

Cyber-Victimization and Cyber-Aggression among Portuguese Adolescents: The Relation to Family Support and Family Rules

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to clarify how the quality of the family environment is related to the involvement in cyberbullying behaviors, either as a cyber-victim or as a cyber-aggressor, via a cross-sectional research design. With this purpose a diagnostic questionnaire with questions about both the quality of family environment and cyberbullying was conceived and administered to 3525 adolescents attending 6th, 8th and 11th grades at several schools in Portugal. The results suggested that two family aspects seem to be equally important in protection against cyberbullying: perception of family support and perception of rules within the family. A hierarchical regression analysis reveals that lack of family support is more predictive of cyber-victimization and that a lack of family rules is more predictive of cyber-aggression. The authors discuss the implications for the well-being of adolescents, as well as the challenges that parents face in the supervision of adolescents' use of digital technologies.

KEYWORDS

Cyberbullying, Family Environment, Family Supervision

INTRODUCTION

The use of digital technologies (DT) has been recently increasing and proliferating, not only in academic and work environments, but also in youth culture and leisure. These technologies bring multiple benefits and opportunities, but may also entail risks such as cyberbullying, which has been generally defined as repeated aggressive and intentional actions with the use of electronic devices (e.g., cell phones and computers) and associated programs (e.g., e-mail, the Internet, and social networks), by means of sending messages and/or creating websites that insult, denigrate, threaten, or harass others in some way (Amado, Freire, Matos, Vieira & Pessoa, 2012; Amado, Matos & Pessoa, 2009; Li, 2007; Kowalski, Limber & Agaston, 2008; Smith, 2009; Willard, 2005). Many studies have suggested that cyberbullying consists of an indirect form of bullying, and frequently represents continuations of face-to-face bullying situations (Kowalski, Giummetti, Schroeder & Lattanner, 2014; Ortega, Calmaestra & Mora-Merchan, 2008; Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra & Vega, 2009). Cyberbullying can be predicted by previous attitudes similarly to what happens with face-to-face bullying (Boulton,

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Lloyd, Down & Marx, 2012). In contrast with other types of bullying, cyberbullying does not tend to decrease with age or grade level; it may actually increase over time (Kowalski et al., 2014; Walker, Sockman & Koehn, 2011) and can also be found in college and university students (Francisco, Veiga Simão, Ferreira & Martins, 2015).

The EUKIDS Online project, a European study conducted by Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, and Olafsson (2011) involving 25,000 children and teenagers, aged from 9 to 16, revealed that Internet usage is part of children's daily life in many European countries, as 93% of the respondents claimed they use the Internet on a weekly basis and one-third of the respondents aged 9 to 10 affirmed that they use the Internet on a daily basis. This study also revealed that children are increasingly accessing the Internet at an earlier age, since older children (15-16 years old) reported they started using the Internet from the age of 11, while younger children (9-11 years old) reported they began to use it from the age of 9 (in a cross-sectional study). Moreover, this research demonstrated how children access the Internet mostly at home (around 87%) and school (67%). Specifically, children usually access the Internet on their desktop computer in their bedrooms (49%) or on a mobile device (33%). Lastly, Livingstone and colleagues (2011) identified that about one-third of the respondents claimed to know more about the Internet than their own parents; this finding is very relevant to this study.

Other works have reported similar tendencies regarding the use of digital technologies (Hertlein, 2012) and suggested that parents with less expertise and knowledge on DT have more difficulties in monitoring teenagers' activities (e.g., Fletcher & Blair, 2014; Sorbring, 2014). Sorbring (2014) concluded that the parents who gave more importance to the Internet and who simultaneously had less relevant knowledge, were those who worried mostly about their teenagers' use of the Internet.

Kowalski and collaborators (2014) conducted a meta-analysis on cyberbullying research in youths and concluded that the theoretical approaches that explain aggression could be used to explain bullying and cyberbullying. Therefore, these authors sustain that both personal and situational factors influence the occurrence of cyberbullying and/or cyber-victimization. As a result, they concluded that the strongest associations with cyberbullying perpetration were normative beliefs about aggression and moral disengagement, and that the strongest associations with cyber-victimization were stress and suicidal ideation. In reference to situational factors, results suggested that parental involvement, parental monitoring, and school characteristics influence both cyber-aggression and cyber-victimization. School variables that were inversely linked to engagement in cyberbullying included school climate and school safety. Regarding family variables, it seems that less frequent cyber-victimization is associated with parental discussion about online behavior and that cyberbullies had weaker emotional bonds with their parents and less frequent monitoring of online activities (Kowalski et al., 2014).

In this study, the authors aim to understand how the family environment relates to the involvement of pre-adolescents and adolescents in incidents of cyberbullying, either as victims or bullies, because this topic has been less investigated and less deepened than socio-demographic and school variables associated with cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Different authors (e.g., Diaz-Aguado, 2004, 2005; Granot & Maysel, 2001) suggested various family aspects, which are usually associated with healthy psychosocial development and adjustment, namely: the presence of warm and affective relationships, without overprotection, or, in other words, strong and safe bonds between parents and their children; the presence of age-appropriate supervision and care, that means adequate balance between parent support and autonomy stimulation; and disciplinary practices in which rules are explicit and authority coexists with negotiation, or, in other words, a consistent parenting education or an assertive discipline parenting that is neither authoritarian nor permissive or inconsistent.

On the other hand, several studies (e.g., Blanc & Janoz, 2002; Fonseca, 2002; Ijzendoorn, 2002; Kõiv, 2012; Smith, 2005) revealed that negative parenting styles and/or parent-child insecure attachment have consequences on children's behavior, in the sense that they seem to predict aggression and other social adjustment problems. Hence, several family characteristics have been generally

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