

## **RESEARCH ON THE COMPETENCE OF FUTURE COACHES TO DEAL WITH HARASSMENT AND AGGRESSION AMONGST CHILDREN DURING SPORTS TRAINING**

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**Abstract.** Bullying and aggressive behavior among children are a serious problem in our society. This study aims to investigate to what extent future sports pedagogues - and sports coaches – are prepared to recognize and respond to bullying among children aged 7 – 10. One hundred eighty full-time undergraduate university students voluntarily participated in the empirical study. The students were in their second year of undergraduate programs, preparing future coaches with different sports profiles. A questionnaire with study cases was developed and distributed for the students to complete. The questions were designed to explore students' knowledge regarding the application of punishment in education and the skills formed to prevent and intervene in bullying among sporting children. The surveyed students were “more sparing” regarding the possible use of harsher punishments, such as removal from play/practice, and the widespread use (in sports contexts) of punishment through individual and additional exercise. The surveyed students demonstrated good knowledge and competence in applying punishment as an educational method in cases of bullying and aggression among children and preferred intervention measures to be more positive. It can be summarized that second-year students have the attitude to carry out educational influences on sporting children and do not entirely rely on parents' assistance and support in education.

*Keywords:* punishment; knowledge; bullying; aggressive behavior

### **Introduction**

Hundreds of millions of people around the world, including children, are victims of bullying, aggression, and violence every year in different environments, situations, and during different activities – in the family, at school, at work, in their free time, among acquaintances and strangers, during sports and sports activities, etc. As a result of these manifestations, the “victim” and quite often the

“perpetrator” experience negative feelings and reactions and short- and long-term negative effects, including those affecting a person's physical, mental, and social health.

Unfortunately, acts of aggression, violence, and bullying are also present among the youngest students and athletes. They are becoming an unavoidable reality and are permanently embedded in our daily lives, including the fear of violence and bullying.

In most cases, acts of aggression and bullying at primary school age are a type of behavior disorder (children may be hyperactive or passive; they may lie, steal, insult, threaten, fight and hit, spit, be envious and hostile, etc.). Some children still do not know right from wrong and do not have the developed skills to communicate with their peers. They use violence in order to receive attention or to protect themselves from a possible “threat”.

In a study conducted among students from grades I to IV, it was found that they increasingly shout at each other and more often use abusive words in communication with each other; in a fit of anger, they hit and thus “cope” with the given social challenge or through another “vent” reduce the tension. As Prokopov (n.d.) points out, in this way, children *“do not realize that they violate the rights of others, that their behavior lacks tolerance, respect, sympathy and empathy for the other classmate, and this increases the risk of aggression against the weaker”* (Prokopov n.d.).

In a study of elementary school students, bullying behaviors were found challenging to identify by the victim, teachers, or parents (Mishna 2004; Mishna 2006). Vassileva (2008) found that in Bulgarian higher education institutions that train pedagogical specialists (we add sports pedagogy), students are not taught how to recognize aggression and violence and how to deal with them. From the academic year 2020/2021, in the NSA “Vasil Levski” this issue is covered by the academic discipline “Pedagogy with Sport Pedagogy”.

### ***1. Definitions of bullying<sup>1</sup>***

The “classic” in defining the phenomenon of bullying is Dan Olweus with the writing of the book “Bullying in School” (1993). He states, *“It is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts injury or discomfort upon another, basically what is implied in the definition of aggressive behavior. Negative actions can be carried out by physical contact, words, or other ways, such as making faces or mean gestures and intentional exclusion from a group. To use the term bullying, there should also be an imbalance in strength (an asymmetric power relationship): the student who is exposed to the negative actions has difficulty defending him-/herself and is somewhat helpless against the student or students who harass”* (Olweus 1993). Bullying also occurs when someone (a pupil) is repeatedly and continuously subjected to actions of a negative nature by another pupil/student. This phenomenon is characterized by manifesting aggressive behavior *“or intentional*

'harm doing,' which is carried out repeatedly and over time in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power" (ibid.). Bullying is not when two students of roughly equal strength (physical and/or psychological) fight or argue (ibid.), but is the intentional, and not accidental, infliction of harm.

