

Exploring the Association Between Attachment and Bullying Among Adolescents Through Bowlbian Perspective

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Abstract: Bullying among adolescents is a worldwide pervasive phenomenon. Understanding the role of attachment stemming from the early years of life is crucial for addressing this major social issue. This research article explores the phenomena of bullying through the lens of Bowlby's attachment theory. Secured attachment with the caregiver acts as a protective factor which fosters positive psychosocial development among adolescents in the form of empathy, emotional regulation and prosocial behavior. This in turn reduces the risk of bullying perpetration and victimization. Conversely, adolescents who share an insecure attachment bond with their parents and peers tend to show a higher propensity towards aggressive tendencies like bullying others and are at enhanced risk of being victimized as well. Despite of this understanding, there remains a significant dearth of literature examining the relationship of both parent and peer attachment with bullying. The present study aims to advance the existing literature by accentuating that secured bonding at both parental and peer level is paramount to mitigate the risks of bullying behaviors. Based on this conceptual approach, intervention strategies at the school and family level are discussed further.

Keywords: Bullying Perpetration, Victimization, Attachment, Bonding, Adolescents.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Bullying in schools initially gained popularization in Scandinavia during the early 1970s and from then the research in this field has extended widely. In 1972, the interest in this area started with the publication of Heinemann's (1972) book titled "Mobbing – Group Aggression Against Boys and Girls." According to Smith (2011), the conceptualization of this issue began with the efforts and use of the term "mobbing." Another

book which gained a lot of recognition was "Aggression in Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys" by Olweus (1978). This publication was a turning point and a landmark in the history of bullying research. With this, Dan Olweus came to be widely lauded as the pioneer who laid down the groundwork for it. The employment of the word "mobbing" saw criticism in this publication by Olweus (1978), who rather utilized the term "bullies" in his research. One of the most commonly accepted definitions of bullying was put forward by Olweus

(1999) who defined bullying as an intentional aggressive behavior which takes place on a regular basis targeting a victim who is not in a position to defend him or herself. Though investigators usually do not come into consensus on a single definition of bullying that universally prevails, there are some attributes of bullying highlighted by Olweus's explanation that most of them accept. These include the following:

- **Intentional:** it means that the act of bullying is a deliberate one.
- **Harmful:** it indicates that bullying intends to cause hurt to the other person.
- **Repeated:** it infers that bullying is a regular action which repeats with time (Salmivalli et al., 2014).
- **Power Imbalance:** it indicates that the difference of power is present in bullying situations, such that the victimized person feels helpless and is not in a position to defend himself or herself (Espelage & Swearer, 2003).

The term bullying is often confused with aggression and the two terms are even used interchangeably, but bullying is rather a subtype of aggression (Hymel et al., 2005). The repeating and power imbalance elements contrast bullying behaviors from aggression (Obermann, 2011). It is well-known that there are two aspects of bullying i.e. bullying perpetration and bullying victimization. Bullying perpetration refers to the involvement of a person in bullying others as an aggressor, while bullying victimization/peer victimization is a term used to specify being a target of aggression by peers. There are numerous ways through which bullying behaviors can be manifested. They can broadly be categorized into direct and indirect forms of bullying. Direct bullying means to inflict harm on others physically or verbally i.e. by overt ways, while indirect bullying includes covert methods to cause insult and hurt to the victim (Côté et al., 2007), in which relational aggression is exerted by the means of excluding others from groups and spreading rumors about them (Drennan et al., 2011). A better understanding of bullying behaviors is provided by the types of bullying described by Crick and Bigbee (1998). Physical bullying includes shoving, kicking or hitting the person, causing theft, damage or hiding the property or forcing others to engage in activities one does not wish to be a part of. This type of bullying comes in easy notice of children and adults and occurs directly (Smith et al., 2002). Although Lee (2004) is of the opinion that activities like stealing or theft of things or destroying them could be indirect forms since they do not physically harm someone but cause psychological damage. Verbal bullying encompasses teasing, yelling, insulting or name-calling others. This type of bullying could also be direct or indirect. Relational bullying involves excluding others from social groups, gossiping or spreading rumors and false information and willfully not speaking to someone. All these types of bullying are commonly referred to as traditional forms of bullying behaviors. A new form of bullying which has come into role with advancements of

Information and communication technology (ICT) is cyberbullying. It refers to a harmful behavior which a person or a group inflict purposely and repeatedly by the means of electronic contact towards a victim lacking the power to defend oneself (Smith et al., 2008).

