

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Peer support for bullying victims in junior high school

 <https://doi.org/10.32505/inspira.v6i2.13794>

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ABSTRACT

School bullying leads to a decline in victims' physical health, psychological well-being, and learning motivation, as well as lower academic achievement. Social support from peers represents a critical resource for the prevention of bullying and the recovery of its victims. This descriptive qualitative study aimed to explore the phenomenon of school bullying and the psychological dynamics of victims who receive social support from their peers. Six junior high school students who were involved in bullying incidents, either as recipients or providers of social support, served as informants. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, with participants recruited via snowball sampling. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, and credibility was established through member checking. The findings indicate that bullying inflicts significant negative emotional consequences on victims, including feelings of fear, sadness, and diminished self-esteem. Peer-based social support emerged as a key protective factor, mitigating these adverse effects. Victims reported increased self-confidence and courage to confront bullying after receiving support from peers. Such support alleviated feelings of isolation, helping victims feel less alone in coping with their distress. Furthermore, students who had previously been bullied demonstrated empathy and were willing to support peers in similar situations. The study suggests that fostering empathy in schools is essential to cultivating supportive peer attitudes and encouraging proactive assistance for bullying victims.

Article History:

Received 15 July 2025

Revised 01 August 2025

Accepted 20 December 2025

Keywords: *bullying; junior high school; peer social support; psychological well-being; qualitative study*

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a persistent global issue requiring serious attention and intervention from multiple stakeholders (Samson et al., 2022). It is characterized by repeated aggressive behavior rooted in an imbalance of power (Mohan & Bakar, 2021). It can occur in various settings, including schools, workplaces, and online environments (Zahara et al., 2023).

School bullying is a significant concern for educators. Data from the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2022) indicate rising prevalence rates among students, with 35.55% of elementary, 41.34% of junior high, and 30.31% of senior high school students in

How to cite (APA 7th Edition)

Adiananda, K. & Lestari, S. (2025). Peer support for bullying victims in junior high school. *INSPIRA: Indonesian Journal of Psychological Research*, 6(2), 119-130. <https://doi.org/10.32505/inspira.v6i2.13794>



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Indonesia reporting victimization. The consistent annual increase reflects its high prevalence across all educational levels (BPS, 2023). Bullying manifests in multiple forms, with physical, verbal, and psychological violence being most common (Saleh, 2024). The emergence of cyberbullying, such as spreading misinformation, defamation, or private information without consent, further complicates the issue (Jubaidi & Fadilla, 2020). This prevalence underscores that bullying is not merely an individual behavioral problem but a complex social phenomenon involving multiple systemic factors (Galán et al., 2021; Aprilianto & Fatikh, 2024).

The consequences of bullying are severe, adversely affecting victims' physical and psychological well-being (Gini, 2018). Physical impacts include sleep disturbances and somatic complaints, while psychological effects encompass anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, post-traumatic stress, and suicidal ideation (deLara, 2019). Bullying also impairs social adaptation, often leading to social withdrawal and a profound erosion of trust in others and oneself (Yosep et al., 2022; La Cour et al., 2022). Academically, victimization is linked to diminished concentration, reduced motivation, lower achievement, and overall poorer school performance (Huang, 2020; Boulton & Macaulay, 2022; Samara et al., 2021; Hysing et al., 2019). These wide-ranging detrimental effects highlight the critical need for effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Social support is a well-established protective factor that can mitigate the adverse outcomes of bullying, aiding in prevention, management, and recovery (Šmigelskas et al., 2018; Hellfeldt et al., 2020). Support from one's social environment alleviates distress and enhances psychological well-being, whereas its absence can exacerbate negative impacts (Ringdal et al., 2021; Ruiz et al., 2019). Within the school context, peers constitute a vital source of such support (Hellfeldt et al., 2020). Peer support has been associated with reduced emotional exhaustion, higher psychological well-being, and lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms among victims (García et al., 2022; Ringdal et al., 2021). Positive peer relationships can thus serve as a buffer, fostering resilience against victimization (Yearwood et al., 2019).

Social support is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal assistance from others (House, 1988). It functions as a resource that helps individuals cope with stress and crisis (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cobb, 1976; Zimet et al., 1988). By providing feelings of being cared for and valued, social support not only remediates existing problems but also plays a preventive role in maintaining mental health (Sarafino & Smith, 2017).

