenomena nyata berdampak jangka panjang terhadap perkembangan psikososial anak. Kajian pustaka ini menganalisis peran keluarga dalam pencegahan bullying di tingkat prasekolah: peran teori pengasuhan terhadap agresi anak, faktor lingkungan keluarga sebagai prediktor bullying, dan peran kelekatan orang tua dalam pembentukan empati. Sebanyak 23 sumber dipilih berdasarkan kriteria relevansi topik dan ketersediaan teks lengkap, mencakup publikasi 2011–2025 dari berbagai negara (Indonesia, Norwegia, Tiongkok, Spanyol). Kajian menggunakan kerangka Teori Sistem Ekologi Bronfenbrenner, Social Learning Theory Bandura, dan Attachment Theory Bowlby, menghasilkan model konseptual empat pilar: pola asuh otoritatif, eliminasi faktor risiko, penguatan kelekatan melalui emotion coaching, dan penanaman nilai religius-moral sebagai fondasi makrosistem.

Kata Kunci

: Bullying Anak Usia Dini; Peran Keluarga; Pola Asuh; Kelekatan Orang Tua; Emotion Coaching

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INTRODUCTION

Academically, bullying is defined as aggressive behavior that meets three main criteria: the intent to cause harm, a pattern of repetition, and a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim (Gaffney et al., 2021). This definition originally emerged from the context of elementary and secondary school-aged children, but recent studies confirm that patterns meeting all three criteria have been identified in preschool-aged children. A scoping review by Navarro et al. of various studies on aggression in preschoolers found that aggressive behavior in this age group is not merely a normal part of play, but can be the precursor to more structured patterns of bullying in later stages of development (Navarro et al., 2022).

Empirical data from various parts of the world reinforce this concern. A study of 857 parents of preschool-aged children in Norway found that approximately 14% of respondents reported their child had been involved in conflicts classifiable as bullying, with the strongest predictors being the child's age, the size of the early childhood education institution, and perceptions of educator competence (Cameron & Kovač, 2024). This figure aligns with reports from teaching staff in other Nordic countries, which recorded rates of preschool bullying involvement ranging from 13% to 22% (Cameron & Kovač, 2024). In the Asian context, a study of more than six thousand early adolescents in China found that unaddressed aggressive patterns from early childhood correlated significantly with lower empathy capacity and higher indirect aggression toward peers in adolescence (Li et al., 2015). In the Indonesian context, Zannah et al. (2025) confirmed that bullying remains a serious problem in educational settings, with religious maturity functioning as a significant moderating variable. Globally, UNESCO (2019) asserts that bullying constitutes a widespread public health concern with long-term consequences if left unaddressed from an early age.

The importance of early intervention is supported by strong longitudinal evidence. A randomized controlled trial that followed preschoolers through adolescence found that adolescents whose parents received parenting training during the preschool years were significantly less likely to engage in bullying a decade later (Kim et al., 2021). This finding is one of the strongest pieces of empirical evidence that investing in early childhood care and education has long-term preventive effects that surpass the effectiveness of curative interventions during school-age years.

The family is the first and primary environment that shapes a child's character development. According to Bandura's Social Learning Theory, young children tend to observe and imitate the communication patterns and conflict-resolution mechanisms that take place in the home environment (Bandura, 1977). The family thus serves not only as a safe haven, but also as the first informal curriculum where children learn a repertoire of social behaviors, including both aggressive and prosocial behaviors. Within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the family occupies the position of the microsystem the closest and most influential layer of the environment and interacts with the microsystem of early childhood education institutions through the mesosystem, specifically through the alignment of values between home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

A meta-analysis by Ttofi & Farrington found a 19–23% reduction in bullying through school-based programs (Gaffney et al., 2021). However, an updated meta-analysis by Gaffney et al. confirmed that the effectiveness of the program actually increased significantly when parents were actively involved (Gaffney et al., 2019a). However, an updated meta-analysis by Gaffney et al. confirmed that the effectiveness of the program actually increased significantly when parents were actively involved (Massarwi & Gross-Manos, 2022). including the values set forth in Surah Al-Hujurat (49): 11, which explicitly prohibits behavior that demeans others. Nevertheless, studies of various intervention programs indicate that active parental involvement remains a

component that has not yet been optimally integrated into school-based bullying prevention efforts.(Gaffney et al., 2021) It is this gap that serves as the academic justification for this study (Gaffney et al., 2019a).

