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Conflict Management and Bullying at School: What do Families Have to Say About it?

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Abstract: This study aims to identify how families understand and manage conflict and bullying, as their perspectives on these issues directly influence school coexistence and the construction of a more peaceful society. We examine the views of 1,480 fathers, mothers, and legal guardians with children in compulsory education (6 to 16 years old) in Catalonia. The research is quantitative, with a post-hoc approach, and complemented by qualitative elements. We processed the data using SPSS and conducted descriptive and correlational analyses to identify trends, patterns, and relationships among the studied variables. Non-parametric tests (Mann–Whitney U and Kruskal–Wallis) were used. Families tend to endorse compromise and negotiation ($M=3.04$), flexibility and partial yielding ($M=3.01$), and talking ($M=2.62$). They reject “letting time pass” ($M=2.39$). No significant differences in conflict-management items were found by sex. By age, differences emerged for encouraging force (item 37, $p = .031$) and setting rules (item 41, $p = .014$), with higher means among those <30 . Several items differed by educational level: item 36 ($p = .001$); items 37, 40, and 41 ($p < .001$); item 42 ($p = .008$); and item 43 ($p < .001$). Approximately one-third of families consider bullying victims to be weak or to have difficulty interacting with others. Specifically, 26.7% reported direct experience with bullying at home, and men scored higher on the statement “it’s just jokes” (item 44, $p < .001$). Education level was associated with victim-blaming (item 45, $p < .001$) and the belief that “my child would tell me” (item 46, $p < .001$; overall $M = 2.86$). This recent population snapshot is novel because it links family conflict management styles with bullying beliefs disaggregated by sex, age, and education. Practical implications prioritise parent training, school–family protocols, and campaigns that de-normalise “just jokes,” with a focus on younger families and lower educational levels.

Keywords: school violence, managing conflict, family perspectives, student well-being, parental involvement, peer relationships.

Introduction

School bullying is one of today’s most concerning social and educational issues, with serious consequences for the emotional, academic, and social development of children and adolescents. Although numerous studies have explored its characteristics and consequences within schools, the family dimension — particularly regarding conflict management styles and the narratives parents transmit at home — has received far less attention in scientific literature. Since the family represents the primary socialising environment, understanding how conflicts are addressed within it can provide valuable insights into preventing peer violence (Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2019; Valdés-Cuervo et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2021). Furthermore, recent research has documented significant relationships between family instability, economic insecurity, and bullying behaviours: for example, Dong and Jiang (2025) found that family economic hardship is associated with higher levels of victimisation and aggressive behaviour.

Recent evidence strengthens the link between family and bullying. Two meta-analyses report small-to-moderate associations between parenting styles and modifiable parental factors, and between bullying involvement and offline and cyber contexts (Chu & Chen, 2025; Grama et al., 2024). At the mechanism level, parenting styles that are consistent with caring and attachment predict lower victimisation, with constructive conflict resolution emerging as a protective pathway (Zhu et al., 2025). Family processes related to communication and attention also matter. For example, parental phubbing is associated with youth bullying through lower family closeness and increased negative affection (Pang et al., 2025). Broader economic strain remains a robust correlate of both victimisation and aggressive behaviour (Dong & Jiang, 2025), and studies have linked bullying to adverse mental health outcomes that can be mitigated by positive family environments (Lucas-Molina et al., 2022). Complementary reviews synthesise family factors in cyberbullying, underscoring parental monitoring, warmth, and consistent rules as promising

targets. In contexts of community risk, parenting practices can mitigate the relationship between exposure to violence and bullying (Valdés-Cuervo et al., 2024).

The importance of addressing this issue is justified on three levels. First, socially speaking, families with positive conflict management strategies in place promote the creation of safer, more collaborative school environments (Larrañaga et al., 2018). Secondly, at the scientific level, this study expands our understanding of the protective and risk factors associated with bullying by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between family conflict management and bullying dynamics (Lucas-Molina et al., 2022). Finally, from a practical point of view, this research will enable the design of more comprehensive coexistence programs, in which schools and families work together for the benefit of society.

However, a clear research gap remains. Few studies directly measure in-home conflict episodes, rupture-and-repair routines, or parental narratives that may influence adolescents' involvement in bullying. Guided by Family Systems Theory, the Family Stress Model, and Social Learning/Attachment perspectives, the study will test if specific conflict management styles (and the narratives surrounding them) at home predict involvement in bullying, beyond the effects of economic strain and general parenting.