For early adolescents, peer support is particularly salient. Junior high school students (typically ages 12–15) are in a developmental period characterized by heightened egocentrism, a strong desire for social acceptance, and complex peer dynamics, making them especially vulnerable to bullying (Megaputri et al., 2021; Balas, 2023). Students who are introverted, lack confidence, or have low perceived social support are at increased risk (Arini & Novianti, 2021). Conversely, strong, supportive peer relationships can significantly reduce this vulnerability and enhance emotional resilience (Biswas et al., 2020; Lester & Mander, 2015). Supportive peers can provide emotional comfort, practical assistance, and even direct intervention, all of which help mitigate the impact of bullying (Kendrick et al., 2012; Ho et al., 2021). Notably, victims often feel more comfortable seeking help from peers than from adults, underscoring the unique importance of peer-based support systems in schools (O'Connor & Gruber, 2014).

Given the established protective function of peer relationships, this study aims to explore the specific psychological dynamics experienced by bullying victims in junior high schools and to describe the nature and role of the social support they receive from their peers. By examining this interplay,

the research seeks to contribute to the development of more effective, peer-informed strategies for bullying prevention and victim support.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, which aims to provide a thorough description of a social phenomenon, event, or object (Samsu, 2017). This method was selected to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences and social realities of bullying victims and their peers.

Participants ($N = 6$) were junior high school students from Indonesia who met one of two criteria: (1) self-identification as a victim of school bullying, or (2) self-identification as a peer who provided social support to a bullying victim. The final sample consisted of three participants from each group. Recruitment began through preliminary data from a focus group discussion conducted under a larger umbrella study. Eligible participants were then recruited via snowball sampling.

Initial	Age	Sex	Bullying Status	Roles in Support System
COKP	14	Female	Victim	Recipient and giver of support
DHA	14	Female	Victim	Recipient and giver of support
ROP	15	Female	Victim	Recipient and giver of support
HPR	15	Female	Witness	Recipient and giver of support
HDR	14	Female	Witness	Giver of support
DNW	15	Male	Witness	Giver of support

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Two separate interview guides were developed, one for victims and one for support providers, though questions evolved based on participant responses. The interview protocol explored participants' experiences of school bullying and the nature of social support received or provided. Interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for participants. Data collection tools included an audio recorder, a notepad, and paper for taking notes. To ensure credibility, a member check was conducted. Participants were asked to review and confirm the accuracy of their transcribed interview data and provided written consent for its use.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process followed several steps: (a) reading and re-reading transcripts to gain familiarity; (b) generating initial codes; (c) collating codes into potential themes; (d) reviewing and refining themes; and (e) defining, naming, and interpreting the final themes. Data management and analysis were facilitated using ATLAS.ti and Microsoft Excel software. The study aimed to interpret the psychological dynamics of school bullying and the specific nature of peer support received by victims.

RESULT

Based on the conducted interviews, four central themes emerged: (a) forms of school bullying, (b) victims' psychological conditions, (c) social support received by victims, and (d) the social support peers provide to victims.

Forms of School Bullying. Bullying at the school manifested in various forms: physical, verbal, social/relational, sexual, and cyber. Physical bullying was predominantly reported among boys, including male perpetrators hitting female victims and male-on-male physical altercations, forms involved hitting and using sharp objects to inflict harm. Verbal bullying was more commonly experienced by female students, primarily consisting of derogatory comments and teasing about physical appearance, such as dark skin, acne, or short stature. Pejorative terms like "maghrib" and "nigha" (referencing dark skin) and nonsensical name-calling (e.g., "kiw-kiw") in hallways were reported. Social/relational bullying, also primarily experienced by female students, included exclusion,

slander, and being cornered in social situations. Sexual bullying involved inappropriate comments, often targeting female students' breast size, using terms like "tobrut" (short for "toket brutal"). Catcalling was also reported. Cyberbullying occurred through the non-consensual sharing of personal images. For example, one victim described how a WhatsApp status photo of herself in a V-neck shirt, which she had edited to obscure her chest, was screenshotted and disseminated by male classmates without her consent.