Based on this background, this study formulates three research questions: (1) What is the role of parenting styles in the tendency toward aggressive behavior in early childhood? (2) What are the family environmental factors that serve as the primary predictors of bullying at the preschool level? (3) What role does parental attachment play in the development of empathy in children? This study aims to integrate findings from various previous studies into a holistic, family-based conceptual model for bullying prevention, positioning religious values as its moral foundation and psychological-pedagogical mechanisms as its operational implementation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a literature review, which involves collecting, reading, recording, and analyzing materials from various relevant written sources. This approach is descriptive-analytical: descriptive in the sense that it systematically presents findings, and analytical in the sense that it critically examines the relationships among findings through three theoretical frameworks: Social Learning Theory (Bandura).(Bandura, 1977) Attachment Theory (Bowlby),(Bowlby, 1969) dan Teori Sistem Ekologi (Bronfenbrenner) (Bronfenbrenner, n.d.).

The data sources fall into two categories. First, primary sources consist of peer-reviewed scientific journal articles published between 2011-2025, obtained from the Google Scholar, ERIC, and PubMed databases. Second, secondary sources consist of scientific reference books on foundational theory: Bronfenbrenner (1979).(Bronfenbrenner, n.d.) Bandura (1977),(Bandura, 1977) Bowlby (1969),(Bowlby, 1969) Espelage & Swearer (2004),(Cameron et al., n.d.) Gottman, Katz, & Hooven (1996);(Gottman et al., 1996) and reports UNESCO (2019). Search keywords included: bullying in early childhood, parenting styles and aggression, parental attachment and empathy, emotion coaching and self-regulation, family environment as a predictor of bullying, and their Indonesian equivalents. Of the 87 sources identified in the initial search, 23 sources that met the criteria were selected, as presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Criteria for Selecting Literature

Admission Criteria	Rejection Criteria
Published 2011–2025 (except for works on foundational theory)	Published before 2011 without a foundational theory
Discussing Bullying and Aggression in Children Aged 0–6	Focus on bullying among teenagers or adults
Examining the role of the family, parents, or parenting styles	Discusses only school-based interventions without family variables
Peer-reviewed journals, scientific books, reports from official agencies	Opinion pieces, editorials, or non-academic sources
The full text is available and accessible	Only the abstract is available; the full text is not available

The reviewed sources encompass studies from a range of countries, including Indonesia (Zannah et al., 2025), Norway (Cameron & Kovač, 2024), China (Li et al., 2015), Spain (Samper-García et al., 2021), Germany (Kim et al., 2021), Israel (Massarwi & Gross-Manos, 2022), Malaysia (Ngadni & Shuang, 2024), and the United States (Bandura, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gottman et al., 1996), as well as international multi-country reviews (UNESCO, 2019; Gaffney et al., 2019, 2021). This geographical diversity strengthens the generalizability of the findings while affirming the relevance of adapting the proposed model to the Indonesian context.

Data collection was conducted using a documentation approach in three sequential stages: literature search (searching for relevant sources in databases), selection (screening based on the

criteria in Table 1), and recording (extracting key information, including authors, year, research focus, main findings, and relevance to the research questions). Data analysis was conducted using two complementary techniques. Content analysis was used to identify and classify findings from each source based on their relevance to the three research questions. Comparative analysis was used to compare findings across sources in order to identify consistent patterns, differences in perspective, and unanswered gaps. Both analytical techniques were conducted using three theoretical frameworks as interpretive lenses: Bronfenbrenner's framework to examine the family's position within a broader ecological system, Bandura's framework to explain the mechanisms of behavioral transmission (risk pathway), and Bowlby's framework to explain the role of attachment in the development of empathy (protective pathway).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Parenting Styles and Aggressive Behavior Tendencies in Early Childhood

A review of the parenting literature indicates that parenting style typologies are an important factor influencing aggressive behavior in young children. Kuppens & Ceulemans distinguish parenting styles based on two main dimensions: demandingness and responsiveness, which result in four typologies: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019). The study by Hasan & Nasir specifically identified a significant relationship between parenting styles and children's bullying behavior (Hasan & Nasir, n.d.).

