

The Relationship Between Parent-Child Relationship and Emotional Distress with Bullying in Female Students: The Mediating Role of Psychological Well-being

Arghavan Rajabi^۱ ، Farnaz Abaharzanjani^۲

Master of Psychology, Iqbal Lahori Institute of Higher Education ^۱

(Corresponding Author) Assistant Professor, Psychology Department, Iqbal Lahori Higher Education Institute ^۲

Abstract

Objective: Bullying is a destructive behavior in educational environments with numerous psychological and social consequences. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between parent-child relationship and emotional distress with bullying among female high school students, considering the mediating role of psychological well-being. **Methods:** This correlational (cross-sectional-analytical) study was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM) based on the partial least squares (PLS) approach. The statistical population consisted of all female high school students in Mashhad, Iran, in the second semester of the ۲۰۲۴-۲۰۲۳ academic year ($N \approx 50,000$). A sample of ۳۸۱ students was selected using multi-stage cluster random sampling. Data were collected using the Illinois Bullying Scale, the Parent-Child Relationship Scale (PCRS), the Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS), and the Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (RPWB). Data analysis was performed using SPSS-۲۲ and Smart PLS-۳ software. **Results:** The results showed that all direct and indirect relationships in the model were significant. The parent-child relationship had a significant direct negative effect on bullying ($\beta = -.213, p < .05$). Emotional distress also had a significant direct negative effect on bullying ($\beta = -.277, p < .05$). Furthermore, psychological well-being mediated the relationship between both independent variables (parent-child relationship and emotional distress) and bullying. The model had acceptable goodness-of-fit indices ($GOF = .323$). **Conclusion:** The findings highlight the importance of the family environment and emotional regulation in preventing bullying among female students. Strengthening the parent-child relationship and improving students' psychological well-being can be effective strategies in reducing bullying behaviors. It is recommended that school-based interventions focus on these factors.

Keywords: Bullying, Parent-Child Relationship, Emotional Distress, Psychological Well-being, Female Students, Structural Equation Modeling.

Introduction

Bullying is a pervasive and serious problem in schools worldwide, negatively impacting the emotional and academic well-being of students who are bullied, those who bully, and even bystanders (Bakhshani et al., ۲۰۲۳). Among female students, more indirect forms such as social exclusion, ignoring, rumor-spreading, and psychological threats are more common (Volk et al., ۲۰۱۷). Understanding the psychosocial and interpersonal factors influencing bullying behavior in this group is crucial for designing effective prevention and intervention programs. Family dynamics, particularly the parent-child relationship, play a fundamental role in shaping children's behavioral patterns. A warm, intimate, and supportive parent-child relationship can reduce the likelihood of children engaging in aggressive behaviors like bullying (Ali Doosti et al., ۲۰۲۴; Wang et al., ۲۰۲۴). Conversely, harsh discipline and parental rejection can increase the risk of adolescents exhibiting bullying behaviors (Liu & Wang, ۲۰۱۸).

Emotional distress, or low distress tolerance, is another critical factor. It refers to an individual's perceived capacity to withstand negative emotional states. Individuals with low emotional distress tolerance may engage in maladaptive behaviors, such as bullying, as a way to regulate or escape from unpleasant emotions (Zegel et al., ۲۰۲۱; Buchner et al., ۲۰۱۹). Research has shown a link between emotional dysregulation and increased aggression (Kermani et al., ۲۰۱۹). Psychological well-being, defined as a state of positive functioning including self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff, ۱۹۸۹), may serve as a protective factor. It can act as a buffer against the negative effects of poor family relationships or high emotional distress, potentially mitigating the tendency towards bullying (Johns et al., ۲۰۲۲). High psychological well-being is associated with better emotional regulation and more adaptive coping strategies. While previous studies have examined parts of this complex relationship (e.g., Amini Rarani et al., ۲۰۲۴ on cyberbullying and well-being; Habibi Hassanabad et al., ۲۰۲۳ on parent-child relationship and well-being), no study has simultaneously investigated the direct and indirect effects of both parent-child relationship and emotional distress on bullying through the mechanism of psychological well-being, specifically among female students. This study aims to fill this gap by proposing and testing a comprehensive model.

The present study hypothesizes that:

۱. The parent-child relationship will have a significant direct effect on bullying.
۲. Emotional distress will have a significant direct effect on bullying.
۳. Psychological well-being will have a significant direct effect on bullying.
۴. Psychological well-being will mediate the relationship between the parent-child relationship and bullying. ۵. Psychological well-being will mediate the relationship between emotional distress and bullying.

