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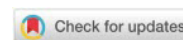
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# The Impact of Peer and Cyberbullying on Elementary School Children in the Republic of Serbia

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**Abstract:** This study examines the prevalence of various forms of peer bullying among elementary school children, with a particular focus on the rising issue of cyberbullying. Utilizing a specially constructed Likert scale, the research gathered data from a sample of 98 children, composed of 51 boys and 47 girls, across grades five to eight. The findings reveal that verbal abuse, such as name-calling, mocking, and insulting, is the most common form of bullying experienced by children. Physical bullying behaviors like hitting, pushing, and kicking are also prevalent. Furthermore, the study highlights the significant presence of cyberbullying, characterized by malicious online messaging and social media interactions, which often result in emotional distress and withdrawal from social activities. The reliability and internal consistency of the measurement scale were confirmed by a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.775. The results underscore the importance of addressing both traditional and cyber forms of bullying to ensure a safer school environment. The study advocates for comprehensive educational programs that promote digital literacy and empathy among children to mitigate the negative impacts of bullying. Additionally, the research suggests implementing effective intervention strategies that include prompt responses to reported bullying incidents and providing support to victims. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on bullying by offering insights into the dynamics of peer and cyberbullying, emphasizing the need for continuous monitoring and preventive measures within educational settings.

**Keywords:** Peer bullying, Cyberbullying, Verbal abuse, Physical violence, Elementary school

## Introduction

Each of us experiences some form of violence during childhood, whether as a perpetrators of violence, a victim, or merely a witness to violence against others. Violence has always existed, but it did not receive as much attention in the media as it does today. Nowadays, our television screens are filled with numerous images and films depicting violence. Wherever we are—at school or on the streets—we encounter an increase in violent behavior and a rise in juvenile delinquency, which has naturally become a societal problem. Violence encompasses any behavior aimed at intentionally causing harm or inflicting pain, whether psychological or physical.

According to the [Rules on the protocol of procedures in institutions in response to violence, abuse and neglect \(2024\)](#), “violence is defined as any form of verbal or non-verbal behavior, whether it occurs once or repeatedly, that results in actual or potential harm to the health, development, and dignity of children/pupils.”

There are numerous definitions of violence because each author strives to provide a comprehensive definition; however, no one has yet succeeded due to the complex nature of the concept itself. Violence or abuse among children can be categorized into direct and indirect violence based on its form. Direct violence refers to situations where the victim is consistently attacked through direct harm, such as physical injury, verbal abuse, theft of money, etc. Indirect violence refers to situations where the victim is

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consistently attacked through indirect harm, such as spreading rumors and falsehoods about a child to their peers, persuading peers to avoid befriending a particular child, etc. (Baldry, 2003).

There are various classifications of violence based on its form, intensity, and duration. The types of violence are challenging to clearly distinguish as they often overlap and combine. Stajić, Miljković, and Stanarević (2006) emphasize that violence can be passive or active. They consider passive violence to be neglect and abuse, while active violence includes physical, psychological, or sexual abuse of varying intensities.

According to the Special Protocol for the Protection of Children and Pupils from Violence, Abuse, and Neglect in Educational Institutions (2009), there are various forms of violence, including:

- Physical violence: hitting, kicking, pushing, slapping, hair-pulling, choking, throwing, attacking with a weapon, etc.
- Emotional/Psychological violence: belittling, labeling, ignoring, insulting, blackmailing, name-calling, gossiping, mocking, ridiculing, excluding, extorting, manipulating, and other forms of hostile behavior.
- Sexual violence: sexual harassment, inducing or forcing pupils to participate in sexual activities, using pupils for prostitution, pornography, etc.
- Electronic violence: messages sent via email, SMS, and MMS that often contain threats, insults, sexual harassment, and similar content.

In a study conducted in 2004, 24% of children confirmed that they had experienced violence in school. Mocking, insulting, teasing, or taunting (verbal violence) was the most common form of violence recognized by students in this study (Gašić-Pavišić, 2004).

A study conducted by Popadić and Plut (2007) highlights that 65.3% of children experienced some form of peer violence within a three-month period. This research found that the most common forms of peer violence were insulting (45.6%) and gossiping (32.6%).

Ožegović conducted a study aimed at identifying the most common forms of aggressive behavior among elementary school children and determining the causes of aggression and reactions to aggressive behavior. The results of this study showed that more than two-thirds of children had been exposed to some form of aggressive behavior, while 39.92% of children had not experienced it. The most prominent forms of aggression identified were: swearing (50%), mocking (44%), physical attacks (43%), threats (25%), and extortion of money (9%). In most cases (53.16%), students openly admitted to exhibiting some form of aggressive behavior themselves (Ožegović, 2008).

