

Bullying in Early Childhood Education: A Systematic Literature Review of Risk Factors, Contexts, and Prevention Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Bullying in early childhood has gained increasing attention due to its long-term impact on children's social, emotional, and psychological development. However, existing reviews largely focus on school-aged populations, resulting in limited synthesis specific to early childhood, inconsistent conceptual definitions, and insufficient evidence on intervention effectiveness. This study aims to synthesize research trends and identify key determinants and intervention strategies related to bullying in early childhood education. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted following PRISMA guidelines. A structured search was performed in the Scopus database using the search string: TITLE-ABS-KEY ("bullying" AND ("early childhood" OR preschool OR kindergarten)). An initial broad search identified 32,709 records, which were refined to 798 topic-relevant studies. After applying inclusion criteria (journal articles, English language, open access, Scopus-indexed) and quality appraisal using CASP and MMAT, eight articles were included for qualitative synthesis. The findings indicate that bullying in early childhood is shaped by multi-level factors, including biological predispositions, peer relationship dynamics, parental and teacher perceptions, socioeconomic conditions, and digital environments. Conceptual inconsistencies were identified, with some studies interpreting aggressive behavior as normal developmental conflict, while others emphasize repetition, intentional harm, and power imbalance. Evidence on intervention effectiveness remains limited, although school-based programs show potential. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive, evidence-based prevention strategies. Implications include strengthening teacher training, integrating anti-bullying curricula, and enhancing parent-school collaboration. This review contributes by providing a focused synthesis of early childhood bullying and identifying directions for future research and intervention development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying in early childhood education has increasingly been recognized as a critical issue due to its significant impact on children's social, emotional, and psychological development. While bullying has traditionally been associated with school-aged children and adolescents, research indicates that bullying-like behaviors such as repeated aggression, exclusion, and intimidation can already emerge in preschool and kindergarten settings. These behaviors often manifest in subtle forms during peer interactions, making them difficult for teachers and parents to detect (Liu & Graves, 2011; Wee & Lee, 2020).

The emergence of such behaviors at an early age is particularly concerning because early childhood represents a crucial developmental period in which children begin to acquire social norms, empathy, and emotional regulation. Research has shown that children who experience bullying are at greater risk of developing psychological difficulties, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Halliday et al., 2021). These experiences may also negatively affect children's academic engagement and interpersonal relationships in later stages of development. Saracho (2017) emphasized that early bullying experiences can shape children's perceptions of social interaction and authority within educational settings. If left unaddressed, such behaviors may evolve into more severe patterns of aggression or victimization in later childhood.

From a theoretical perspective, bullying in early childhood can be understood through several major frameworks. Ecological systems theory posits that children's behavior is influenced by interactions across multiple environmental systems, including family, school, and the broader sociocultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition, social learning theory explains that children learn aggressive behaviors through observation and imitation of models within their environment (Bandura, 1977). Furthermore, developmental systems theory emphasizes that children's behavior develops through dynamic interactions between biological, psychological, and environmental factors over time (Lerner, 2006). Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive conceptual foundation for understanding the complexity of bullying in early childhood education.

Despite the growing body of research on bullying, several gaps remain in the literature, particularly within the context of early childhood education. First, most existing systematic reviews focus on school-aged children and adolescents, resulting in a lack of preschool-specific synthesis. Second, empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of intervention strategies specifically designed for early childhood remains limited, as many prevention programs are adapted from approaches developed for older populations (Rico-Gonzalez et al., 2025; Schwarzer et al., 2025). Third, inconsistencies in the definition and conceptualization of bullying in early childhood have led to methodological challenges, particularly in measurement and cross-study comparisons (Jenkins et al., 2017). Additionally, variations in social contexts and individual characteristics contribute to the diverse forms and dynamics of bullying behaviors (Chalamandaris & Piette, 2015).

Several studies have also highlighted that bullying in early childhood may be associated with health conditions, disabilities, and other social differences, reflecting the complexity of its contextual influences (Falla et al., 2021; Nocerino et al., 2024). Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of risk factors and prevention strategies is essential, particularly for fostering inclusive educational environments.

In response to these gaps, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is necessary to synthesize and critically evaluate existing research findings. An SLR enables researchers to systematically identify patterns, risk factors, and prevention strategies based on empirical evidence (Podiya et al., 2025). The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on early childhood education, the integration of developmental theoretical frameworks, and its emphasis on identifying key determinants and intervention strategies.