The act of bullying involves different participants taking up diverse roles. Different investigators vary in their identification of participants who play an active role in bullying, but four major groups tend to exist. These are the bully, the victim, the bully-victim and bystanders. A bully can be defined as an individual who initiates repeated harm to others but does not experience it on him or herself. A victim refers to someone who is the target of the perpetration and holds a weaker position lacking the power to defend him/herself. Earlier researches considered bullying as the interaction between the “bully” and the “victim” but since 1990s there has been a wide acknowledgment of the third category “bully-victims” and the expanding research on this group (Solberg et al., 2007). Bully-victims constitute those participants who engage in both perpetrating others and experiencing victimization themselves. This group is observed to be the worst affected one amongst the active participants of bullying behaviors. Research indicates various psychological issues among victims of bullying like poorly developed self-esteem and self-concept (Malhi et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2010), high stress (Tokunaga, 2010), anxiety, depressive symptoms and even suicidality (Eyuboglu et al., 2021; Lee & Vaillancourt, 2019; Luo et al., 2022; Swartz & Bhattacharya, 2017). Not only victims, but both bullies and bully-victims suffer from mental health concerns as well (Goldbach et al., 2018; Lereya et al., 2015). Considering the grave consequences associated with bullying among youth, researchers and policy makers have consistently attempted to uncover its potential correlates that can explain the existence of this type of peer violence from years in the society. Among these, one of the crucial factors that helps in grasping the phenomenon of bullying among adolescents is attachment. The next section highlights the contribution of one of the key figures in attachment research i.e. John Bowlby and his attachment theory.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF BOWLBY'S ATTACHMENT THEORY

John Bowlby has been a key figure who has extensively contributed towards understanding the dynamics of attachment and social-emotional development among humans through his Attachment theory. Bowlby (1977) comprehended that conceptualization of attachment centers on having a natural tendency in forming emotional attachment and proximity with significant figures. An aspect of attachment which plays a fundamental role in the adaptive and maladaptive development of an individual is the concept of internal working models, which has its roots in the attachment theory. Attachment refers to the affective bonding between the child and the primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1973). Attachment theory (Bowlby 1969,

1988) emphasizes the substantial contribution of this parent-child bond and contends the relevance of this bonding in helping a person engage effectively in positive social interactions and developing social competency (Bowlby 1969; Thompson, 2008). It asserts that the parent-child bond forms the secure base which enables children to deal with their surroundings (Bowlby, 1988). Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1988) has described internal working models as the mental framework a person forms based on his experiences with the attachment figure. This framework directs his subsequent expectations in life based on his early attachment history and guides his future relationships.

As a result, the experiences with caregiver prompt children to develop internal working models of themselves and others including their partners. Individuals who have parents that are caring, responsive and supportive to their needs and acting sensitively towards them become securely attached. While children having parents who are ignorant, neglectful, insensitive and inconsistent towards them become insecurely attached (Bowlby, 1977). In other words, those developing positive internal working models turn out to have good quality of secure attachment with parents, whereas the ones with negative internal working models have insecure attachment. Moreover, positively developed internal working models are favorable in molding adolescents into psychosocially resilient individuals and in dealing with stressful circumstances, while negatively developed internal working models put adolescents at a greater risk of stress causing conditions constituting psychological threats (Bowlby, 1980). The above explanations serve as a background to examine bullying among adolescents indicating that bullying during adolescence can be traced down to the very early years of life and is largely associated with the caregiver interactions. Socialization of an individual initiates from the very early experiences with his family and the family system continues to play an eminent role in the development of an individual during the phase of adolescence as well. Since childhood, a person spends a great deal of time with his family members and among them his parents are the ones who uphold the responsibility of being primary caregivers for him. Undoubtedly, parents are the significant attachment figures for the child and continue to serve as the models of attachment throughout the core developmental process. A significant body of research has established that attachment relationships are paramount during the transitional phase of adolescence, specifying that a link exists between secured attachment and positive consequences (Delgado et al., 2022). Competence and explorations develop due to these experiences of feeling secure (Grossmann & Grossmann, 1991).

