



## Abstract

This study investigated the influence of parental attachment on peer bullying in 110 sixth grade students. Bullying behavior was identified using both self-report and peer nomination measures. Path analyses indicated that aggressive attitudes mediate a relationship between insecure attachment and bullying. These findings can inform school-based intervention with bullies.

## Rationale

Attachment theory provides an important conceptual link between parental and peer relationships (Bowlby, 1988). Bowlby defined *internal working models* as a set of rules for processing social information that emerge from early attachment experiences and guide subsequent interpersonal behavior. Early childhood attachment has been shown to influence many aspects of interpersonal behavior, including bullying during the preschool years (Troy & Sroufe, 1987). To our knowledge, the current study is the first to measure the influence of parental attachment on bullying in middle school, when bullying is most prevalent (Nansel et al., 2001). We conducted path analyses to test for (1) a direct influence of insecure attachment on bullying and (2) an indirect influence in which insecure attachment leads to aggressive attitudes and then bullying.

## Methods

**Sample.** The participants were 110 sixth grade students at a suburban, public middle school in central Virginia. This sample represents 78% of the total class, excluding 19 students who lacked parental consent and 11 students who were absent on the day of questionnaire administration. There were 59 boys and 51 girls with a mean age of 11 years (range 11 to 13). Students self-identified as White (69%), African American (21%), Asian (3%), Hispanic (2%), Native American (1%), and Other (4%). As part of the school's ongoing anti-bullying program, all students completed the School Climate Bullying Survey (SCBS; Cornell & Sheras,

2003) and the Revised Adolescent Attachment Questionnaire (R-AAQ; West, Spreng, Sheldon-Keller, & Adam, 1998). Surveys were administered on a confidential basis using code numbers rather than student names.

## Revised Adolescent Attachment Questionnaire (R-AAQ).

The R-AAQ is a 20-item self-report instrument designed to measure adolescents' attachment to "the parent, or person who is most like a parent, to whom you feel closest to right now." The internal consistency coefficient for the Secure Scale was .77.

## School Climate Bullying Survey Bullying.

The SCBS is a 43-item measure designed to assess bullying behavior as well as student attitudes and beliefs related to peer aggression. The SCBS defines bullying as "the use of one's own strength or status to injure, threaten, or humiliate another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal, or social. It is *not bullying* when two students of about the same strength argue or fight."

**Self-reported bullying behavior.** Self-report surveys are the most common method of measuring the prevalence of bullying (Nansel, et. al., 2001). Students were asked to report the number of times they had bullied others in the past month.

**Peer-nominated bullying behavior.** Multiple studies support the reliability and validity of peer-nomination as a method for identifying bullies among middle school children (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). Students were asked to write the names of peers in their grade who "have repeatedly bullied others" during the past month.

**Aggressive Attitudes Scale.** This 7-item scale (alpha .79 in this study) was developed to measure student attitudes supporting aggressive behavior towards peers and predicts peer aggression and bullying (McConville & Cornell, 2003).

## Intercorrelations among study variables.

	Secure Scale	Preoccupied Scale	Aggressive Attitudes	Self-reported Bullying	Peer Nominated Bullying
Secure Scale	1.00	-.56**	-.54**	-.33**	-.37**
Preoccupied Scale		1.00	.40**	.27**	.15
Aggressive Attitudes			1.00	.50**	.50**
Self-reported Bullying				1.00	.26*

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

## Results

The majority of students (77) reported that they never bullied others. Fifteen students admitted to bullying others "once or twice," two students admitted to bullying others "about once per week," and two students admitted to bullying others "several times a week." More students received peer nominations as bullies than admitted to bullying. Thirteen students received one nomination, two students received two nominations, and eleven students received three or more nominations, with one student receiving as high as eleven nominations.

Path analyses (Figures 1 & 2) revealed that the secure attachment scale had an indirect effect on both peer-nominated and self-reported bullying. The model accounted for 26% percent of the variance in peer-nominated bullying,  $F(2, 109) = 19.20, p < .05$ , and 25% of the variance in self-reported bullying,  $F(2, 109) = 18.32, p < .05$ .

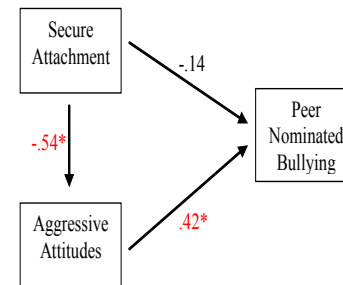


Figure 1. Effect of attachment on peer-nominated bullying behavior.

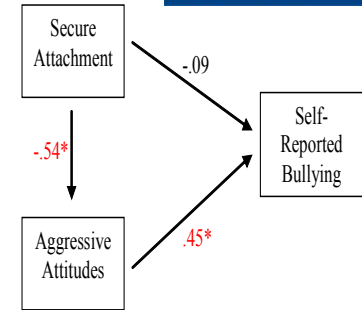


Figure 2. Effect of attachment on self-reported bullying behavior.

## Conclusions

As hypothesized, students who endorsed attitudes indicating insecure attachment were more likely to be identified as bullies by their peers. Although a correlation between parental attachment and self-reported bullying could be produced by shared method variance, insecure attachment was associated with both self-report and peer-report measures of bullying. Additionally, aggressive attitudes mediated the relationship between insecure attachment and bullying. This model is consistent with research in which hostile attribution bias was found to mediate the connection between abusive parenting in early childhood and aggressive behavior in later childhood (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2003). Additional analyses of bullying, as well as victimization, are reported in the full paper, available from the authors.

## References

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