Methods :

This was a correlational study analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with a partial least squares (PLS) approach. The population included all female high school students (second period) in Mashhad, Iran, during the second semester of the ۲۰۲۳-۲۰۲۴ academic year ($N \approx ۵۰,۰۰۰$). Using Morgan's table and considering potential dropouts, a sample of ۳۸۱ students was determined. Participants were selected via multi-stage cluster

random sampling: first, ۲ out of ۷ educational districts were randomly selected; then, ۸ schools from these districts were chosen; finally, ۱۶ classes were randomly selected, and all students in those classes were invited to participate. Inclusion criteria were being a female student aged ۱۵-۱۸, not having a diagnosed psychological disorder or chronic physical illness, and providing informed consent.

Instruments:

۱. Illinois Bullying Scale (Espelage & Holt, ۲۰۰۱): This ۱۸-item scale measures bullying perpetration, victimization, and fighting on a ۵-point Likert scale (Never to ۷ times or more). Higher scores indicate greater involvement in bullying. Cronbach's alpha in this study was ۰,۷۵.

۲. Parent-Child Relationship Scale (PCRS; Pianta, ۱۹۹۴): This ۲۲-item scale assesses parents' perceptions of their relationship with their child across subscales like conflict, closeness, and dependence. It uses a ۵-point Likert scale. The total positive relationship score was used. Cronbach's alpha in this study was ۰,۸۲.

۳. Distress Tolerance Scale (DTS; Simons & Gaher, ۲۰۰۵): This ۱۵-item scale measures emotional distress tolerance on a ۵-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate lower distress tolerance (higher emotional distress). Cronbach's alpha in this study was ۰,۸۵.

۴. Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (RPWB; Ryff, ۱۹۸۹): The ۱۸-item version was used to measure psychological well-being on a ۶-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate greater psychological well-being. Cronbach's alpha in this study was ۰,۷۰.

Procedure:

After obtaining necessary permissions and ethical approval, researchers visited the selected schools. Students and parents were informed about the study's purpose, and written informed consent was obtained. Questionnaires were administered in classrooms during a pre-arranged time. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time. Data collection took approximately ۳۰-۴۰ minutes.

After determining the sample size, ۳۸۱ female students were selected using cluster random sampling to participate in the study, and the researcher provided them with the questionnaire to complete. Before distributing the questionnaire, informed consent was obtained from the participants, and the research objectives were explained to them. The participating students were also asked to complete the questionnaire with the utmost care and honesty. To control for the effects of fatigue, participants were given the option to complete the questionnaire in two sessions if they wished. To adhere to ethical considerations, participants were informed that they were taking part in a psychological study and that their information would remain strictly confidential. Additionally, participants' questions were answered, and they were assured that the results would be published in a statistical and aggregate manner, not individually. After collecting the questionnaires, the data were prepared for statistical analysis. The exclusion criteria for the study included the participant's unwillingness to continue with the test and the presence of psychological or physical disorders among the statistical sample individuals.

Data Analysis:

Data were analyzed using SPSS-۲۲ for descriptive statistics and Smart PLS-۳ for Structural Equation Modeling(SEM). The analysis followed a two-step approach: (۱) assessment of the measurement model (reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity) and (۲) assessment of the structural model (path coefficients, significance levels, coefficient of determination R^2 , and goodness-of-fit index GOF).

Results: Descriptive Statistics: The mean scores for the variables were: Parent-Child Relationship ($M=4.06$, $SD=0.54$), Emotional Distress ($M=3.90$, $SD=0.64$), Psychological Well-being ($M=4.40$, $SD=1.26$), and Bullying ($M=3.30$, $SD=0.67$). Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that the data were not normally distributed ($p < 0.05$ for all variables), justifying the use of PLS-SEM. Measurement Model Assessment: The measurement model showed good reliability and validity. All factor loadings were above 0.4. Composite Reliability (CR) values for all constructs were above 0.7, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above 0.5, confirming convergent validity. The square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than its correlations with other constructs, establishing discriminant validity. Structural Model Assessment and Hypothesis Testing: The structural model explained 16.4% of the variance in bullying ($R^2 = 0.164$) and 19.9% of the variance in psychological well-being ($R^2 = 0.199$). The goodness-of-fit index (GOF) was 0.323, indicating a moderate to strong model fit.