Research Problem

Despite the recognised importance of family dynamics in shaping children's social behaviour, there is still limited empirical research on the role of family conflict management in bullying. Most studies have focused on school-related variables, leaving the influence of the home environment largely unexplored (Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2019; Nocentini et al., 2019). This gap hinders our ability to determine whether family conflict resolution practices act as protective factors or as risk factors that reinforce aggressive peer dynamics (Lucas-Molina et al., 2022). Therefore, investigating this relationship is necessary to strengthen both theoretical knowledge and practical interventions involving schools and families (Valdés-Cuervo et al., 2024).

Research Focus

This study focuses on analysing how families, as primary social and educational agents, perceive school conflicts, particularly bullying, and the conflict management strategies they implement. The study is based on the premise that family dynamics influence not only the socio-emotional development of children but also how they deal with and perpetuate situations of peer violence in a school setting. Thus, the research aims to describe family perceptions and practices and to understand the extent to which these contribute to the prevention or perpetuation of school bullying dynamics.

Research Aim and Research Questions

Based on this focus, the following specific objectives are proposed:

- Understand families' conceptions of school conflict resolution.
- Identify the predominant styles of conflict management within families.
- Analyse families' perceptions of bullying and associated myths.
- Explore how sociodemographic variables influence perceptions and management styles.

Given the focus and defined objectives, the following key questions arise:

- How do families view school conflicts and their resolution?
- What styles of conflict management are predominant in the family environment?
- What are families' perceptions of bullying, and which myths persist around it?

- Are there significant differences in these perceptions based on sociodemographic variables?

Literature Review

Olweus (1998) conceptualised school bullying, defining its key features as intentionality, repetition, duration over time, the victim's helplessness, and a power imbalance. Subsequent studies have expanded upon this definition, adding aspects such as bystanders' silence, adults' lack of awareness, and the digital dimension (Menesini et al., 2012). Research consistently shows that bullying behaviours have severe consequences for victims, perpetrators, and observers (Avilés, 2006; Suárez-García et al., 2020; Yu & Zhao, 2021). Studies have found that victims of bullying exhibit higher levels of depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and social adjustment problems during adolescence. These findings confirm the severity of bullying's short- and long-term effects (Han et al., 2025; Kowalski et al., 2014; Modecki et al., 2014). Similarly, Han et al. (2025) demonstrate the link between different forms of bullying and anxiety, depression, and other emotional issues. More recently, Oriol et al. (2025) conducted a multinational study with children aged 10 and 12 and found that being a victim of bullying is associated with lower subjective well-being. However, this negative effect is mitigated when children perceive support from their families and teachers.

In terms of family context and parenting practices, a stable home environment has been identified as a protective factor (Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013). In contrast, a lack of affection and support increases vulnerability to bullying (Alcántara et al., 2017; Atik & Güneri, 2013; Brendgen et al., 2016). Both permissive and authoritarian parenting styles have also been linked to bullying victimisation (Garaigordobil & Machimbarrena, 2017). Consistent with this, Gómez-Ortiz et al. (2019) developed a typology of parenting styles. They found that democratic and indulgent styles are associated with less bullying and cyberbullying, while authoritarian styles increase the risk.

Recent studies in Spain confirm that family cohesion, or the quality and stability of family bonds, is a protective factor against peer violence. Conversely, family disintegration and poor communication can lead to aggressive behaviour (Vegas & Mateos-Agut, 2025).

A multinational study across 24 countries found that perceived family and school support mitigates the negative effects of bullying, though there are significant cultural variations (Oriol et al., 2025). In Norway, the It Takes a Village project emphasised the importance of family-school collaboration in addressing cyberbullying but also identified barriers, such as the digital divide among parents (Bell & Fandrem, 2025).

The way parents manage family conflicts is key to understanding the emergence or prevention of bullying, beyond parenting styles. Lucas-Molina et al. (2022) demonstrated that employing constructive dispute resolution strategies fosters the development of social-emotional competencies and mitigates involvement in bullying dynamics. Conversely, exposure to destructive interparental conflict or authoritarian parenting is linked to increased aggression and victimisation in school settings (Larrañaga et al., 2018).

In conclusion, scientific evidence underscores the importance of considering parenting styles, family cohesion, and conflict management strategies simultaneously to understand and prevent bullying. However, integrating these factors into educational programs that promote coexistence will be challenging in the near future. Further research is needed to determine how schools and families can collaborate to create violence-free environments.

Materials and Methods

To achieve the research objectives, the methodological design is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, aiming to understand the studied reality through participants' perceptions of it. The study followed a mixed-methods design, combining easily quantifiable data with qualitative information extracted from participants' discourse.