Accordingly, the main research question guiding this study is: *What are the major determinants and intervention strategies for bullying in early childhood education settings?*

2. METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to ensure transparency, rigor, and replicability in the review process (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA provides a structured procedure for identifying, screening, selecting, and synthesizing relevant studies, thereby enhancing the methodological quality of systematic reviews.

2.1 Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted primarily in the Scopus database due to its comprehensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed international journals and its relevance for indexing standards such as SINTA. The search was carried out between March 6 and 8, 2026. The full search string used was:

2.2. TITLE-ABS-KEY ("bullying" AND ("early childhood" OR preschool OR kindergarten))

The search was limited to publications from 2015 to December 2025 to ensure the inclusion of recent and relevant studies. Although Scopus was selected as the primary database due to its broad academic coverage, it is acknowledged that incorporating additional databases such as Web of Science and ERIC could further enhance the comprehensiveness of the review.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Strict inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Article Selection Criteria

| Inclusion | Exclusion |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|
| Article Journal | Book, Chapter book, |
| English | Non-English |
| Open Acces article | Articles could not be downloaded |
| Scopus indexed | Not indexed in Scopus |

2.4 Screening and Selection Process

The study selection process followed the PRISMA stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. In the identification stage, the initial search yielded 32,709 articles using the keyword "bullying." This was refined to 798 articles using the specified search string related to early childhood. After limiting the publication years (2015–2025) and removing irrelevant studies, 21 articles remained. During the screening stage, duplicate records were removed, and articles were evaluated based on titles, abstracts, and keywords. Three articles were excluded because they were classified as book chapters, leaving 18 articles. In the eligibility stage, full-text articles were assessed against the predefined criteria. Ten articles were excluded due to the following reasons: lack of open access, insufficient focus on early childhood contexts, or not meeting methodological relevance criteria. Finally, in the inclusion stage, eight articles met all criteria and were included in the final analysis. The entire process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

2.5 Quality Assessment

To ensure the methodological quality of the included studies, a critical appraisal process was conducted using established evaluation tools. Qualitative studies were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) checklist, while mixed-methods studies were evaluated using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) Hong et al., 2018). These tools were used to evaluate study rigor, validity, data collection methods, and relevance of findings.

2.6 Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction was conducted systematically using a coding framework that included: (1) study characteristics (authors, year, country), (2) research design, (3) sample characteristics, (4) identified risk factors, and (5) intervention strategies.

The data were analyzed qualitatively using a thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

This process involved three stages:

1. Line-by-line coding of extracted data,
2. Development of descriptive themes, and
3. Generation of analytical themes that explain patterns of bullying determinants and intervention strategies.

This approach allows for a deeper interpretation of findings while considering the social and educational contexts in which bullying occurs.

2.7 Reliability and Validity

To enhance the reliability of the review process, two reviewers independently conducted the screening and selection of articles. Inter-rater reliability was ensured through discussion and consensus in cases of disagreement. This process minimizes selection bias and strengthens the credibility of the findings. The qualitative synthesis approach is consistent with interpretive research traditions, which emphasize understanding complex social phenomena within their context (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009).