A plethora of available literature evidences that secured parental attachment is significantly related to well-being, social competence, interpersonal relationships and emotional regulation during childhood and adolescence (Allen & Land, 1999; Grossmann et al., 2005; Nickerson & Nagle, 2004; Sroufe, 2005; Valarezo-Bravo et al., 2024). Support from

parents coming in any form encourages the healthy development of adolescents. Supportive parenting encompasses behaviors such as applauding the adolescents, providing them with encouragement and being around them by spending an ample amount of quality time (Barber & Thomas, 1986; Fuligni & Eccles, 1993; Rohner, 1986). Parents displaying such behavioral patterns share nourishing and positive bond with the adolescents. As a result, the relationship between parents and adolescents improves and becomes stronger with such practices of parents. Clearly, parental support helps in smoothly getting away with the challenges of the transitional phase of adolescence (Whitlock & Schantz, 2008). In contrast to these positive parenting practices, if parents exhibit invasive psychological authority, then there are negative influences on adolescent functioning (Barber, 2002).

III. ATTACHMENT TO PARENTS AND BULLYING AMONG ADOLESCENTS

Adolescence is widely recognized as the period of stress and storm where a person goes through numerous significant changes (Hall, 1904). Teenagers often seek parents' advice to channelize their emotions and share their concerns. However, absence of effective communication patterns with parents increases the chances of adolescents resorting to other sources of affiliation and care, like their peers. Children who share poor emotional bonding with parents have a poor world view and hold negative assumptions regarding interpersonal relationships. They usually expect others to be unavailable (Renken et al., 1989). Having such an unfavorable mindset pertaining to social interactions can result in hostile feelings towards others and increase the chances of maladaptive social exchanges. Consequently, these adolescents having poor parental attachment are highly vulnerable to bullying perpetration (Walden & Beran, 2010). Additionally, uncaring and indifferent behavior displayed by the caregiver increases the likelihood of the child feeling insecure as well as diminishing his self-esteem. These factors ultimately predispose them to being targets of peer aggressiveness (Georgiou, 2008). Hence, these insecurely attached individuals can form a "victim schema." Some may also form a "bully schema" wherein the assumptions of negative world view and lack of confidence in others may take the form of bullying perpetration to improve their self-esteem levels.

Overall, feeling alienated from the attachment figure leads to visualizing others who are the part of the social circle as individuals who are undeserving and threatening. Such hostile feelings enhance the likelihood of social isolation and peer victimization. Nonetheless, there could be another child who undertakes the act of bullying others to express his power, dominance and control against the victim whom he might perceive as threatening (Balan et al., 2018; Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Individuals who have insecure attachment also tend to have low levels of emotional regulation and struggle with processing social information and dealing with social

issues. Previous findings highlight that all these aspects act as risk factors increasing the vulnerability to engage in bullying behaviors (Dwyer et al., 2010; Panfile & Laible, 2012; Raikes & Thompson, 2008).

IV. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCES ON PARENTAL ATTACHMENT AND BULLYING

Many studies have established the association between attachment to parents and bullying, but still the available literature is limited and insufficient (Eilts et al., 2023). A recent study by Liu and Li (2025) found that poor maternal attachment was significantly related to more likelihood of bullying involvement. Innamorati et al. (2018) also concluded that maternal attachment was negatively related to bullying perpetration directly and also indirectly via conservative social orientation. Father attachment was found to be directly related to bullying victimization. In line with the above studies, Charalampous et al. (2019) reported that bullying involvement was negatively correlated with mother trust and mother communication. Moreover, bullying was positively correlated with mother alienation. Peer attachment and student-teacher relationship was found to mediate the impact of maternal attachment on bullying experiences.

Another investigation conducted by Igundunasse and Anozie (2018) demonstrated that poor attachment to parents

was linked with higher odds of bullying among adolescents. Similarly, findings by Eilts et al. (2023) showed that parental attachment directly impacts bullying perpetration. Further, Cho et al. (2017) examined a sample of South Korean adolescents to analyze the impact of parental attachment on bullying perpetration mediated by self-control, deviant peer relationships and delinquency. There was no direct significant relationship between attachment to parents and bullying among adolescents. The researchers employed structural equation modeling and found that low quality attachment to parents was indirectly related to high bullying rates via self-control. The authors suggested that it is not necessary that adolescents having poor parent-child bond immediately exhibit bullying behaviors, but it may be rather through some developmental pathways during adolescence. Hence, self-control was found to mediate the relationship between parental attachment and bullying perpetration. However, other researchers in South Korea have found significant direct relationship between parent attachment and bullying among adolescents (Park & Chae, 2011).

In general, review of literature supports the explanations of Bowlby's theory asserting that indeed attachment is significantly associated with bullying involvement among adolescents, with those sharing poor quality of parental attachment being highly prone to both bullying perpetration and bullying victimization than their uninvolved counterparts.