• H_1 : The parent-child relationship had a significant negative direct effect on bullying ($\beta = -0.213$, $t = 2.203$, $p < 0.05$). Supported. •

H_2 : Emotional distress had a significant negative direct effect on bullying ($\beta = -0.277$, $t = 2.129$, $p < 0.05$). Supported. •

H_3 : Psychological well-being had a significant negative direct effect on bullying ($\beta = -0.217$, $t = 1.991$, $p < 0.05$). Supported. •

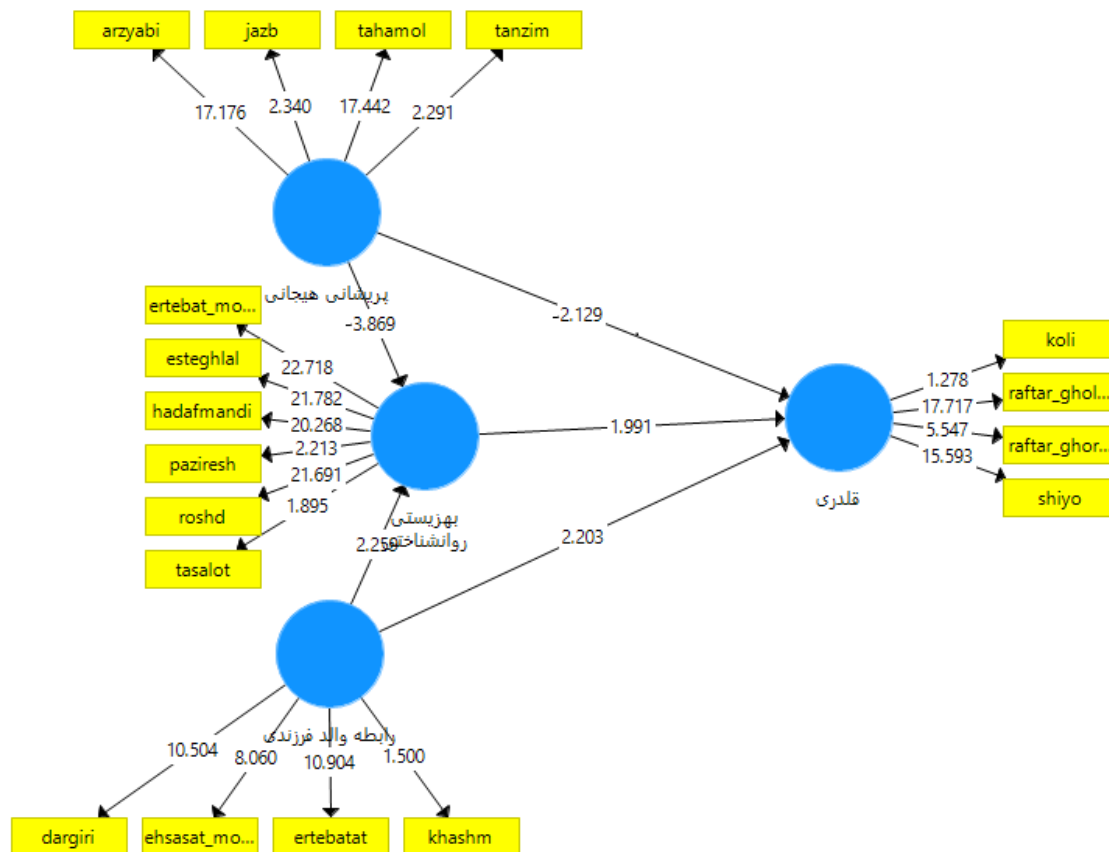
H_4 : Psychological well-being significantly mediated the relationship between the parent-child relationship and bullying. The indirect effect was significant ($\beta = -0.048$, Sobel's $z = 3.049$, $p < 0.05$). Supported. •

H_5 : Psychological well-being significantly mediated the relationship between emotional distress and bullying. The indirect effect was significant ($\beta = 0.070$, Sobel's $z = 2.780$, $p < 0.05$). Supported.

CR	AVE	Variable name
0.897	0.629	Psychological well-being
0.820	0.665	Parent-child relationship
0.797	0.525	Bullying
0.819	0.553	Emotional distress

As shown in the table, at the 95% confidence level, all items are significant (the significance number is greater than ± 1.96). Also, for greater certainty, the values of the average variance

extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) are also estimated. If the values of composite reliability and average variance extracted are greater than ۰,۷ and ۰,۵, respectively, it is acceptable and it can be concluded that the convergent validity of the questionnaire is confirmed.