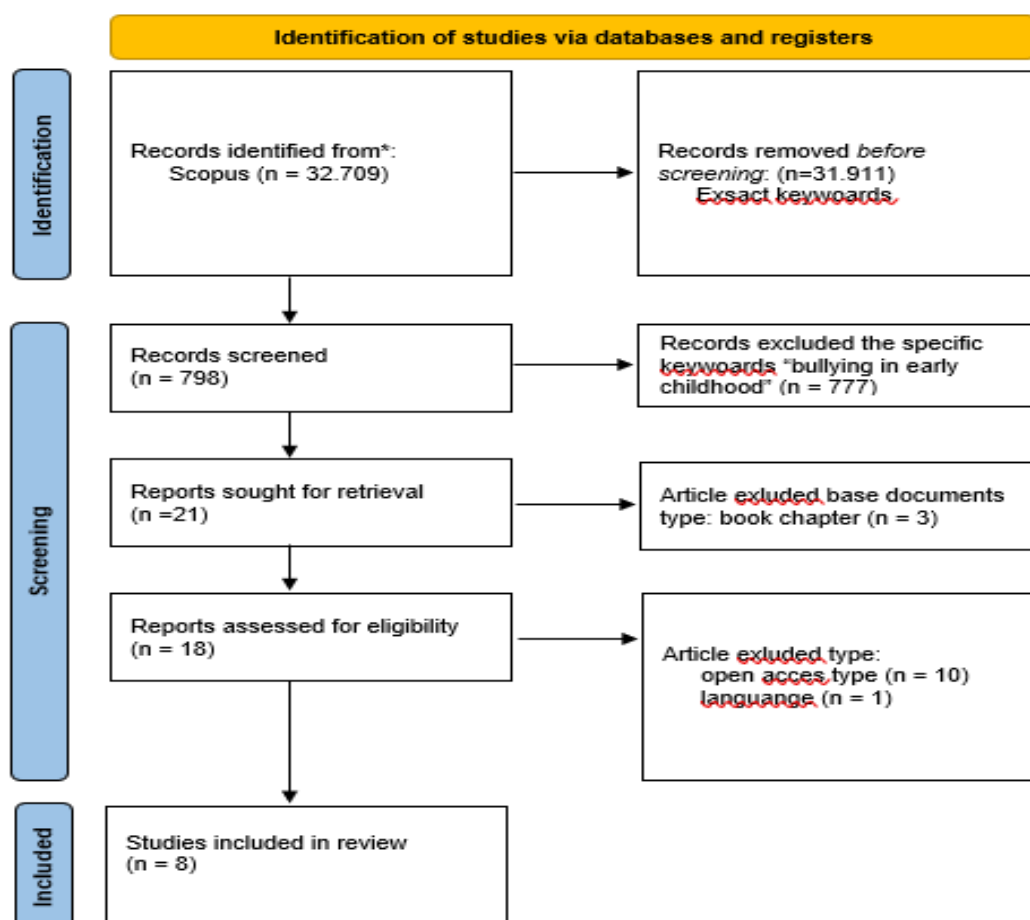


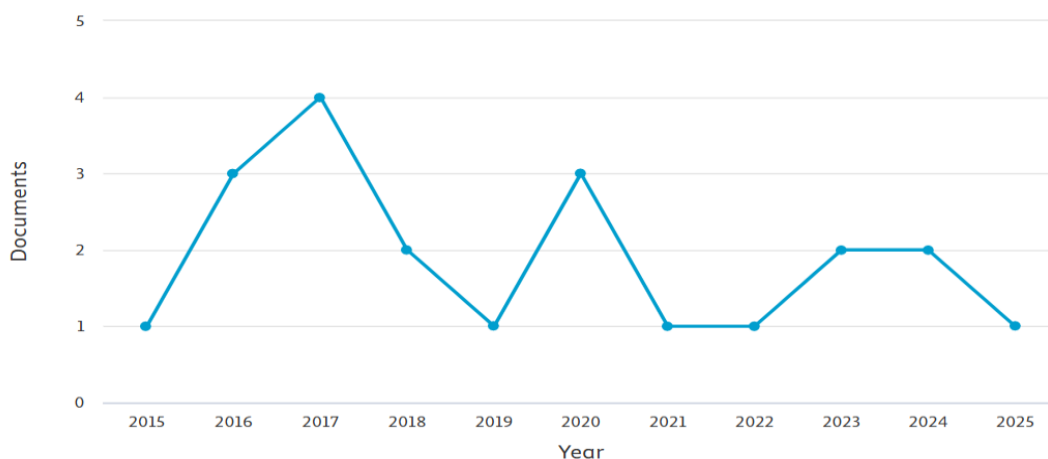
Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Trends in Early Childhood Bullying Research