The quantitative component corresponded to a non-experimental, post-hoc design, using descriptive and inferential analyses of participants' responses. The qualitative component consisted of a discourse analysis conducted through transcription, coding, categorisation, and interpretation.

Sample and Participants

Participants were selected on a non-random, discretionary basis, depending on accessibility to families with children enrolled in compulsory education (ages 6–16) in Catalonia. They were contacted through federated family associations, and a mass mailing was also sent to more than 1,100 public and charter schools to broaden participation and ensure more representative results.

The final sample comprised 1,480 parents or legal guardians, mostly mothers (82.1%), followed by fathers (17.5%) and other guardians (0.4%). Participants' ages ranged mainly between 30 and 50 (83.2%), with 16% over 50 and 0.8% under 30. Most participants were born in Catalonia (84.7%), 8.6% in other countries, and 6.5% in other Spanish autonomous communities.

Regarding educational level, 64% held higher education degrees, 28.4% had completed secondary education, 6.8% primary education, and 0.3% had no formal education. Most families were married or cohabiting (76.6%) with two children (59.1%). Children were mainly enrolled in public schools (62.6%), followed by charter or private schools (32.5%).

With a final sample size of 1,480 families, a post hoc sensitivity analysis revealed sufficient sensitivity to detect small effects across the planned comparisons ($\alpha = .05$, power = .80).

Instrument and Procedure

The instrument was designed ad hoc, validated using the expert-judgement technique, and then piloted with 221 families. It obtained a reliability index of 0.824, which is an acceptable coefficient (Nunnally, 1975). The definitive instrument, presented online in Google Forms in both Catalan and Spanish, was comprised of five sections: the first is about the respondent; the second section explores attitudes, values and norms, communication, and conflict management; the third focuses on four types of violence; the fourth section examines the families' perception of society; and the fifth, which consists of open-ended questions, tries to ascertain the families' stance and discourse on issues associated with violence by using scenarios that take place in the school setting. In this article, we will focus on the items associated with conflict management and a specific type of violence (bullying).

Data collection was conducted online during the academic year 2023–2024. Initially, the research team contacted federated family associations to share the invitation and the questionnaire link. At the same time, a mass email was sent to over 1,100 public and charter schools across Catalonia, requesting that school administrators forward the study information to families.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Before accessing the questionnaire, participants were required to read and accept an informed consent form explaining the study's objectives, confidentiality, and data protection measures. The questionnaire was completed through Google Forms, with an average response time of approximately 15 minutes.

The research team monitored the data collection process, checked the completeness and internal consistency of the responses, and excluded duplicated or incomplete submissions from the final database.

Content validity was established through an expert panel review of item relevance and clarity, as well as feedback from the 221-family pilot. This feedback informed minor wording refinements and adjustments to the response format prior to administering the final instrument.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 26.0. Both descriptive and correlational analyses were performed to identify trends, regularities, and patterns in the variables studied. Since the normality assumptions were not met, nonparametric tests (Mann–Whitney U and Kruskal–Wallis) were used to compare groups by sex, age, and educational level.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the methodological approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). The procedure included:

- (a)familiarisation with the data,
- (b)systematic coding,
- (c)theme generation,
- (d)review of themes at two levels,
- (e)theme definition and naming, and
- (f) preparation of the final report.

Two researchers independently coded an initial set of transcripts to create and refine the coding manual. Discrepancies were resolved by consensus. They assessed agreement between coders on a random sample of transcripts using Cohen's κ statistic (see Results). Analysis continued until thematic stabilisation, or when no new codes appeared in consecutive interviews. We took reflective notes and kept an audit trail to support decision-making.

To ensure credibility and reliability, the peer debriefing technique was used (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each researcher independently coded the data, followed by analytical discussion sessions to refine and validate the final thematic structure through recursive review of participants' responses.

Ethical Considerations

The study complied with the European Union's Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) standards and adhered to the ethical principles set out in the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided informed consent before participating.

All data were collected anonymously, guaranteeing confidentiality and privacy in accordance with EU Regulation 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation). Because the study involved families with minors, special attention was paid to voluntary participation, data protection, and the safeguarding of personal information.

The study protocol was reviewed by the Universitat Ramon Llull Research Ethics Committee (CER-URL).

Results

We now present the data according to the two main dimensions considered: conflict management and bullying.