Victims' Psychological Condition. The experience of bullying caused significant psychological distress. Victims reported a range of negative emotions: fear, sadness, discomfort, irritation, exhaustion, confusion, anxiety, and feelings of humiliation. These emotions led to crying, self-hatred, avoidance of school, a desire to escape the situation, and even acts of self-harm.

DHA, a victim of sexual and cyberbullying regarding her breast size, felt deeply humiliated when her photo was shared. Being called "tobrut" made her sad and led to body dysmorphia, wishing for a different body. HPR, who experienced social bullying through slander and exclusion, reported feelings of sadness and confusion regarding her classmates' behavior. ROP, a victim of verbal bullying about her dark skin and nonsensical name-calling in hallways, experienced constant anxiety and discomfort in those spaces. This distress culminated in an episode of crying and self-harm in a bathroom. COKP, teased about her acne and dark skin with terms like "nigha" and "maghrib," internalized the insults, leading to sadness, self-disappointment, and a belief that she was unattractive.

Social Support Received by Victims. Following bullying incidents, victims typically sought support by confiding in friends, motivated by a need to avoid internalizing their pain and to prevent worsening mental states, such as excessive negative thinking or depression. The received support took three primary forms: 1) emotional support: encouragement, attentive listening, empowerment, and advice to ignore the bullies; 2) instrumental support: friends confronting the perpetrators or, in some cases, seeking retaliation; and 3) informational support: guidance and practical advice on how to handle the situation.

This peer support generated positive emotional outcomes for victims, including happiness, calmness, relief, reduced feelings of isolation, and a sense of being supported. It also fostered increased bravery, assertiveness, and self-confidence. Notably, instrumental actions, such as confronting the bully, were perceived by victims as effective in preventing further incidents.

Social Support Provided by Peers to Victims. Witnessing bullying prompted junior high school students to provide support, which they categorized into the same three types: 1) emotional support: expressing encouragement, advising victims to ignore bullies, and showing care and concern; 2) instrumental support: physically protecting or accompanying the victim, intervening to stop the bullying, reporting to teachers, or directly confronting the perpetrator; and 3) informational support: offering suggestions and guidance.

Motivations for providing support included feelings of pity, a desire to help and protect, and an intention to prevent recurring bullying. Some supporters who were former victims were motivated to "pay forward" the support they had once received. Supporters demonstrated empathy, sharing in the victim's sadness, and were often driven by their own past experiences of victimization. Internalized personal values, such as belief in human equality, karma ("hukum tabur tuai"), selflessness, and universal kindness—also motivated supportive behavior. After offering support, peers reported positive feelings of happiness and relief. A core driving factor was their stated desire to ensure others would not have to endure the same suffering they had witnessed or experienced.

DISCUSSION

Bullying in schools is a fundamental issue that manifests in various forms and significantly impacts students' psychological and social well-being. It is defined as intentional, repeated aggressive behavior involving a power imbalance between perpetrator and victim (Radmerikhi et al., 2021). This study's findings align with this definition and further detail the specific manifestations and consequences of bullying, as well as the crucial role of peer support.

Consistent with national data (BPS, 2023), bullying is highly prevalent in junior high schools. Our qualitative findings reveal a complex gendered landscape. While quantitative national data suggests similar victimization rates for boys and girls (BPS, 2023), our study found a higher proportion of female participants self-identifying as victims. This discrepancy may be explained by gendered social capital and norms of masculinity, which can pressure boys to conceal victimization experiences to maintain a socially acceptable masculine image, thereby underreporting their experiences (Bourdieu, 1986).

The findings confirm that bullying takes multiple forms. Verbal bullying was the most frequently reported, which aligns with previous studies indicating its high prevalence (Fathinah et al., 2023). For female victims, this often involved body-shaming related to skin color, acne, or breast size, exacerbating anxieties associated with pubertal changes and societal beauty standards (Hadiani et al., 2021). Female participants were also more vulnerable to indirect forms like social/relational and sexual bullying, while physical aggression was more commonly reported among and by male students (Siyahhan et al., 2012). The emergence of cyberbullying, exemplified by the non-consensual sharing of personal images, adds a modern, pervasive dimension to victimization.

The psychological consequences were severe and align with extensive literature. Victims reported a range of negative emotions, fear, sadness, anxiety, and humiliation, that compromised their sense of safety at school (Tamamiyah, 2024). These emotions led to maladaptive coping strategies, including social withdrawal, self-harm, and school avoidance. Crucially, the experience eroded self-esteem, creating a vicious cycle where low self-esteem is both a consequence and a risk factor for further victimization (Mungala & Nabuzoka, 2020; Hammad & Awed, 2020).