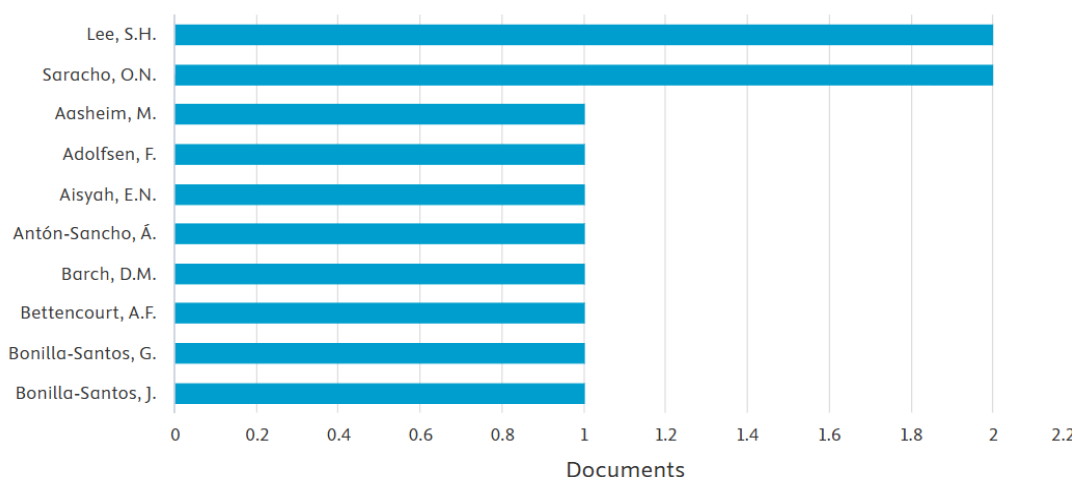
The analysis of publications from 2015 to 2025 indicates that research on early childhood bullying remains relatively limited and fluctuating. The results are presented in Figure 2. While there were slight increases in certain years, no consistent upward trend was observed. This suggests that early childhood bullying is still an emerging field, with substantial opportunities for further investigation.



Source : Scopus database

Figure 2. Publications on Early Childhood Bullying Research by Year

Rather than being dominated by a few leading scholars, the research is distributed across various authors. Although researchers such as Lee, S. H. and Saracho, O. N. contributed more than once, most authors had only a single publication. This fragmentation indicates that the field has not yet reached a stage of theoretical consolidation. The results are presented in Figure 3.

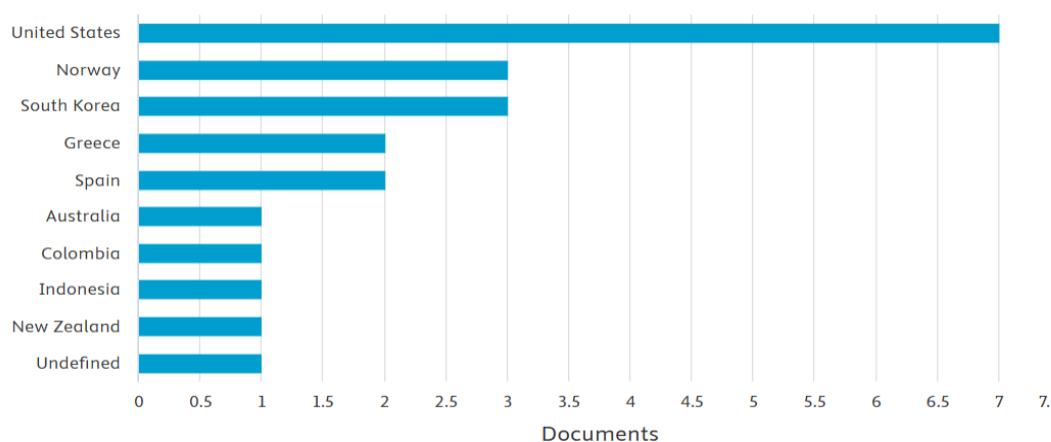


Source : Scopus database

Figure 3. Publications on Early Childhood Bullying Research by Author

Geographically, the dominance of studies from the United States, followed by contributions from Norway and South Korea, highlights a concentration of research in Western and developed contexts.

This distribution suggests a potential contextual bias and indicates the need for more studies from diverse cultural settings, particularly from developing countries. The results are presented in Figure 4.



