



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Associations between child disciplinary practices and bullying behavior in adolescents<sup>☆</sup>

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### KEYWORDS

Bullying;  
Adolescent;  
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### Abstract

**Objective:** to investigate associations between different types of child disciplinary practices and children and adolescents' bullying behavior in a Brazilian sample.

**Methods:** cross-sectional study, with a school-based sample of 10- to 15-year-old children and adolescents. Child disciplinary practices were assessed using two main subtypes: power-assertive and punitive (psychological aggression, corporal punishment, deprivation of privileges, and penalty tasks) and inductive (explaining, rewarding, and monitoring). A modified version of the Olweus Bully Victim Questionnaire was used to measure the frequency of bullying.

**Results:** 247 children and adolescents were evaluated and 98 (39.7%) were classified as bullies. Power-assertive and punitive discipline by either mother or father was associated with bullying perpetration by their children. Mothers who mostly used this type of discipline were 4.36 (95% CI: 1.87-10.16;  $p < 0.001$ ) times more likely of having a bully child. Psychological aggression and mild forms of corporal punishment presented the highest odds ratios. Overall inductive discipline was not associated with bullying.

**Conclusions:** bullying was associated to parents' assertive and punitive discipline. Finding different ways of disciplining children and adolescents might decrease bullying behavior.

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**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Bullying;  
Adolescente;  
Punição;  
Educação infantil

**Associações entre práticas de disciplina infantil e comportamento de bullying em adolescentes****Resumo**

**Objetivo:** investigar a associação entre práticas parentais de disciplina e comportamento de *bullying* entre adolescentes brasileiros.

**Métodos:** estudo transversal, com alunos de 10 a 15 anos. Práticas parentais de disciplina foram avaliadas utilizando duas subclassificações principais: autoritárias e punitivas (agressão psicológica, punição corporal, retirada de privilégios e penalidades) e indutivas (explicações, recompensa e monitoramento). Uma versão modificada do *Olweus Bully Victim Questionnaire* foi utilizada para verificar a frequência de *bullying*.

**Resultados:** foram avaliados 247 adolescentes, e 98 (39,7%) deles foram classificados como agressores. Práticas parentais de disciplina autoritárias e punitivas, utilizadas tanto pela mãe como pelo pai, apresentaram associação com a prática de *bullying* pelos filhos. Mães que mais utilizavam este tipo de disciplina apresentaram chance 4,36 (IC95%: 1,87-10,16;  $p < 0,001$ ) vezes maior de ter um filho agressor. Agressão psicológica e formas brandas de punição corporal apresentaram os maiores *odds ratio*. Disciplina indutiva como um todo não apresentou associação.

**Conclusões:** a prática de *bullying* apresentou associação com a disciplina parental autoritária e punitiva. A utilização de diferentes formas de disciplinar os adolescentes podem diminuir o comportamento de *bullying*.

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**Introduction**

Bullying is recognized as a major concern because it is associated with greater school impairments,<sup>1</sup> mental health problems,<sup>1,2</sup> and later offending and criminality.<sup>3</sup> Studies have demonstrated that bullies have poorer self-control<sup>4</sup> and self-esteem,<sup>5</sup> and lower affective empathy.<sup>6</sup> These characteristics are associated with parenting as well. For example, parental attachment is associated with self-esteem, empathy, prosocial behavior, and peer attachment.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it would be expected that day-to-day parenting influences children's social competence, and thus their behavior in school.

Child disciplinary practices are a necessary part of child rearing. They involve training and helping children to develop judgment, a sense of boundaries, self-control, self-sufficiency, and a positive social conduct.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this study, two classifications of child disciplinary practices were explored: power-assertive and punitive discipline, and inductive discipline.<sup>9</sup> Inductive discipline (e.g. reasoning) is believed to help children to develop empathic skills, appealing to the child's sense of reason and fairness.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, punitive discipline (e.g. psychological aggression, corporal punishment) is believed to foster anger and unwillingness to comply, besides providing a model of aggression.<sup>11</sup>

In the field of child disciplinary practices, none is as controversial as corporal punishment. Vitolo et al.<sup>12</sup> found that 11.9% of Brazilian parents regarded corporal punishment as educational, and 43.3% used it as a child disciplinary practice. A broader and more recent study, with low and middle income countries (LaMICs) and the United States, observed that in Brazil, although nearly all parents use some form of nonviolent discipline, 55% had spanked their

children in the previous year, 15% had hit them with an object, and 19% had used forms of psychological violence, such as name-calling.<sup>13</sup>

While the association between physical abuse and bullying<sup>14</sup> is well accepted, to the authors's knowledge, no study has yet demonstrated an association between bullying and mild forms of corporal punishment, such as spanking. The present study sought to verify associations between different types of child disciplinary practices, especially mild forms of corporal punishment, and children and adolescents' bullying behavior in a Brazilian sample.

**Methods****Participants and data collection procedures**

Participants were children and adolescents from six public schools belonging to the catchment area of the primary care unit of the Hospital de Clínicas de Porto Alegre, Brazil, assessed between October of 2010 and March of 2011. In order to be eligible, participants needed to be between 10 to 15 years of age, since corporal punishment, an important variable in this study, is rarely used on adolescents older than 15 years of age.<sup>15</sup> The only exclusion criterion inability to obtain passive consent from parents and active student assent. This study was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of Hospital de Clínicas de Porto Alegre (n° 100010).

On the day of the data collection, students were evaluated in their classroom by two research assistants. Students were asked to sit separately, to prevent conferring or talking while completing the questionnaire, which took approximately one teaching period (50 minutes).

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