As shown in Table 1, competitive, collaborative, compromising, evasive, and accommodating options are represented among the possible responses. From highest to lowest scores, families tend towards a compromising and negotiating style ($\bar{X}=3.04$), believing that a win-win situation is the best option. They also attach considerable importance to being flexible and giving in to some degree when it can prevent greater evils ($\bar{X} = 3.01$), believing that accommodation is a good response to conflict. Many families view talking with their children when resolving a conflict positively ($\bar{X} = 2.62$), although more than one-fourth disagree. However, more than half the families disapprove of letting time go by and doing nothing in the hope that conflicts with their children resolve themselves ($\bar{X} = 2.39$). Another widely used conflict-management resource is setting rules ($\bar{X} = 2.3$). Families consider that it is more important to collaborate with the other party than to achieve one's own goals in a conflict ($\bar{X}= 2.25$). However, half the families encourage their children never to be stepped on, and, if necessary, to know how to defend themselves by using force ($\bar{X} = 2.06$). Finally, few families believe that ignoring conflicts—so others forget about them and leave them alone—is an effective way to resolve them ($\bar{X}= 1.96$).

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for items in the conflict management dimension

Items	Mean	Standard deviation
Item 36. I believe that in a conflict it is more important to achieve your own goals than to collaborate with the other party.	1.75	.744
Item 37. I encourage my children to never let themselves be stepped on; I tell them they must know how to defend themselves and to use force, if needed.	2.06	.804
Item 38. I tell my children that the best solution to a problem is to negotiate a "win-win" situation.	3.04	.643
Item 39. I tend to advise my children to try to be flexible and to give in a bit to avoid greater evils.	3.01	.572
Item 40. I tell my children that the best way to solve a problem is to ignore it, so others forget about it and leave you alone.	1.96	.798
Item 41. When I must resolve a conflict with my children, I end up setting rules.	2.30	.672
Item 42. When I must resolve a conflict with my children, I prefer to do nothing and let time go by.	1.61	.729
Item 43. When I must resolve a conflict with my children, I do not think talking helps at all.	1.38	.655

Next, we show the contrast in results in the conflict management dimension with three variables that characterise the sample: sex, age, and educational level.

Regarding the sex variable, Table 2 shows no significant differences in the items related to conflict management.

Table 2

Contrast study according to sex in the conflict management dimension

	Item 36	Item 37	Item 38	Item 39	Item 40	Item 41	Item 42	Item 43
Sig.	.412	.612	.915	.625	.220	.403	.985	.482
a. Kruskal Wallis test								
b. Grouping variable: Sex								

In terms of age (Table 3), there are statistically significant differences in two items:

- I encourage my children never to let themselves be stepped on; I tell them they must know how to defend themselves and use force if needed (item 37).
- When I must resolve a conflict with my children, I end up setting rules (item 38).

Table 3

Contrast study according to age in the conflict management dimension

	Item 36	Item 37	Item 38	Item 39	Item 40	Item 41	Item 42	Item 43
Sig.	.745	.031	.047	.066	.245	.014	.496	.602
a. Kruskal Wallis test								
b. Grouping variable: Age								

To further explore these differences, Table 4 presents the means and standard deviations for each age group. We found that younger participants (under the age of 30) are most likely to agree with encouraging their children to use force if needed and with setting rules when resolving conflicts with their children. However, only a small number of participants are in this age range (N=12).

Table 4

Means and standard deviations for items in the conflict management dimension according to age

Age		Items	
		I encourage my children to never let themselves be stepped on; I tell them they must know how to defend themselves and to use force, if needed. (item 37)	When I must resolve a conflict with my children, I end up setting rules. (item 41)
Under 30 (N=12)	Mean	2.58	2.75
	Standard deviation	.996	.866
Between 30 and 50 (N=1231)	Mean	2.07	2.31
	Standard deviation	.806	.674
Over 50 (N=237)	Mean	2.00	2.24
	Standard deviation	.773	.642

Finally, when considering the educational level of the participants (Table 5), there are statistically significant differences in five items:

- In a conflict, it is more important to achieve your own goals than to collaborate with the other party (item 36).
- I encourage my children never to let themselves be stepped on; I tell them they must know how to defend themselves and use force if needed (item 37).
- I tell my children that the best way to solve a problem is to ignore it, so others forget about it and leave you alone (item 40).
- When I must resolve a conflict with my children, I end up setting rules (item 41).
- When I must resolve a conflict with my children, I do not think talking helps at all (item 43).

Table 5

Contrast study according to educational level in the conflict management dimension

	Item 36	Item 37	Item 38	Item 39	Item 40	Item 41	Item 42	Item 43
Sig.	.001	.000	.334	.610	.000	.000	.008	.000
a. Kruskal Wallis test								
b. Grouping variable: Educational level								

The analysis of the means and standard deviations (Table 6) shows that participants with no formal education are the ones who believe most

- that achieving one's own goals in a conflict is more important than collaborating with the other party;
- encourage their children to use force if needed;
- agree with setting rules when they have conflicts with their children;
- believe that talking does not help at all when in conflict with their children.