Source: Scopus database

Figure 4. Publications on Early Childhood Bullying Research by Country

3.1.2 Main Findings in Early Childhood Bullying Research

Table 1. Main Findings in Early Childhood Bullying Research

| No. | Reference/Source | Method | Main Findings |
|-----|---|--|---|
| 1 | Aisyah, E. N., Harun, A. R., & Hardika, H. (2021). <i>The analysis of child bullying behaviour of game mobile learning users in the early childhood education management perspective</i> . <i>International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies</i> , 15(9), 4–20. https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v15i09.21583 | Qualitative descriptive study analyzing the behavior of young children using mobile learning games. Data were collected through observation and analysis of children’s interactions in technology-based learning contexts. | The use of mobile learning games can influence children’s social dynamics, including the emergence of aggressive behavior and peer domination. Without parental and teacher supervision, digital technology may reinforce verbal and social bullying tendencies in early childhood. |
| 2 | Musci, R. J., Bettencourt, A. F., Sisto, D., Maher, B., Uhl, G., Ialongo, N., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2018). <i>Evaluating the genetic susceptibility to peer reported bullying behaviors</i> . <i>Psychiatry Research</i> , 263, 193–198. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2018.03.016 | Longitudinal quantitative study using a genetic association approach to examine the relationship between genetic variation and peer-reported bullying behavior. | Certain genetic susceptibilities were associated with bullying tendencies, but environmental factors such as social relationships and family conditions also played significant roles. Bullying behavior results from a complex interaction between biological and environmental factors. |
| 3 | Lee, S.-H. (2020). <i>Kindergarten teachers’ perspectives on young children’s bullying roles in relation to dominance and peer relationships: A short-term longitudinal approach in South Korea</i> . <i>International Journal of Environmental</i> | Short-term longitudinal quantitative study based on kindergarten teachers’ perspectives on children’s bullying roles | Social dominance and peer relationship structures were strongly associated with bullying roles. Children with dominant social status were more likely to become perpetrators, while children |

| No. | Reference/Source | Method | Main Findings |
|-----|--|--|---|
| | <i>Research and Public Health</i> , 17(5). https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17051734 | (perpetrator, victim, or both). | with lower social status were more vulnerable to victimization. |
| 4 | Ju, H., & Lee, S.-H. (2019). <i>Mothers' perceptions of the phenomenon of bullying among young children in South Korea</i> . <i>Social Sciences</i> , 8(1). https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8010012 | Qualitative phenomenological study exploring mothers' perceptions of bullying in early childhood through in-depth interviews. | Many parents viewed bullying in early childhood as normal conflict and therefore did not address it seriously. This highlights a gap in understanding between parents and educators regarding the importance of early intervention. |
| 5 | Fernández-Alfaraz, M.-L., Nieto-Sobrinó, M., Antón-Sancho, Á., & Vergara, D. (2023). <i>Perception of bullying in early childhood education in Spain: Pre-school teachers vs. psychologists</i> . <i>European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education</i> , 13(3), 655–670. https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe13030050 | Comparative quantitative survey comparing preschool teachers' and psychologists' perceptions of bullying in early childhood education. | Significant differences were found between teachers' and psychologists' perceptions. Psychologists were more likely to view bullying as a serious issue requiring systematic intervention, while some teachers still saw it as part of normal social development. |
| 6 | Perino, M. T., Sylvester, C. M., Rogers, C. E., Luby, J. L., & Barch, D. M. (2025). <i>Neighborhood resource deprivation as a predictor of bullying perpetration and resource-driven conduct symptoms</i> . <i>Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry</i> , 64(1), 53–64. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2024.03.008 | Quantitative study using multivariate statistical analysis to examine the effect of neighborhood resource deprivation on children's bullying behavior. | Environments with high poverty and limited resources increased the risk of bullying and other behavioral problems. Socioeconomic conditions were identified as important contextual factors in the development of aggressive behavior. |
| 7 | McFarland, L., Bull, R., Cumming, T., & Wong, S. (2024). <i>Workplace bullying in early childhood education settings: Prevalence and protective factors</i> . <i>International Journal of Early Childhood</i> , 56(2), 189–210. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-022-00341-y | Quantitative survey study analyzing the prevalence of workplace bullying in early childhood education settings and protective factors. | Bullying occurred not only among children but also among educators in early childhood institutions. Protective factors such as supportive leadership, positive organizational culture, and collegial support could reduce workplace bullying. |
| 8 | Kvestad, I., Adolfsen, F., Angeles, R. C., Brandseth, O. L., Breivik, K., Evertsen, J. G., et al. (2024). <i>Effectiveness of a bullying intervention (Be-Prox) in Norwegian early childhood education and care centers: Protocol for a cluster randomized controlled trial</i> . <i>JMIR Research Protocols</i> , 13. https://doi.org/10.2196/60626 | Cluster Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) protocol to test the effectiveness of the Be-Prox anti-bullying intervention in early childhood education centers in Norway. | The study aims to evaluate whether the Be-Prox program can reduce bullying behavior by improving children's social competence and teachers' intervention strategies. It emphasizes the importance of school-based prevention programs from an early age. |

3.1.3 Thematic Findings in Early Childhood Bullying

To move beyond descriptive reporting, the findings were synthesized into five major themes: child factors, family factors, teacher perceptions, digital influences, and intervention effectiveness.