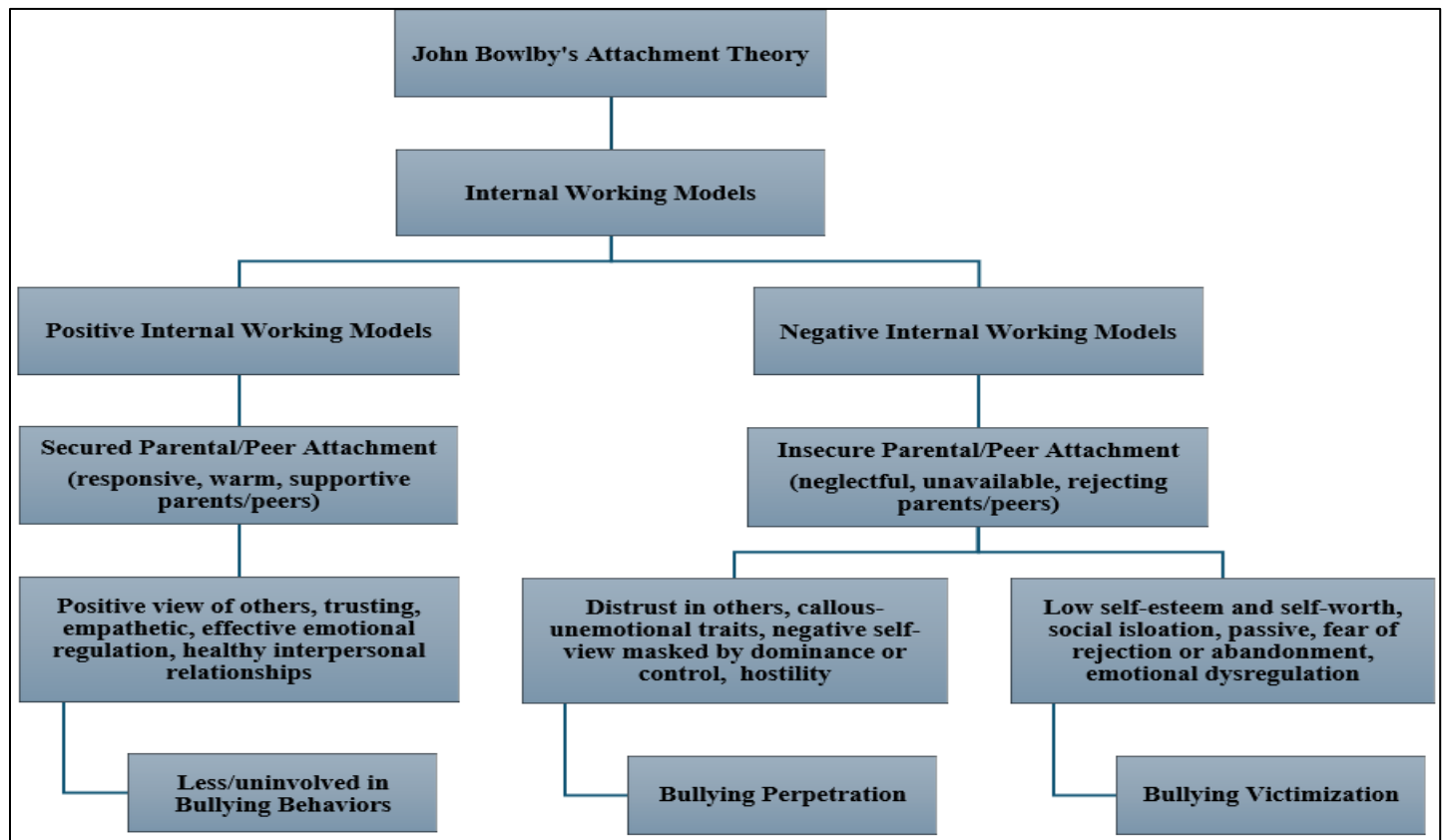


Fig 1 Conceptual Framework Based on Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Bullying Behaviors

V. PEER ATTACHMENT

Initially, attachment was explained by Bowlby (1973) as the affective mother-child bond, but the follow up studies have supported the significance of other relationships in the conception of attachment as well, such as the peer relationships (Murphy et al., 2017). This further led to the recognition of the key role of peers in the lives of adolescents. Attachment during adolescence move towards those who are not among the family members and peer attachment gains greater significance than earlier (You et al., 2015). Establishing significant peer relations is one of the important developmental tasks during adolescence. It is the phase where peer interactions grow remarkably and sometimes result in attachment relationships (Rao & Madan, 2013). In simple words, peer attachment refers to the internal representations' adolescents' form with respect to the social-emotional availability of their peers in times of need.