Finally, those with a primary school education are most likely to believe that ignoring a problem is the best way to resolve it.

Table 6

Means and standard deviations for items in the conflict management dimension according to educational level

Educational level	Items				
	I believe that in a conflict it is more important to achieve your own goals than to collaborate with the other party. (Item 36)	I encourage my children to never let themselves be stepped on; I tell them they must know how to defend themselves and to use force, if	I tell my children that the best way to solve a problem is to ignore it, so others forget about it and leave you alone. (Item 40)	When I must resolve a conflict with my children, I end up setting rules. (Item 41)	When I must resolve a conflict with my children, I do not think dialogue helps at all. (Item 43)

			needed. (Item 37)			
No education (N=5)	Mean	2.00	2.60	2.20	2.60	1.80
	Standard deviation	1.000	.548	.837	.548	.837
Primary School (N=100)	Mean	1.95	2.34	2.22	2.47	1.62
	Standard deviation	.880	.890	.883	.771	.826
Secondary School (N=421)	Mean	1.86	2.16	2.11	2.36	1.50
	Standard deviation	.806	.831	.819	.719	.761
Higher Education (N=954)	Mean	1.69	1.99	1.86	2.26	1.31
	Standard deviation	.688	.772	.763	.635	.563

When examining specifically the second dimension, we begin by identifying the standpoint of families in relation to bullying; the data indicate that 26.7% claim that either they themselves or someone they live with has suffered this type of violence firsthand.

Regarding myths and beliefs, we found that they coexist within families and can lead to passive behaviours when confronted with this dire problem. This is the case in two of the items studied which show averages (Table 7) that are closer to agreement than disagreement: “Children who suffer from bullying are weaker and tend to have more problems interacting with others” (item 44), which stigmatizes the victims of bullying; and “If my child were the victim of bully, I’m sure s/he would tell me” (item 46), which unduly reassures parents.

Table 7

Means and standard deviations for items in the bullying dimension

Items	Mean	Standard deviation
Bullying consists of jokes and mischief among children; it is fashionable now but has always existed and is not a big deal	1.38	.653
Children who suffer from bullying are weaker and tend to have more problems interacting with others.	2.12	.973
If my child were the victim of bullying, I am sure s/he would tell me.	2.86	.674

If we examine the results in relation to the previously seen variables of sex, age, and educational level, we detect some significant differences.

In the case of sex, Table 8 shows that there are statistically significant differences according to groups of people determined solely by item 44: “Bullying consists of jokes and mischief among children; it’s fashionable now but has always existed and isn’t a big deal.”

Table 8

Contrast study according to sex in the bullying dimension

	Item 44	Item 45	Item 46
Sig.	.000	.601	.791
a. Kruskal Wallis test			
b. Grouping variable: Sex			

To further explore the differences, Table 9 shows the means and standard deviations for each group, stratified by sex. Men show the highest level of agreement, although the score is quite low.

Table 9

Means and standard deviations in the bullying dimension items considering sex

Sex		Items
		Bullying consists of jokes and mischief among children; it is fashionable now but has always existed and is not a big deal (item 44)
Male (N=264)	Mean	1.56
	Standard deviation	.712
Female (N=1214)	Mean	1.34
	Standard deviation	.634
Nonbinary (N=2)	Mean	1.00
	Standard deviation	0.000

In terms of age, Table 10 shows no significant differences in the items related to bullying.

Table 10

Contrast study according to age in the bullying dimension

	Item 44	Item 45	Item 46
Sig.	.884	.108	.109
a. Kruskal Wallis test			
b. Grouping variable: Age			

Regarding the educational level, Table 11 shows statistically significant differences on two items:

- Bullying consists of jokes and mischief among children; it is fashionable now, but has always existed and is not a big deal (item 44).

- Children who suffer from bullying are weaker and tend to have more problems interacting with others (item 45).

Table 11

Contrast study according to educational level in the bullying dimension

	Item 44	Item 45	Item 46
Sig.	.729	.000	.000
a. Kruskal Wallis test			
b. Grouping variable: Educational level			

The in-depth analysis of the means and standard deviations in Table 12 shows first that the participants without formal education are the ones who most believe that “Children who suffer from bullying are weaker and tend to have more problems interacting with others,” and that the participants with primary school education are more likely to think that “If my child were the victim of bullying, I’m sure s/he would tell me.”