3.1.3.1. Child Factors (Biological and Social Development)

Several studies indicate that bullying behavior in early childhood is influenced by both biological predispositions and social dynamics. Musci et al., (2018) found that genetic susceptibility may increase the likelihood of bullying behavior; however, this influence is mediated by environmental factors. Similarly, Lee, (2020) demonstrated that children with dominant social status are more likely to become perpetrators, while socially marginalized children are more vulnerable to victimization. These findings suggest that bullying is not solely an individual trait but emerges from the interaction between biological tendencies and peer relationship structures.

3.1.3.2. Family and Socioeconomic Factors

Family environment and broader socioeconomic conditions also play a significant role. (Perino et al., 2025) found that children living in resource-deprived neighborhoods were more likely to exhibit bullying behavior. This indicates that structural inequalities and environmental stressors contribute to children's social behavior. At the same time, parental perceptions significantly influence how bullying is addressed. Ju & Lee (2019) reported that many parents interpret bullying as normal developmental conflict, which may delay early intervention.

3.1.3.3. Teacher and Professional Perceptions

Differences in professional understanding of bullying were also evident. Fernandez-Alfaraz et al., (2023) found discrepancies between teachers and psychologists, with psychologists more likely to recognize bullying as a serious issue requiring intervention. This highlights a critical gap in professional awareness that may affect how bullying is managed in early childhood education settings.

3.1.3.4. Digital Influences

Emerging evidence suggests that digital environments also shape bullying behavior. Aisyah et al. (2021) found that mobile learning environments may reinforce dominance and aggressive interaction patterns if not properly supervised. This indicates that bullying is no longer confined to physical interactions but may also develop through digital exposure, even in early childhood.

3.1.3.5. Intervention and Institutional Context

Intervention studies highlight the importance of structured prevention programs. Kvestad et al. (2024) emphasized that programs such as Be-Prox can improve children's social competence and teachers' intervention skills. Additionally, McFarland et al. (2024) showed that institutional climate, including leadership and organizational culture, plays a crucial role in reducing both child and adult bullying in educational settings.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this review indicate that bullying in early childhood is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon influenced by the interaction of biological, social, and environmental factors. These findings reinforce the view that bullying behavior cannot be explained from a single perspective but must be understood as part of children's developmental dynamics within their social context.

From a biological perspective, the study by Musci et al. (2018) shows that certain genetic vulnerabilities may increase children's tendency to engage in bullying behavior. However, these findings are not deterministic, as environmental factors still play a significant role in shaping children's behavior. This is consistent with developmental approaches that emphasize that children's behavior is

the result of interactions between internal and external factors. Therefore, aggressive tendencies that emerge in children cannot be separated from the social context in which they develop.

In the context of social relationships, the structure of peer relations becomes a very important factor. Lee (2020) found that children with dominant positions within social groups tend to become perpetrators of bullying, while children with lower social status are more vulnerable to victimization. These findings indicate that bullying is closely related to power dynamics (*power imbalance*) within peer groups. In other words, bullying is not merely aggressive behavior, but also a social strategy to maintain or enhance status within the group.

However, there are significant conceptual differences in the literature. Some studies still view aggressive behavior in early childhood as part of normal developmental conflict (Ju & Lee, 2019). Meanwhile, other studies emphasize that bullying has specific characteristics, such as repetition, intentional harm, and power imbalance (Fernandez-Alfaraz et al., 2023). These differences indicate that the definition of bullying in early childhood remains inconsistent, which has implications for differences in identification and intervention.

In addition to child-related factors, family environment and socioeconomic conditions also play an important role in shaping bullying behavior. Perino et al. (2025) show that children living in resource-limited environments are more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior. These conditions can increase stress within families, which ultimately affects children's ability to regulate emotions and interact socially. On the other hand, parental perceptions of bullying are also an important factor. Ju & Lee (2019) found that many parents consider bullying to be a normal phenomenon, and therefore do not immediately intervene.