"Bullying is aggressive goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance" and has three elements (goal-directed behavior, power imbalance, and harm to the victim). These three elements or key attributes are appropriately also the focus of preventative measures (Volk et al. 2014).

"Bullying involves not only aggressive behavior, but an intention to harm, an imbalance of power, and repetition over time" (Nansel, Overpeck 2003). "Bullying is when one or more students tease, threaten, spread rumors about, hit, shove, or hurt another student over and over again. It is not bullying when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight or tease each other in a friendly way" (Young Park et al. 2022). As Berger (2007) points out, repetition over time is a crucial feature and is present in most contemporary definitions of bullying (Berger 2007). Bullying is a distinct type of aggression that typically involves behavior intended to disrupt or harm, occurs repeatedly over time, and consists of a power imbalance in which the stronger person or group attacks the weaker (Aalsma & Brown 2008).

## **2. Types of bullying, violence, and aggression**

Aggressive behavior has many dimensions – direct, indirect, overt, relational, social, physical, verbal, nonverbal and nonphysical, reactive, and proactive (Li et al. 2013; Camodeca, Goossens 2005). Bullying is also a form of (proactive) aggression (Baldry, Farrington 2007; Sutton et al. 1999; Li et al. 2013). Reactive aggression – at its core is frustration. It is an angry, defensive, and retaliatory response to provocation. Proactive aggression is unprovoked, deliberate, and goal-directed behavior (Li et al. 2013).

Violence, aggression, and bullying among children can be verbal, non-verbal, virtual (cyber), etc. Physical aggression/bullying involves physical contact or the intention to cause pain/harm. It is implemented by hitting, shoving, tripping, hair-plucking, biting, damaging, breaking personal belongings, threatening physical self-harm, etc. Verbal aggressors use abusive words, nicknames, taunts, deliberate teasing, shouting and screaming, etc. Bullying and aggression can also be carried out indirectly, so-called social manipulation.

Nowadays, the development and widespread use of new technologies have contributed to the emergence of the phenomenon of online (cyber) bullying, which describes behavior directed at/against another person when using electronic communications (mobile phones - calls and texts, social networks, chats, emails, online media) to cause harm, isolation, and vilification through repeated acts of a hostile and aggressive nature (Kramer, Vaquera 2011; Shah et al. 2014; Kalchev 2012)<sup>2</sup>.

In the Bulgarian context, according to a survey of primary school students<sup>3</sup>, the most common types of bullying are verbal aggression, mainly insults and abusive words, followed by physical aggression – hitting and shoving (Prokopov n.d.).

### ***3. Aggression, violence, and bullying in sports***

Harassment also occurs in sports and sporting activities, for which there is no universally accepted definition (Fontana et al. 2022). According to Stirling (2009), bullying in sports is any pattern of abuse between team members that is potentially dangerous or harmful. It is characterized by repetitiveness and deliberateness to cause harm to another person (Brackenridge et al. 2007). Michele LaBotz (2023) found that peers/teammates are the most frequent perpetrators of bullying and stalking, including sexual violence. Usually, the victims are the new and inexperienced team members (found in team sports). With an established team hierarchy and the emergence of a more reliable player who appears to be a “threat” to the status quo, he, too, can fall victim to bullying. Manifestations may include unspoken threats, violence, unwarranted criticism, belittling of performance, displays of verbal or psycho-emotional bullying, spreading rumors, efforts to turn teammates against the victim (indirect), or other efforts to exclude the victim from the team community (Steinfeldt et al. 2012; Fisher & Dzikus 2017; Fontana et al. 2022).