The higher the educational level, the greater the participants’ awareness of the relevance of bullying.

Table 12

Means and standard deviations for items in the bullying dimension according to educational level

Educational level		Items	
		Children who suffer from bullying are weaker and tend to have more problems interacting with others. (item 45)	If my child were the victim of bullying, I am sure s/he would tell me. (item 46)
Unschool ed (N= 5)	Mean	2.8	2.8
	Standard deviation	1.643	0.447
Primary School (N= 100)	Mean	2.51	3.01
	Standard deviation	0.969	0.689
Secondary School (N= 421)	Mean	2.28	2.99
	Standard deviation	1.001	0.664
Higher education (N= 954)	Mean	2.01	2.79
	Standard deviation	0.937	0.668

On the other hand, to even further explore the families’ stances on bullying, the participants were presented with a scenario related to the help offered to people who suffer from peer bullying; specifically, they were asked whether or not the school should encourage students to report any type of abuse they see, such as the one described in the following fragment they read: “Juan had to change schools because he couldn’t deal with the bullying he was suffering from any more. He claims that many of his classmates knew what was happening, and no one said anything because they thought it was not good to tell on people. The

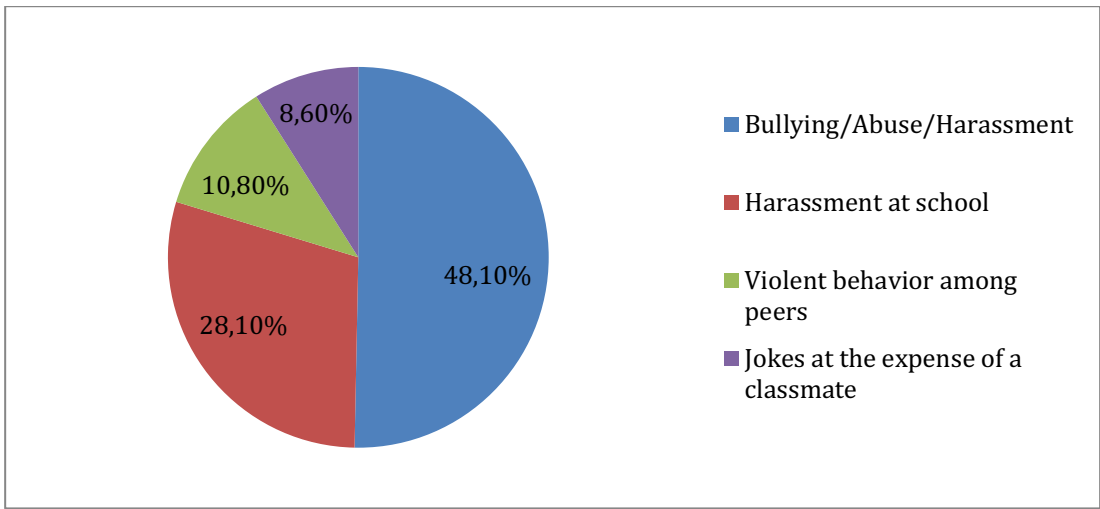
school is considering holding a campaign to encourage children to report any situation they see where someone is being abused.”

The responses were dichotomous (Yes/No), and the participants then had ten lines to explain their reasons. In this regard, we should note that 98.2% of the responses were affirmative, stating that the campaign would be appropriate, while 1.8% of the participants believed the opposite.

Finally, to gain a more in-depth understanding of the families’ discourse around the subject of study, we examined the topics families reported discussing most frequently with their children, and bullying was a frequent topic in 8.1% of families (185 mentions). This issue, related to peaceful coexistence and the school climate, clearly concerns parents and children. We then categorized the 185 times that bullying appeared into six subcategories (Figure 1), which are presented in descending order: the first and most frequent one includes quotes where the parents claim that they speak to their children about abuse or harassment; the second one is specifically related to bullying at school; the third refers to violent behaviours among peers; the fourth includes comments on jokes at the expense of a classmate; the fifth outlines situations in which the respondents’ children have suffered from bullying; and the sixth reflects cases in which the children were involved in a situation of bullying.

Figure 1

Bullying subcategories families talk about



Discussion

Regarding the first dimension considered (conflict management), there is a clear trend toward conflict, as the respondents, when dealing with problems, recommend that their children compromise or accommodate, clearly renouncing the legitimate defence of their own interests and needs. Nevertheless, running away, letting time pass, and doing nothing in the face of conflict are acceptable attitudes for almost half of the families.