Table 2. Parenting Styles, Characteristics, Effects, and Transmission Mechanisms (Bandura)

Parenting Styles	Key Characteristics	Impact on Children's Behavior	Transmission Mechanism (Bandura)
Authoritative	High control + high warmth; dialogic communication; explanation-based discipline	Low aggression; high empathy; constructive conflict resolution	Children imitate dialogic interaction models in their peer relationships
Authoritarian	High control + low warmth; absolute obedience; punishment as the primary form of discipline	High aggression; dominance as a social strategy	Children reproduce the model of coercive dominance through pressure
Permissive	Low control + high warmth; minimal restrictions; avoiding conflict	Low self-regulation; high impulsivity; difficulty managing conflicting emotions	The absence of inhibitory mechanisms leads to uncontrolled aggressive impulses
Neglectful	Low control + low warmth; minimal involvement	Highest risk: dominance as compensation for emotional neglect	A behavioral deficit drives aggression as a means of seeking attention

The most consistent pattern found in the literature is the protective effect of authoritative parenting. Lee's ecological study confirms that family microsystem factors contribute significantly, both directly and indirectly, to bullying behavior on par with the influence of school and community factors (Lee, 2011). These findings can be explained through Bandura's Social Learning Theory framework: children observe the models of dialogic interaction demonstrated by authoritative parents and replicate those patterns in their relationships with peers (Bandura, 1977). Conversely, authoritarian parenting creates a paradox at home, children learn to be obedient through pressure, but at school, they reproduce the same mechanism by positioning themselves as the ones exerting pressure. The scoping review by Navarro et al. reinforces the finding that family communication patterns are consistently associated with higher levels of aggression among children in early childhood education settings (Navarro et al., 2022).

The implication of these findings is that a shift in parenting styles toward an authoritative approach through Positive Discipline consistent guidance combined with emotional warmth and

open communication is the family intervention strategy with the strongest empirical support for preventing bullying in early childhood. Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, it is the quality of daily interactions within the family microsystem that primarily determines the behavioral patterns children will bring to the early childhood education institution microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

B. Family Environment Factors as Predictors of Bullying in Preschool

A review of studies on the family environment and bullying has identified a number of risk factors that consistently emerge as predictors of bullying behavior at the preschool level. Monks, Ortega-Ruiz, & Rodríguez-Hidalgo specifically identified the role of the family environment as a significant predictor of victimization and aggression in early childhood (Monks, n.d.). Based on a comparative analysis of various sources, these factors can be grouped into two categories, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Map of Family Environmental Risk Factors as Predictors of Preschool Bullying

Category	Risk Factors (Red Flags)	Empirical Reference
Structural Factors	Exposure to domestic violence	Monks et al. (2021); Navarro et al. (2022)
Structural Factors	Lack of supervision of children's media consumption and social interactions	Monks et al. (2021); UNESCO (2019)
Structural Factors	High levels of economic stress in families	UNESCO (2019); Espelage & Swearer (2004)
Interactional Factors	Low parental involvement	Dey, Yetti & Hartati (2020); Cameron & Kovač (2024)
Interactional Factors	Weak self-regulation in children that has not been developed at home	Dey, Yetti & Hartati (2020); Wilson et al. (2014)
Interactional Factors	The absence of constructive conflict resolution models from parents	Navarro et al. (2022); Hasan & Nasir (2020)
Interactional Factors	Inconsistency in setting boundaries for children's behavior	Christiana (2023); Kuppens & Ceulemans (2019)

A key finding of the comparative study is that these risk factors do not operate independently but rather reinforce one another. The study by Cameron & Kovač adds a critical dimension: parents who were bullied during their own childhood tend to be more likely to downplay their child's involvement in bullying a finding that underscores the importance of parental literacy as a prerequisite for effective intervention (Cameron & Kovac, 2025).

Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, these risk factors create disruptions at the microsystem level (direct parent-child interactions) that impact the mesosystem (a mismatch in values between home and school) (Bronfenbrenner, n.d.). Children who are exposed to domestic violence at home but receive anti-bullying education at school experience a value dissonance that hinders the internalization of prosocial values. Espelage and Swearer's social-ecological perspective confirms that bullying must be understood as the product of layered interactions, not merely as a result of a child's individual disposition.¹ It is this dissonance that explains why school-based interventions alone often fail to produce lasting change, (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011) (Gaffney et al., 2019b) and why alignment of values between home and school is a key determinant of the success of prevention efforts. A study by Ngadni & Shuang confirms that

¹ drianna Duncan, "Bullying in American Schools: A Social-Ecological Perspective on Prevention and Intervention, Edited by Dorothy L. Espelage & Susan M. Swearer," *Journal of Catholic Education* 10, no. 2 (December 1, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.1002122013>.

shared understanding among parents, teachers, and school principals is a key determinant of the quality of children's social-emotional development (Ngadni & Yee Shuang, 2024).

C. The Role of Parental Attachment and Emotion Coaching Strategies in Developing Children's Empathy

Bowlby's attachment theory emphasizes that the quality of the emotional bond between a child and their primary caregiver in early life plays a crucial role in the development of empathy, the most fundamental protective factor against bullying behavior. (Bowlby, 1969) Models of themselves and others, which support the development of empathy later in life.

A review by Samper-García, Mestre-Escrivá, Mesurado, & Cerdá specifically found that parental attachment serves as a significant mediator between the quality of caregiving and empathy levels in early childhood. Children with strong, secure attachments to their parents tend to have better emotional regulation skills and are therefore better able to resist the urge to bully others. (Samper-García, n.d.) These findings are supported by a study by Li et al. of more than 6,000 early adolescents in China, which found that children's secure attachment to their parents was positively associated with perspective-taking ability, which was consistently negatively associated with tendencies toward indirect aggression toward peers (Li et al., 2015).

From an operational standpoint, secure attachment can be strengthened through the Emotion Coaching strategy developed by Gottman, Katz, and Hooven. (Gottman et al., 1996) Parents who follow the emotion coaching philosophy tend to: (1) recognize low-intensity emotions in themselves and their children; (2) view their children's negative emotions as opportunities to teach and strengthen their bond; (3) validate their children's feelings; (4) help their children label their emotions; and (5) set clear boundaries in problem-solving. A study by Wilson et al. specifically found that emotional coaching from both fathers and mothers significantly contributes to the ability of children identified as being at risk for aggression to regulate their attention and emotions (Wilson et al., 2014).

In addition to the psychological dimension, a review of recent studies indicates that religiosity serves as a protective factor that reinforces this pathway. Massarwi & Gross-Manos found that children's religiosity acts as a significant moderator in the relationship between bullying victimization and children's subjective well-being (Massarwi & Gross-Manos, 2022). A study by Zannah et al. in Indonesia found a significant negative correlation between the level of religious maturity and the tendency to engage in bullying; the higher the level of religious maturity, the lower the tendency to engage in bullying. (Zannah et al., 2025) In the family context, the consistent internalization of religious values through daily interactions at home is consistent with Bandura's principle (Bandura, 1977) Children will emulate the attitude of mutual respect modeled by their parents as part of the family's daily religious practice. This value is grounded in Quranic Surah Al-Hujurat (49:11), which explicitly prohibits mocking, insulting, and giving derogatory nicknames to fellow human beings behaviors that are essentially identical to forms of verbal bullying.