## **Methodology**

### ***Objective of the study***

Research has been conducted on the occurrence of aggression, violence, and bullying among children – in families, at school (Solberg, Olweus 2003; Gao et al. 2023), and during sports. Nansel & Overpeck (2003) examined the measurement and interventions of bullying and assessed the prevalence among youth (Webb et al. 2021; Xu et al. 2020). No research articles on the extent to which adults are prepared to recognize and respond to bullying and harassment among children were found. This is precisely the purpose of the present study – to investigate to what extent future sports pedagogues – and sports coaches are prepared to recognize and respond to bullying among children aged 7 – 10. In other words, to examine the knowledge and competencies for intervention of bullying among sporting children. It is essential to clarify that the questionnaire refers to case studies that could potentially happen with 'sporting children aged 7 – 10 years'.

### ***Persons studied***

One hundred eighty full-time undergraduate university students voluntarily participated in the empirical study. The studied students were in their second year of undergraduate programs, preparing future coaches with different sports profiles. Of these, 34.4% (n=62) were female and 65.6% (n=118) were male.

### ***Data collection***

A questionnaire was developed and distributed for students to complete during the Pedagogy with Sport Pedagogy classes during the summer semester of the 2021/2022 academic year. The curriculum this semester covers topics related to educational theory. After a lecture during which punishment as an educational method was discussed, and a week later, the same subject was discussed during the seminar exercises. At the end of the exercise, the students were given the opportunity to fill in the questionnaire. They were informed of the purpose of the survey and allowed to withdraw at any time if they felt the questions were irrelevant or affected them in any way.

### ***Questionnaire design***

The questionnaire contains 5 case studies. The idea for their development was inspired by Ivanka Boncheva (Boncheva 2015). Each case study includes statements about possible reactions from the coach. It was pre-specified that the research students should imagine themselves working in the youth sport system with children aged 7 – 10. Responses to each statement were on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (with responses of “1 – strongly disagree,” “2 – disagree,” “3 – neither agree nor disagree,” “4 – agree,” and “5 – strongly agree”).

The questions were designed to explore students' knowledge regarding the application of punishment in education and the competencies formed to prevent and intervene in bullying and aggressive behavior in sporting children. The questionnaire results were processed using a validated statistical procedure using IBM SPSS 19.0.

### **Results and discussion**

As a result of the analysis of variance conducted on the responses to Case Study 1 (Table 1), it was found that the surveyed students had the attitude to carry out educational influences on sporting children and did not entirely rely on the assistance and support of parents in terms of education (Statement 2:  $M=1.92$ ;  $SD=.86$  and Statement 3:  $M=1.93$ ;  $SD=.88$ ). At the same time, they rely on parental support regarding bullying prevention (Statement 1:  $M=4.41$ ;  $SD=.74$ ). In general, the students surveyed were “more sparing” regarding the possible use of harsher punishments such as removal from play/practice ( $M=2.82$ ;  $SD=1.02$ ) and the widespread use in sport contexts of punishment through individual and additional exercise ( $M=3.53$ ;  $SD=.92$ ). The remark as a form of punishment was most preferred ( $M=3.68$ ;  $SD=1.04$ ). Regarding the statement, “Without reprimanding and criticizing the child, you are naming the problem and showing the child a way to solve it. After the practice, you have a conversation. E.g., 'Do you want attention? Are you bored? Want to make a friend? In that case, get the attention of the others in another way, do not tease them, but try to make them like you. Would you like to give it a try?’. Almost all students agreed to apply it ( $M=4.59$ ;  $SD=.61$ ). One student strongly disagreed with this response option, and 3.3% of them ( $n=6$ ) indicated the

“neither agree nor disagree” option. The remaining respondents accepted this option, with the majority indicating “strongly agree” – 63.9% (n=115). It makes a good impression that for this case study, the statement that the coach will not waste time and explain and show other behavior alternatives has a mean value of  $M=1.31$  and  $Max=3$ ,  $SD=.52$ .