In educational contexts, the perceptions of teachers and professionals also influence how bullying is addressed. Fernandez-Alfaraz et al. (2023) found differences between teachers and psychologists in understanding bullying. When teachers perceive such behavior as part of normal development, intervention tends to be less optimal. This highlights the importance of improving teachers' competence in understanding the characteristics of bullying in early childhood.

In addition, the development of digital technology has become a new factor influencing bullying dynamics. Aisyah et al. (2021) found that the use of digital-based learning media can reinforce patterns of dominance and aggressive interaction if not accompanied by adequate supervision. This indicates that bullying in early childhood has evolved, not only occurring in direct interactions but also being influenced by digital environments.

From an institutional perspective, the organizational climate in educational settings also plays an important role. McFarland et al. (2024) found that a positive work environment, supportive leadership, and collaborative relationships can reduce bullying behavior, both among children and educators. This indicates that bullying prevention should not only focus on children but also on the educational system as a whole.

These findings suggest that bullying prevention strategies must be implemented comprehensively. Intervention programs such as Be-Prox, as examined by Kvestad et al. (2024), show that structured, school-based approaches can improve children's social competence and teachers' ability to handle bullying. Such programs emphasize the importance of developing empathy, cooperation, and inclusive classroom environments.

The findings of this study have important implications for early childhood education practices. Teachers need to have the ability to identify forms of bullying that are often subtle. In addition, the implementation of anti-bullying curricula integrated into learning activities can help children develop positive social skills. Parental involvement is also a key factor in ensuring consistency in addressing bullying between home and school environments.

This review has several limitations. Most of the studies analyzed used relatively small sample sizes, which limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the dominance of studies from Western countries indicates limitations in cultural representation. Longitudinal studies focusing on

early childhood are also still very limited, making it difficult to understand the long-term development of bullying behavior comprehensively.

Future research needs to develop intervention models that are culturally responsive, particularly in developing countries. In addition, longitudinal studies are needed to understand how bullying behavior develops from early childhood into later stages. Research on the influence of digital technology on bullying in early childhood also needs to be expanded, given the increasing exposure of children to digital devices.

4. CONCLUSION

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) demonstrates that bullying in early childhood is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by the interaction of biological, social, and environmental factors. The synthesis of the reviewed studies indicates that key determinants of bullying include children's biological predispositions, peer relationship dynamics, parental and teacher perceptions, socioeconomic conditions, and the increasing influence of digital environments. Importantly, bullying behaviors can emerge at early developmental stages and may manifest through physical aggression, verbal hostility, and social exclusion. While such behaviors are sometimes interpreted as part of normal developmental conflict, repeated and unaddressed patterns may evolve into more stable forms of bullying.

This review contributes to the growing scholarship on early childhood bullying by synthesizing multi-level determinants and highlighting the complexity of bullying behavior within early educational contexts. By integrating findings across diverse studies, this review provides a more comprehensive understanding of how individual, relational, and contextual factors interact in shaping bullying in early childhood.

In terms of implications, the findings underscore the need for comprehensive and evidence-based prevention strategies in early childhood education. At the policy level, educational institutions should implement structured teacher training modules to enhance educators' ability to recognize and respond to early signs of bullying. In addition, parent education programs are essential to improve awareness and align perceptions between home and school environments. Schools should also establish clear anti-bullying policies that promote inclusive, safe, and supportive learning environments. Strengthening social-emotional learning and fostering positive peer interactions should become central components of early childhood curricula.

Despite its contributions, this review has several limitations. The study relied solely on the Scopus database, which may have excluded relevant studies indexed in other databases. In addition, only English-language publications were included, potentially limiting cultural diversity in the findings. Furthermore, the relatively small number of final selected articles may affect the generalizability of the conclusions.

Future research should focus on developing culturally responsive intervention models, particularly in diverse and underrepresented contexts. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the developmental trajectories of bullying behavior from early childhood to later stages. Moreover, further investigation into the role of digital environments in shaping early bullying behavior is essential, given the increasing exposure of young children to digital technologies. Overall, this review highlights the importance of early identification and prevention of bullying through collaborative efforts among educators, parents, and policymakers to support children's social and emotional development.

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