Fitted conceptual model in the case of parameter significance

Discussion:

This study investigated a model linking parent-child relationship, emotional distress, psychological well-being, and bullying among Iranian female high school students. The results supported all hypotheses, indicating that both family factors and individual emotional capabilities play crucial roles in bullying behavior. The finding that a positive parent-child relationship is associated with less bullying is consistent with previous research (e.g., Wang et al., ۲۰۲۴; Zhao et al., ۲۰۲۱). A supportive family environment likely fosters empathy, prosocial values, and effective emotion regulation skills, reducing the need to exert power or control through bullying. The significant direct effect of emotional distress on bullying suggests that students who struggle to manage negative emotions may be more prone to engaging in bullying as an externalizing coping mechanism. This aligns with studies linking low distress tolerance to aggression and behavioral dysregulation (Khorsand et al., ۲۰۱۹; Kelly et al., ۲۰۱۹). The mediating role of psychological well-being is a key contribution of this study. It appears that a positive parent-child relationship bolsters psychological well-

being, which in turn reduces the likelihood of bullying. Conversely, high emotional distress seems to impair psychological well-being, creating a vulnerability that increases the risk of engaging in bullying behavior. This highlights psychological well-being not just as an outcome, but as a critical mechanism through which family and emotional factors influence behavior.

The results of data analysis revealed that the parent-child relationship has an indirect effect on student bullying at a ۹۵% confidence level, with the intensity of this effect being ۰,۲۱۳. This means that as the parent-child relationship variable increases, the bullying variable decreases, and as it decreases, bullying increases. Therefore, it can be concluded that the research hypothesis is confirmed, and the parent-child relationship has a significant effect on bullying among female students. The results of the present study are consistent with the findings of Ali Doosti and colleagues (۲۰۲۴), who demonstrated a significant negative relationship between the relationship with parents and cyberbullying. Similarly, Wang and colleagues (۲۰۲۴) found in their research that parent-child attachment was significantly negatively correlated with the external expression of anger and bullying behavior, while the external expression of anger was positively correlated with bullying behavior. Therefore, it can be concluded that the higher the quality of the parent-child relationship in terms of intimacy, emotional support, mutual understanding, and appropriate responsiveness, the lower the likelihood of aggressive and bullying behaviors among students. Conversely, relationships characterized by conflict, neglect, excessive control, or lack of emotional support from parents are associated with an increased tendency toward destructive and aggressive behaviors. Often, adolescents who exhibit bullying behavior have a negative perception of their family, viewing communication with their parents as difficult. Excessive conflict in the parent-child relationship and a history of significant violence with the adolescent are factors that contribute to the emergence of bullying behavior in students.

In contrast, parents of non-bullying children reported having a completely or largely happy relationship with their children and reported more interaction with them. Such parents were more aware of and involved in their children's life events compared to the parents of bullies (Khalilnejad & Latifzanjani, ۲۰۲۰). Female students who experience a sense of security, support, and acceptance within their family environment also demonstrate more positive approaches in their interactions with peers and are less involved in behaviors such as bullying. From a psychological perspective, a healthy parent-child relationship can be a strong resource for developing skills such as empathy, problem-solving, resilience, and self-control—skills that are primary deterrents to the formation of bullying behaviors. In contrast, parents who lack effective parenting styles or exhibit inconsistent and cold behavior toward their children unintentionally contribute to emotional dissatisfaction and aggression in female students. Strengthening the emotional bond between parents and children, teaching positive parenting methods, increasing family awareness of effective communication styles, and providing a safe and accepting home environment can be effective in reducing bullying in schools and improving students' social relationships.