D. An Integrative Conceptual Model: Four Pillars of Family-Based Bullying Prevention

If all the findings of the literature review in subsections A, B, and C are critically examined and linked to one another through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory framework, (Bronfenbrenner, n.d.) It appears that the family, as a microsystem, operates two opposing developmental pathways simultaneously: a risk pathway that operates through Bandura's mechanism (imitation of aggressive behavior models) (Bandura, 1977) and protective pathways that operate through Bowlby's mechanism (the development of empathy through secure attachment). (Bowlby, 1969) The final outcome whether a child is more likely to become a bully

or to exhibit prosocial behavior is determined by which pathway is more dominant in the child's upbringing.

Based on a discussion of the findings of this literature review, this study formulates an integrative conceptual model of the Four Pillars of Family-Based Bullying Prevention. It should be emphasized that this model is conceptual in nature formulated based on the logical relationships among findings in the literature and still requires empirical verification through field research.

Pillar 1: Positive Discipline (Authoritative Parenting). Based on a review of the parenting literature,(Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019)(Hasan & Nasir, n.d.). Parents need to shift their parenting style toward an authoritative approach by striking a balance between consistent control and emotional warmth. This approach simultaneously activates protective pathways and deactivates risk pathways, as children acquire a model for healthy, dialogic interaction and lay the early foundation for secure attachment.

Pillar 2: Elimination of Environmental Risk Factors. Based on the red flag map in Table 3,(Monks, n.d.) Families need to actively address structural factors (reducing exposure to domestic violence, strengthening media supervision) and interactional factors (increasing active involvement, maintaining consistent behavioral boundaries). This pillar addresses risk pathways related to amplifying factors and serves as an early detection tool that early childhood educators can utilize when communicating with parents.

Pillar 3: Strengthening Attachment through Emotion Coaching. Based on a review of the literature on attachment and emotional parenting,(Gottman et al., 1996)(Wilson et al., 2014). Parents need to consistently validate their child's emotions and help the child identify those emotions in order to build a positive internal working model(Bowlby, 1969) which serves as a prerequisite for empathy to act as an internal inhibitor of the urge to bully.

Pillar 4: Instilling Religious and Moral Values. Based on a review of research on religiosity (Massarwi & Gross-Manos, 2022)(Zannah et al., 2025). Religious values serve as a macrosystem element that provides meaning and moral direction for the other three pillars, while also being empirically proven to play a protective role against the tendencies and effects of bullying. This model positions religious values as the primary foundation, followed by the dimensions of education (Pillars 1 & 2) and character (Pillar 3) as their operational implementations. The four pillars of this model do not function independently, but rather synergistically: Pillar 1 facilitates the formation of secure attachment (Pillar 3), the elimination of red flags (Pillar 2) reduces interference with the other two pillars, and Pillar 4 strengthens the entire system by providing a stable foundation of values. Meta-analysis evidence confirms that the effectiveness of bullying prevention increases significantly when schools and families work in harmony (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011)(Gaffney et al., 2019b). An RCT study by Kim, Hahlweg, and Schulz demonstrated that structured family interventions beginning in preschool produce protective effects that last for up to a decade(Kim et al., 2021) empirical evidence that underscores the urgency of implementing this four-pillar model.

CONCLUSION

A literature review of 23 selected sources confirmed three main findings. Authoritative parenting is the most effective protective factor against aggression in early childhood, while authoritarian and permissive parenting styles encourage aggressive behavior through the process of imitation (Bandura). Seven family environmental risk factors categorized into structural and interactional factors mutually reinforce one another as predictors of preschool bullying, thereby requiring a systemic approach rather than a single intervention. Parental attachment has been shown to be a vital mediator in the development of children's empathy, with the Emotion

Coaching strategy serving as the most effective operational mechanism. Taken together, these three findings yield a conceptual model of a four-pillar family-based bullying prevention approach, with religious and moral values serving as the foundation of the macrosystem. This model remains conceptual and requires empirical verification through field studies, Emotion Coaching-based parent training, and longitudinal studies in the context of early childhood education in Indonesia.

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