In our sample, most families prioritise compromise and dialogue. However, a significant minority normalises avoidance or the imposition of rules. This is consistent with numerous studies linking parenting and conflict management styles to subsequent aggression in children and their interactions with peers. Meta-analytic and longitudinal studies demonstrate that negative or coercive parenting correlates with increased aggression, whereas warm, structured, and collaborative environments predict reduced aggression (Rajendran et al., 2015). Early exposure to intense or unresolved parental conflict also predicts socioemotional difficulties (Craft et al., 2021). In school settings, approaches based on dialogue and

restorative justice have been associated with improvements in school climate and, according to some reviews, a decline in bullying. However, the effects vary depending on the quality of implementation (Gaffney et al., 2021; Weber et al., 2020).

Regarding bullying, our data on misconceptions (e.g., "it's just jokes" or "they'll quickly or automatically stop") are consistent with reports showing persistent gaps between student victimization and family detection/reporting, as well as the rise of cyberbullying, which is more difficult to identify (Cameron & Kovač, 2024; Mercado et al., 2022). Ecological reviews emphasise that bullying is sustained in multilevel contexts, including family, peers, school, community, and media. This supports our argument that bullying should be treated as a cultural/ecological phenomenon rather than an individual problem (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Shams et al., 2018). Finally, some international studies indicate that well-designed global anti-bullying programs reduce perpetration and victimisation. This underscores the practical relevance of family norms of dialogic conflict for prevention (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Fortunately, a high percentage of families choose to talk to resolve conflicts (75%). Still, the remaining 25% believe that talking does not solve a thing. Itten (2019), for example, when speaking of dysfunctional societies—where fractures are becoming deeper and democracies more vulnerable, proposes integrative and participatory solutions, emphasising talking with whoever is at the other pole as a way of reconnecting. Caireta and Barbeito (2018), in turn, believe it is important to have families' complicity when dealing with disputes, although they must have the tools to handle difficult conversations at home.

The difference between seeking solutions that involve mutual gain (collaboration) or trying to only meet one's own interests and needs (competition) is striking, both in terms of the attitudes, values, and norms that underpin either position, and in terms of the communicative strategies put into play and the goals sought.

Thus, we found that while some children are socialised in cooperation, others are in the use of violence; a dichotomy which shows what may happen later at school and in social settings. Specifically, we were surprised that younger people were more likely to support the use of force and the imposition of rules. We had expected more dialogue considering recent parenting initiatives. This may partly be because they have younger children, but they still need guidance tailored to their situation. We were also surprised that groups with less formal education considered talking to be useless and downplayed bullying despite awareness campaigns. This underscores the need for clearer, more accessible resources for parents on how to manage conflicts in a non-imposing way and how to recognise covert bullying.

Our findings reinforce socio-ecological models of school violence. Conflict coping styles within families (e.g., accommodating/avoiding versus collaborating/competing/forcing) influence beliefs about bullying and how the problem will be addressed. Ecologically speaking, the family is the immediate environment in which conflict norms are learned and reinforced. These norms are then transferred to peer relationships and school settings (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Paat et al., 2025). The results are consistent with social learning principles. The use of coercive solutions at home can lead children to adopt dominance strategies in their peer interactions. Conversely, fostering dialogue and perspective-taking can promote prosocial conflict management. Therefore, anti-bullying programs at the school level should include family education (e.g., communication training and debunking myths) aligned with restorative and skills-based approaches, which have been shown to reduce aggression and victimisation when implemented effectively (Gaffney et al., 2021; Weber & Vereenoghe, 2020; Shams et al., 2018).

In the case of bullying, this is a type of violence many families admit to having experienced (27%), although it is still little known and somewhat mystified. Almost a third of the families erroneously believe that if their child were suffering from bullying, they would tell them ($\bar{X}$ = 2.86). They also believe that victims

of harassment are usually weak and have problems interacting with others ($\bar{X}$ = 2.12). However, more harrowing is the fact that over a quarter of the families (X = 1.38) believe that bullying consists of just jokes and mischief among children. Although it is now fashionable, it has always existed.

As Garaigordobil (2018) points out, erroneous judgments about bullying can lead us to adopt passive behaviours and fail to view this phenomenon in its full complexity. Besides, bullies may pretend their behaviour is just a joke, but the damage they cause is conscious and leaves profound aftereffects. The false beliefs we just presented, according to the results of this study, seem especially related to families with no formal education or only primary school education.