Findings from data analysis revealed that the indirect effect of the mediating variable of psychological well-being on the relationship between parent-child relationship variables and student bullying is confirmed. The findings of this research are consistent with the findings of Habibi Hasankabad et al. (۲۰۲۳), who concluded in a study that the parent-child interaction variable can predict ۲۲,۴ percent of the variance or changes in psychological well-being. Anish et al. (۲۰۲۴), in a study, concluded that the parent-child relationship significantly

correlates with adolescents' psychological well-being through the dimensions of emotion regulation and social competence. Also, Norouzi and Asadi (۲۰۱۸), in a study, found that there is a significant relationship between parents' psychological well-being, parent-child interactions, and the social adjustment of adolescent girls.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the family is the first institution that provides the foundation for meeting the fundamental needs of children. Both mother and father directly impact the adolescent's psychological well-being. The positive emotions of parents encourage adolescents to establish healthy and constructive communication with others. Parents hold a special place in their children's lives from childhood to adulthood, especially during the sensitive period of adolescence. Thus, it can be said that the quality of the parent-child relationship affects the adolescent's psychological well-being both directly and indirectly (Delforouz et al., ۲۰۲۱). The quality of children's development plays a determining role in their mental health in adulthood. A lack of necessary resources and access to suitable conditions for a desirable life, by reinforcing feelings of humiliation in adolescents, will lead to impairment in their psychological well-being (Yousefi Afrashteh and Haghghi, ۲۰۲۰). The quality of the parent-child relationship can influence aggressive behaviors and bullying in adolescents through psychological well-being. A warm, responsive, and supportive parental relationship, by increasing components such as self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and personal growth, promotes the adolescent's psychological well-being; this reduces the need for aggressive behaviors to seek attention or for emotional discharge (Wan & Huang, ۲۰۲۵).

Healthy, warm, and supportive relationships between parents and children, by promoting adolescents' psychological well-being, pave the way for reducing the occurrence of aggressive behaviors and bullying. A positive parent-child relationship improves components of psychological well-being such as self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, and personal growth. These components have a protective role against psychological harm and empower female students in dealing with social conflicts, interpersonal adversities, and school pressures. As a result, the individual is less likely to resort to maladaptive strategies such as school bullying. It can be stated that fulfilling basic psychological needs, including relatedness, autonomy, and competence, within the context of positive family relationships, promotes mental health and ultimately reduces the occurrence of maladaptive behaviors.

The results of data analysis indicated that, at a ۹۵% confidence level, emotional distress has an indirect effect of ۰,۲۷۷ on student bullying. This means that as the emotional distress variable increases, the bullying variable decreases (?), and with its increase, the bullying variable increases (?). [Note: The original Persian text contains a contradiction: "as emotional distress increases, bullying decreases and with its increase, bullying increases." The translation reflects this contradiction. It likely intends to say that higher emotional distress is associated with higher bullying.] Therefore, it can be concluded that the research hypothesis is confirmed and emotional distress has a significant impact on female students' bullying. These results align with the findings of Sampasa et al. (۲۰۱۸), who concluded in their research that there is a significant correlation between psychological distress and both cyber and school bullying among students. It has also been established that bullying is a source of stress for adolescent students. Therefore, it can be concluded that female students who experience higher levels of emotional distress—such as anxiety, depression, anger, and emotional instability—are more susceptible to exhibiting aggressive behaviors, including bullying. Individuals with less ability to manage and process negative emotions are more likely to resort to maladaptive

behaviors like aggression or bullying when faced with psychological pressures and challenging social situations. Students' poor performance in regulating their emotions plays a significant role in the occurrence of bullying behaviors.

Lack of student awareness of their own emotions, difficulty in describing emotions, difficulty in controlling emotional impulses, and the use of limited emotional strategies can predict bullying behaviors in students (Shabahang et al., ۲۰۱۹). In fact, bullying can be an unhealthy way to release internal tension and uncontrolled emotions. Furthermore, it should be noted that among female students, bullying often takes indirect forms, manifesting as social exclusion, rumor-spreading, ignoring, or verbal attacks. These behaviors can be a manifestation of suppressed emotional distress that emerges destructively towards others instead of being expressed directly. When students lack clear awareness of their emotions, they cannot accept them, and, more importantly, they will not be able to manage their negative emotions and emotional distress. Under such conditions, they use the inappropriate strategy of bullying to compensate for this unpleasant feeling and put an end to it. In such circumstances, bullying behaviors provide an opportunity for the individual to externalize their turmoil and emotional distress, and by discharging negative emotions onto others, improve their own feelings (Hosseini & Badri-Gargari, ۲۰۲۳).

The findings from the data analysis indicated that emotional distress has a significant effect on female students' bullying through the mediating role of psychological well-being. The findings of the present research are relatively consistent with the findings of Arhin et al. (۲۰۱۹), who showed in a study that psychological distress can lead to increased anxiety, stress, depression, and bullying. Kelly et al. (۲۰۱۹) concluded in a study that individuals with lower distress tolerance face challenges in regulating and managing their emotions when exposed to stress and pressure. Therefore, it can be concluded that emotional distress, by undermining psychological well-being, paves the way for the emergence of aggressive and maladaptive behaviors such as bullying.