A central finding of this study is the critical function of peer support in mitigating these negative outcomes. Victims primarily used emotion-focused coping, seeking to share their experiences with trusted friends (Hunter & Borg, 2006). This act of disclosure itself provided relief and reduced emotional distress (Nwadinobi et al., 2021; Raboteg-Šarić, 2019). The support received, categorized as emotional, instrumental, and informational (Sarafino, 2016), was transformative. Emotional support (e.g., encouragement, listening) fostered positive emotions like happiness, relief, and a sense of belonging. Instrumental support (e.g., confronting the bully, reporting to teachers) was particularly effective in stopping bullying, as it helped rebalance the power dynamic between the victim and the perpetrator (Lee et al., 2013). This support network enhanced victims' bravery, assertiveness, and self-confidence, directly countering the psychological damage inflicted by bullying.

The motivations of peer supporters were rooted in empathy, both affective (feeling the victim's pain) and cognitive (understanding their perspective), which is a key driver of prosocial behavior (Butarbutar & Fathi, 2018; Sofwana et al., 2020). Many supporters were former victims themselves, and this shared experience created a powerful, empathetic bond that motivated them to provide the support they once needed (Helgeson & Cohen, 1996). This led to a notable pattern of reciprocal support, especially among female participants, in which receiving aid created an obligation and a desire to "pay it forward," strengthening a supportive peer ecosystem. Internalized values of kindness, equality, and justice underpin this reciprocity.

The study also highlights systemic failures. Victims reported dissatisfaction with teacher responses, finding them inadequate, which diminished trust in adult intervention at school. Combined with perceived low parental availability or understanding, this vacuum pushed students to rely almost exclusively on peers for validation and support.

This dynamic can be effectively understood through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. The microsystem (immediate environment of peer relationships) functioned as the primary source of resilience due to failures in other microsystem interactions (teacher-student, parent-child). The mesosystem (connections between home and school) was weak, as communication and collaboration between parents and teachers were insufficient to create a cohesive anti-bullying front. The exosystem (school policies) and macrosystem (cultural norms around masculinity and conflict) indirectly perpetuated the problem by not adequately preventing bullying or encouraging male victims to seek help.

In conclusion, this research underscores that while bullying in junior high schools inflicts significant harm, peer support networks act as a powerful, on-the-ground protective system. These networks facilitate emotional recovery, empower victims, and can directly intervene to stop bullying. However, their necessity also exposes critical gaps in adult-led support structures within the school and family microsystems. Effective anti-bullying strategies must therefore strengthen these formal support systems while simultaneously fostering and integrating the natural, empathetic, and reciprocal support dynamics that already exist among students.

CONCLUSION

Peer social support plays a vital role in assisting victims of bullying. This study demonstrates that such support enhances personal resilience, reduces anxiety, and improves emotional well-being, outcomes critically relevant for those who have experienced victimization. The support, manifested through attention, empathy, and tangible assistance from friends, helps victims feel more accepted and mitigates feelings of loneliness. In essence, positive interactions and emotional support from peers equip individuals facing bullying with the strength to overcome their challenges, thereby fostering greater resilience and enhancing their psychological welfare. A significant finding is that former victims of bullying who are now junior high school students emerge as agents of positive change. Through empathy and the social support they extend to peers undergoing similar experiences, they actively contribute to a more supportive school environment.

DECLARATION

Acknowledgment

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the research participants for generously sharing their invaluable life experiences. This study was funded through an Individual Lecturer Research Grant from the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, awarded to the second author.

Author contribution statement

Kinanthy Adiananda conceptualized the research design, formulated the research problem, and developed the methodology. Conducted data collection, performed data analysis, and drafted the initial manuscript. Sri Lestari contributed to the conceptualization of the research design, problem formulation, and methodology. Supervised the data collection and analysis conducted by the first author. Reviewed, edited, and critically revised the manuscript drafted by the first author.

Funding statement

This research was funded by *Penelitian Pengembangan Individual Dosen (PID)* Grant from the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Fiscal Year 2025, awarded to the second author.

Data access statement

The data described in this article are from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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