In addition, the 2023 report of the State Observatory for School Coexistence (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2023) highlights significant differences in perceptions between pupils and their families regarding bullying at school. While 9.5% of pupils report having suffered from bullying, only 7.7% of families have detected it. Furthermore, only 20.17% of pupils reported it to their families, suggesting that many cases of bullying go unnoticed, either because there is a lack of communication, the family underestimates the signs, or the child is afraid of not being taken seriously or of aggravating the situation. The Observatory's report also suggests that many parents lack the tools or knowledge to identify warning signs, such as changes in behaviour, isolation, or poor performance, especially at an early age.

It is also important to understand that bullying is not justified by genetic reasons, which attribute certain individuals with innate evil and violence. This entirely misguided view can lead to the belief that there is only one way to address bullying: to punish the aggressor. However, prompt and punitive actions only validate violence as a tool to obtain goals before everyone. Consequently, not only do these actions not resolve the situation, but they also reinforce the belief that the real problem exists only if the aggressor is caught.

Therefore, bullying is a cultural phenomenon that should be treated as such. Through the application of the ecological model, attention to bullying should focus more on learning about and understanding the complexity of the settings in which it occurs.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the non-probability, accessibility-based sampling of families connected to school networks in Catalonia limits the ability to generalise the results to other similar contexts. This sampling method may also introduce self-selection and non-response biases. Second, because all constructs were assessed via self-report in an online survey, the results may be affected by social desirability bias or misunderstandings of bullying terminology. Future work should triangulate these results with student reports and school records. Third, while the instrument showed acceptable reliability and content validity reviewed by experts, further construct validation across diverse populations is warranted. Finally, while our qualitative analysis enhanced interpretation, we relied on thematic analysis of open-ended responses rather than in-depth interviews, which may limit the depth and saturation of emergent mechanisms.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn highlighting both the shortcomings and opportunities for improvement in how families address conflicts and bullying.

In line with objectives 1 and 2, the results clarify how families perceive school conflict resolution and which management styles are most common.

First, although rules are necessary in family life, they should be established through dialogue rather than imposition. It is therefore essential that families teach their children, from an early age, how to negotiate and hold conversations as the main strategy for conflict resolution. Families can adopt short, weekly “talk it through” routines (identifying the problem, stating needs, proposing options, and agreeing on a plan) to co-construct rules rather than impose them. Recent studies confirm that family communication patterns and emotional closeness significantly influence children’s social adjustment and their ability to manage conflicts peacefully (Pang et al., 2025).

Second, addressing objectives 3 and 4, the findings reveal an urgent need for families to better understand the phenomenon of peer bullying. The observed relationship between educational level and awareness of the seriousness of bullying clearly indicates which groups should be prioritised in educational interventions. In this sense, research highlights that a positive parent–child attachment and stable family relationships act as protective factors against school victimisation (Peng et al., 2025).

Moreover, the data show that a lack of safe spaces for conversation at home persists, limiting families’ ability to intervene in time. In this regard, it is worth recalling that families, as a fundamental context of socialisation, strongly influence the values, attitudes, norms, communicative styles, and conflict-resolution strategies that children absorb daily. As a practical step, we recommend establishing weekly “family dialogue circles” and supporting them with school-led workshops that train parents in active listening, nonviolent communication, and recognising warning signs early on. This influence can lay the foundations for either a culture of peace or a culture of violence.

Furthermore, although families are key actors in identifying and managing bullying, they often lack the necessary training. A recent study confirms that fewer than half of parents have received any formal education in this field, relying instead on spontaneous strategies such as direct emotional support or information-seeking (Samadieh & Soleimani, 2025). Consequently, it is imperative to strengthen emotional and communicative training in the family environment. Creating spaces of trust, active listening, and respectful guidance must become a priority. Schools could play a decisive role by offering joint programs with families that promote dialogue and shared learning.

In sum, this mixed-methods study uniquely contributes to the body of research by building on these findings and linking everyday family conflict-management scripts (e.g., dialogue, accommodation, avoidance, imposition, and use of force) to beliefs and misconceptions about bullying in a polarised context. Additionally, the study identifies actionable levers that schools and families can implement together, such as home negotiation routines, safe talk spaces, and targeted parent education.

Suggestions for future research

Future studies could further explore the relationship between family communication styles and children’s social and emotional development, examining how these dynamics evolve throughout childhood and adolescence. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable information on how family dynamics shape attitudes toward conflict and violence.

Additionally, the impact of family-school alliances on the early detection and prevention of bullying should be evaluated, particularly in culturally or socioeconomically diverse contexts. In this regard, future research could analyse how educational systems integrate families into coexistence policy.

Finally, given the growing role of the digital world in the lives of children and adolescents, it is crucial to address cyberbullying and identify ways to support families in developing digital skills and strategies that promote safe environments.

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Conflict of Interest

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