Emotional distress can disrupt an individual's psychological balance, leading to a reduced ability to regulate emotions, solve problems, empathize with others, and adopt adaptive social behaviors. When this distress results in diminished psychological well-being—including reduced feelings of meaning in life, self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, and personal growth—the likelihood of aggressive behaviors, including bullying, among female students increases. Emotional distress (including anxiety, depression, and psychological pressure) is associated with reduced emotion regulation ability and psychological resilience, which in turn leads to a lower level of psychological well-being in the individual. Consequently, adolescents may desperately resort to aggressive and bullying behaviors to compensate for emotional frustration and gain a sense of emotional control. In fact, adolescents with lower psychological well-being lose their ability to cope with psychological stresses and react to negative feelings in an aggressive and bullying manner. (Vacha et al., ۲۰۲۳).

Of course. Here is the English translation of the provided Persian text. --- The results of data analysis indicated that psychological well-being has a significant indirect effect on student bullying at a ۹۵% confidence level, with the intensity of this effect being ۰.۲۱۷. This means that as the psychological well-being variable increases, the bullying variable decreases. Therefore, it can be concluded that the research hypothesis is confirmed, and psychological well-being has a significant impact on female students' bullying. The results of this research correlate with the findings of Amini Rarani et al. (۲۰۲۴), who showed in a study that there

was a significant inverse relationship between cyberbullying and psychological well-being and its dimensions (except for autonomy and positive relations with others). A significant inverse relationship also existed between cyber victimization and psychological well-being and its dimensions. Therefore, it can be concluded that psychological well-being is a psychosocial protective factor against the emergence of destructive interpersonal behaviors such as bullying. Students with high levels of psychological well-being typically possess higher skills in emotional self-regulation, empathy, and problem-solving, and exhibit safer, more empathetic, and less aggressive behaviors in social interactions. Conversely, low levels of psychological well-being can be associated with internal dissatisfaction, feelings of helplessness, and emotional frustration, which increase the likelihood of aggressive behaviors, including bullying (Chen et al., ۲۰۲۴).

Students who enjoy a high level of psychological well-being usually have higher self-esteem, a greater sense of control over their lives, and a better ability to empathize with others. These characteristics steer them away from aggressive and maladaptive behaviors like bullying. In contrast, students with poor psychological well-being may resort to bullying behaviors to compensate for inner dissatisfaction, reduce anxiety, or gain attention. Adolescents who exhibit bullying behavior have lower levels of psychological well-being. In other words, adolescents who experience higher levels of negative emotions, particularly hatred, anger, and guilt, display more bullying behaviors (Stepanian & Khitryan, ۲۰۲۴). Among female students, bullying usually manifests in more indirect forms, such as rumor-spreading, social rejection, and ignoring; these behaviors often stem from emotional problems and a lack of self-worth or psychological security. In this context, high psychological well-being can make an individual more resilient to social pressures and reduce the likelihood of such behaviors.

Implications for Practice: The findings suggest that anti-bullying programs should adopt a multi-faceted approach:

۱. **Family-focused Interventions:** Schools should offer workshops for parents on building positive, communicative, and supportive relationships with their adolescents.
۲. **Emotion Regulation Training:** Implementing school-based programs like Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) skills training or mindfulness can help students improve their distress tolerance and emotional regulation.
۳. **Promoting Psychological Well-being:** Curricula and counseling services should actively promote the components of psychological well-being (e.g., purpose in life, positive relationships, personal growth) to build resilience against negative behaviors like bullying.

Limitations and Future Research:

This study has limitations. Its cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences. Data were based on self-report, which may be subject to biases. The sample was limited to female students in one city, limiting generalizability to males or other regions. Future research should use longitudinal designs, include reports from parents and teachers, and investigate these relationships in different cultural contexts and across genders.

Conclusion:

This study provides evidence that both the parent-child relationship and emotional distress are significant predictors of bullying among female students, and that psychological well-being

serves as a key mediating mechanism. Interventions aimed at preventing bullying should therefore not only focus on the school environment but also actively involve families and strive to enhance students' emotional regulation capabilities and overall psychological well-being. Strengthening the family foundation and building individual resilience are promising avenues for creating safer and healthier school environments.

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