**Table 1.** Variance analysis of the results of Case Study 1: During practice, one of the children systematically teases the others – pushes them, kicks them, hits them, yells, insults them, takes their things without their consent, etc. This behavior annoys the other children on the team, and they do not want to interact with him during or after practice. This reaction of them further intensifies the negative behaviors of the child-teaser

Statements	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1. Seeking assistance from parents	2.00	5.00	4.41	.74
2. Tell the parents you no longer want this child on your team.	1.00	5.00	1.92	.86
3. I do not want to work with children who are not educated!	1.00	5.00	1.93	.88
4. <b>Punish</b> the child by <b>reprimanding</b> them whenever they misbehave.	1.00	5.00	3.68	1.04
5. Penalty-repetition: extra laps or physical exercise.	1.00	5.00	3.53	.92
6. Penalty-Suspension: from game/practice	1.00	5.00	2.82	1.02
7. Show a way to solve the problem	1.00	5.00	4.59	.61
8. I am not wasting my time at all with this statement	1.00	3.00	1.31	.52

The results of the responses to Case Study 2 are presented in Table 2. Again, the future coaches relied on parental support. The choice of positive reactions in this case of bullying between children predominated over negative ones. As of now, the students stated that they would not be indifferent to aggressive behavior between children ( $M=1.52$ ;  $SD=.84$ ).

**Table 2.** Results of the analysis of variance of the statements from Case Study 2: Before practice, one child purposely challenges and teases the others, and if s/he sees a group of children playing, s/he goes over to them and "forcefully" asks to join in. When they refuse – they start fighting, insulting, and spoiling the game. There are also such reactions when disagreeing with their wishes, even sometimes without a reason

Statements	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Seeking assistance from parents	1.00	5.00	3.78	1.40
You react without scolding the child. You name the problem and give guidance on how it can possibly be solved	1.00	5.00	4.04	.81
You remark the child	1.00	5.00	3.92	.89

You remark the other children who ignore the "rejected" child because, in this way, they challenge them, and for this reason, they have this behavior	1.00	5.00	3.04	1.05
Without scolding and making a remark, you try to find out the reason for everyone's reactions and give guidance for everyone's behavior	1.00	5.00	4.02	.89
You tell the parents of the child who annoys the others that you no longer want him on your team	1.00	5.00	2.15	1.01
You don't interfere with the relationships between the children as long as they don't interfere with your activity	1.00	5.00	1.52	.84

Table 3 presents the responses to the statements in Case Study 3. Again, the students surveyed demonstrated good knowledge of dealing with bullying behaviors among children, as well as good coping skills in a multicultural environment.

**Table 3.** Results of the variance analysis of Case Study 3: You have a Roma child in your team. The other children do not communicate with that child. Both sides do not seek mutual contact. The Roma child reports to their parents that the other children hate him/her and constantly insult him/her (which is not the case).  
The parents turn to you for help.

Statements	Min	Max	Mean	SD
After talking to the parents of the "rejected" child, you reprimand the whole team	1.00	4.00	1.92	.85
You remark the child who has complained and explain to him that it is not right to slander their teammates	1.00	5.00	2.91	1.22
Without making a remark, you show children options for communicating. You actively try to include the child from a Roma background and support communication with the children.	1.00	5.00	4.17	.94
Seek assistance from the parents of the other children – it is their responsibility to educate their children.	1.00	5.00	2.9	1.01

It is also clear from the responses to the statements in Case Study 4 (Table 4) that the students surveyed have knowledge and competence regarding the application of punishment in the actual learning and training process. They have also mastered the theory of "positive education", which is appropriate when working with children and students of primary school age, particularly when implementing intervention measures for bullying and aggressive behavior.