During adolescence period, peer attachment serves as source of emotional support (Paterson et al., 1994). Adolescents spend an additional amount of time with their peers, and it is evident with the growing role of peers that there is a subtle transfer of attachment figures to peers from parents (Allen, 2008; Allen & Tan, 2016). Attachments during this phase are seen becoming dependent and reciprocal largely on the internal representations of relationships an individual has formed to guide his behavior (Allen 2008; Nickerson & Nagle, 2005), inferring that the core of attachment is now the peers, and less emphasis is laid on parents (Murphy et al., 2017). Despite peers becoming an indispensable part of adolescent life, parents remain the foundational source of attachment. However, along with parents serving as the secured base for interpersonal interactions, teenagers establish more stable and intimate relationships with their peers and perceive them as safe haven (Murphy et al., 2017; Poncela, 2014).

VI. PEER ATTACHMENT AND BULLYING DURING ADOLESCENCE

Bullying is commonly recognized as a group process (Salmivalli et al., 1996) and a social event taking place between peers (Balan et al., 2018). Available literature underlines that those who are bullied have lesser peer relationships in future (deLara, 2019) and the participants attribute trust issues as a key concern stemming from their bullying experiences. Victims of bullying are also lower on peer acceptance than their uninvolved counterparts (Bacchini et al., 2008). Moreover, students who negatively perceive their relations with their class fellows and have poor level of school connectedness are more prone to bullying victimization experiences (Bacchini et al., 2009; Li et al., 2020). As argued by Mishna et al., (2016), supportive social groups are protective factors against peer victimization. Similarly, behavioral and emotional consequences are influenced by peer relationships (Hamel, 2021), with negative peer interactions

resulting in maladaptive affective and behavioral manifestations (Kutsyuruba, Klinger, & Hussain, 2015). Thus, adolescents who have secure peer attachment are likely to be more sympathetic towards their peers and tend to show less aggressive tendencies. Peer attachment is quintessential in the development of empathy as well (Laible et al., 2000), which buffers against bullying and promotes defending behavior alongside (Murphy et al., 2017).

Good quality of peer attachment provides assurance to adolescence regarding the dependable nature of their peer bonding characterised by mutual respect, healthy communication, affection, trust and stability (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005; Wright, Kamble, & Soudi, 2015). Though attachment to peers can be identical to parental attachment in various ways, it may also show distinctive outcomes in how adolescents develop socially since the bonding with peers is more egalitarian in nature (Laible et al., 2000). Research shows that there is a reciprocal relationship between problematic peer relationships and psychological difficulties (Brendgen et al., 2000). This supports the notion that problematic peer interactions can give way to further unhealthy peer practices like bullying perpetration and bullying victimization if one fails to develop a strong emotional bond with the peers. Victims and bullies are more likely to have negative perceptions of their peer relations since there are greater chances that such adolescents would get along less with their peers or be less socially integrated (de Monchy et al., 2004; Juvonen et al., 2003). Since there is a direct association of social integration with peer relations during adolescence, these adolescents poorly manage their peer interactions (de Monchy et al., 2004).

VII. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCES ON PEER ATTACHMENT AND BULLYING

Though the majority of the initial research studies focused on the role of parental attachment in bullying, the past few years have seen a growth of empirical literature examining the relationship between attachment to peers and bullying involvement among adolescents.

Liu and Li (2025) reported that poor levels of attachment to peers is associated with bullying among secondary school students in China. Results by Riany and Utami (2025) highlighted that adolescents who share secure peer attachment are less likely to be involved in cyberbullying perpetration. Supportive findings were procured by Charalampous et al. (2019) who found that bullying involvement was negatively related to peer trust and peer communication and positively with peer alienation among adolescents. Balan et al. (2018) explored cognitive mechanism (negative automatic thoughts) operating the link between attachment to parents and peers and bullying behaviors. The authors assessed how attachment to different agents of socialization indirectly influences bullying perpetration and bullying victimization experiences of adolescents via negative automatic thoughts. Findings showed

that negative automatic thoughts acted as a mechanism through which the parental and peer attachment was associated with the phenomena of bullying in adolescents. The researchers concluded that when particular cognitive contents of negative automatic thoughts were assessed, it was found that only hostile thoughts explained the link between low quality of attachment with all socialization agents and bullying perpetration. In case of bullying victimization, hostility and social threat thoughts explained this association.