**Table 4.** Results of the variance analysis of Case Study 4: During practice, a kid who is new to the team demonstrates very good skills. A kid envies the new kid and, at a convenient moment, intentionally trips him/her

Statements	Min	Max	Mean	SD
You reprimand the child (punishment)	1.00	5.00	3.94	.88
Remove the child from play (punishment)	1.00	5.00	2.32	.96
You do not reprimand or apply any other punishment. In a calm tone, you instruct the offending child to go to the one who has tripped - to apologize for their behavior, ask the child to forgive and forget the wrongdoing, and inquire if the child is all right.	1.00	5.00	3.94	1.13
You explain to the child that his/her action is not good and is caused by envy, which is also not good. Let the kid try to be a good kid - practice more and harder and ask for help when needed from someone more talented than him/her.	1.00	5.00	4.16	.96

The findings of the previous case studies are also valid for Case Study 5 (Table 5). Prospective coaches had the attitude that they would actively work with parents (M=4.24; SD=1.03) but would not entirely rely on them to address instances of bullying between children (M=3.98; SD=.93).

**Table 5.** Results of the variance analysis of Case Study 5: A child takes whatever he/she likes (belongings) from his/her teammates without permission or consent. He/she is visibly pleased with this action and even takes offense at any disagreement with it

Statements	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Notify the parents and seek their cooperation.	1.00	5.00	4.24	1.03
You make a remark and issue an order to return what was taken immediately. You make the child apologize.	2.00	5.00	3.92	.95
You make a comment in front of everyone that it's not much of a problem and it's not right for kids to get mad about it.	1.00	4.00	1.80	.92
In a friendly tone and without remarking, you point out a specific option of the behavior of the child who is bullying his/her teammates. Suggest a different behavior, e.g., " <i>Want the ball on .....? Why don't you ask him/her to help you for a while instead of grabbing it yourself?</i> "	1.00	5.00	3.98	.93
I will not waste my time at all with this statement	1.00	4.00	1.52	.75

Most of the students surveyed – 82.8% (n=149) recognized aggressive behavior and bullying among children in these described behaviors (cases). According to 11.7% (n=21), it is not bullying, and the remaining 5.6% (n=10) could not judge.



In general, it can be summarized that second-year students have knowledge and competence in applying punishment as an educational method in cases of bullying and aggressive behavior and prefer intervention measures to be more positive. There were no statistically significant differences in responses to the case study statements concerning gender (Mann-Whitney test).

When aggressive acts and bullying by child/children are detected, the coach needs to take measures and teach the child/children not to commit these acts again. Children need to know that they are unacceptable and that they are harming everyone. They need to understand and recognize right and wrong, good and bad actions. Nowadays, this cannot be achieved by constant prohibitions and the application of severe punishments. In these moments, a timely and adequate reaction from the sports educator is essential. To show with love and concern, and at the same time with firmness in their voice, that bullying between children is unacceptable, it is vital that they are able to show good and proper alternative behavior. If necessary, seek the assistance of parents so that all adults can unite against bullying between children.

### **Conclusion**

Whether it is violence, aggression, or bullying, whatever form it takes, it is a reality even among children. It is essential to tackle them from an early age to prevent risky behavior in later years. In this regard, the efforts of adults, including coaches, must be directed towards timely and adequate prevention and intervention.

Nowadays, our society relies heavily on sports as a factor for the prevention of violence, aggression, and bullying among children. However, sports will be the "cure" when coaches are well prepared to deal with the problem when they do not disregard the problems lest someone's prestige, including that of the sports club, is damaged or out of disinterest. The commitment of a coach working with children is not only to prepare them to be future champions but also to prepare them for life and, above all, to teach them to be good people. When acts of violence, aggression, and bullying are found among children, it is the coach's duty not to punish but to teach them not to commit these acts again, especially why this is important. Besides teaching the techniques and tactics of the sports, a coach educates and prepares for life.

### **NOTES**

1. Since the cases in the empirical study are mainly bullying cases and due to the page limit, we will mainly focus on the definitions of bullying.
2. Cyber bullying is not included in the case studies developed.
3. In the empirical study, the case studies developed are of 7 – 10 year old children playing sport, namely primary school pupils.

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