Further, Murphy et al. (2017) conducted a study to assess the role of interaction between attachment figures (parents and peer) and gender with different roles an individual adopts during bullying. The results demonstrated that adolescents who were securely attached to both parents and peers were less involved in bullying others and reported a greater likelihood of defending a victim. For male adolescents with poor quality of parental attachment, high peer attachment positively predicted low involvement in bullying. Parental attachment was a stronger predictor of bullying roles than attachment to peers. The study depicted that insecure parental attachment was a risk factor for bullying involvement in males, but good quality of peer attachment can safeguard them and acted as a protective factor. Parent attachment was not a significant predictor of bullying involvement for females. Košir et al. (2019) reported that students who had perceptions of higher peer support experienced less bullying victimization. Numerous authors have investigated the contribution of other peer relationship factors like peer acceptance and peer rejection in bullying behaviors and reported that though bullying others can be useful for gaining popularity (Wiertsema et al., 2022), bullies experience less peer acceptance (Pouwels et al., 2016) and high levels of peer rejection (Orue & Calvete, 2011). They are even disliked by their peers (Orue & Calvete, 2011).

To summarize, the role of peer attachment appears to be significant in studying bullying behaviors as bullying is a social phenomenon. However, the association of peer attachment and bullying involvement among adolescence is still in its growing phase and limited studies are available in comparison to the variable of parental attachment. Nevertheless, the existing literature points out to poor peer attachment being an integral determinant of both bullying perpetration and bullying victimization (Burton et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2017; Nikiforou et al., 2013).

VIII. CONCLUSION

The above discussions unequivocally signify that attachment figures play a paramount role in social relationships during adolescence phase. While previous research has used Bowlby's theory of attachment to understand bullying behaviors, limited studies have incorporated both parental and peer attachment as underlying mechanisms that collectively shape the dynamics of bullying perpetration and victimization. Healthy parental and peer

attachment contributes to favorable social interactions with peers. On the contrary, poor parental and peer bonding can have negative influence on interpersonal relations, which can take the form of bullying behaviors. This paper accentuates the relevance of Bowlby's theory of attachment and its application in comprehending the relational dynamics of parental and peer role in bullying. This understanding is supported by the consistent empirical evidence highlighting the imperative contribution of parental affection, healthy communication, trust, warmth, and care in protecting adolescents against bullying behaviors. In contrast, aloofness from parents and poor parent-child bond act as risk factors for bullying behaviors. Moreover, quality peer attachment ensures adaptive social functioning, whereas poor peer acceptance or deviant peer affiliations tends to predispose adolescents to maladaptive social adjustments like bullying perpetration and peer victimization. Also, different aspects of peer relationships like peer support, peer rejection, etc. are associated with bullying as well.

IX. IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings of this study underscore the relevance of early preventive measures aiming at family-based interventions as suggested by previous authors (Murphy et al., 2017; Walden & Beran, 2010). These interventions focus on promoting the understanding of the interplay between parental and peer attachment and their indispensable function in fostering interpersonal exchanges among adolescents. Organizing counseling sessions for family members can bring awareness regarding the turmoil of changes during the developmental phase of adolescence. Parents should be motivated to attend such counseling programs so that they not only understand their role in adolescent development and problematic behaviors, but also the centrality of integrating healthy peer relationships in their children's life. Future research is encouraged to delve into the influence of socio-cultural factors that can drive the development of more targeted and effective strategies. In addition, more empirical research focusing on the influence of both parent and peer attachment needs to be promoted to identify the underlying patterns of this association both quantitatively and qualitatively, along with testing the proposed association.

Further, this paper addressed the phenomena of bullying through Bowlby's theory only, which is rather a core stone of attachment research. However, subsequent research is suggested to employ other relevant theories like Bandura's social learning theory, ecological systems theory, temperament and trait theories, etc. in comprehending bullying involvement. Also, the objective of this research limited itself by considering bullying during the adolescence phase primarily. Future investigators can explore other developmental stages like childhood and adulthood and analyze the relevance of parental and peer bonding in bullying experiences during these stages. Lastly, the role of gender was

not taken into account by the authors, which can potentially moderate the relationship between attachment and bullying. Future research should examine the diverse influence of attachment on bullying across different genders.

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