## **Cyberbullying – A New Form of Violence Among Adolescents**

From traditional forms of violence, today's so-called cyberbullying has become increasingly prevalent, where children are exposed to various forms of violence via the internet. Cyberbullying can be defined as "any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others" (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278). A distinctive feature of this type of violence is the absence of temporal and spatial limitations for its occurrence. This form of violence is treated as a unique type due to its lack of temporal and spatial constraints, the large number of observers, and the frequent anonymity of the perpetrators (Bozbayindir, 2019). This research focuses on peer bullying, which includes verbal and physical aggression such as name-calling, mocking, hitting, and pushing, and cyberbullying, which involves harmful behaviors conducted through digital platforms like social media and messaging services.

Characteristics of cyberbullying among school children include malicious messaging, sharing offensive or false information, creating fake profiles, and online exclusion from groups. Cyberbullying often results in emotional stress, poor academic performance, and withdrawal from social activities. Numerous studies have shown that the increased use of digital technologies and social networks contributes to the growing trend of cyberbullying among children. Serbia is one of the countries that has decided to sanction cyberbullying by applying existing criminal laws (Janković and Stošić, 2022, p. 105).

The occurrence of bullying and cyberbullying among children and adolescents, along with concerns about their negative implications, has led to an increasing number of publications focusing on this topic (Cretu and Morandau, 2024, p. 372). As we continue to discuss cyberbullying, "future research should be more specific about possible mediating factors between different types of victimization and

demographic categories (such as gender), socialization processes (e.g., family type), children’s social skills development, and other psychological factors (e.g., self-esteem)” (Savahl, Adams, and Hoosen, 2024, p. 23). It is also important to note that cyberbullying is linked to the consequences of internet addiction, and the “internet addiction disorder should indeed be considered a general disorder under which there are other disorders directly related to the internet” (Bjelajac, Filipović and Stošić, 2022, p. 59). Additionally, artificial intelligence, which is continually advancing, offers new avenues for autonomous systems to exploit data for harmful outcomes with every new application of this technology (Bjelajac, Filipović, and Stošić, 2023, p. 530).

## Research Methods

The subject of this research is the identification of forms of peer bullying in school. The aim of this research is to identify the prevalence of various forms of peer bullying.

The tasks in this research are:

1. How common is peer bullying and cyberbullying among elementary school children in some school in Serbia?
2. What are the most common forms of peer bullying and cyberbullying?
3. To examine whether children are more exposed to name-calling.
4. To examine whether children are more exposed to rumor spreading in order to attract attention.
5. To examine whether children more frequently engage in name-calling.
6. To examine whether children more frequently engage in rumor spreading to attract attention.
7. To examine whether children have been minimally exposed to peer bullying throughout their entire schooling.

The research included 98 children, consisting of 51 boys and 47 girls. From the fifth grade, 20 children participated, accounting for 20.4%, with 13 boys and 7 girls. From the sixth grade, 30 children participated, accounting for 30.6%, with 13 boys and 17 girls. From the seventh grade, 18 children participated, accounting for 18.4%, with 12 boys and 6 girls. From the eighth grade, 30 children participated, accounting for 30.6%, with 13 boys and 17 girls. The table shows that we have the same number of male participants in the fifth, sixth, and eighth grades, while the highest number of female participants is in the sixth and eighth grades.

**Table 1.** Structure of Participants by Gender and Grade

		Grade				Total	
		Fifth	Sixth	Seventh	Eighth		
Gender	Male	Total	13	13	12	13	51
		% total	13.3%	13.3%	12.2%	13.3%	52.0%
	Female	Total	7	17	6	17	47
		% total	7.1%	17.3%	6.1%	17.3%	48.0%
Total		Total	20	30	18	30	98
% total			20.4%	30.6%	18.4%	30.6%	100.0%

In our sample of 98 participants (100% valid sample), the value of the Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient (Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.775) demonstrates very good reliability and internal consistency of the scale for this sample, thus meeting the reliability criterion.

## Results

The analysis of the research results reveals that peer bullying is prevalent among elementary school children, with verbal abuse being the most common form. The study also indicates a significant presence of cyberbullying, highlighting the need for effective interventions. The findings underscore the importance of addressing both traditional and modern forms of bullying to create a safer school environment.

**Table 2.** Frequency of Bullying Behavior Experienced by Children

	Never		Happened once or twice		Happened multiple times		Almost every day	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
I have experienced being called names, mocked, or insulted by other children.	41	41.8	36	36.7	13	13.3	8	8.2
I have experienced being hit, pushed, and kicked.	61	62.2	33	33.7	3	3.1	1	1
They have tried to turn other children against me by gossiping and spreading lies about me.	59	60.2	24	24.5	12	12.2	3	3.1
I have experienced having my money and other belongings taken away, and my things being destroyed.	90	91.8	6	6.1	1	1	1	1
I have experienced being threatened and intimidated.	81	82.7	15	15.3	2	2	0	0
I have been forced to do things I did not want to do and to behave badly.	87	88.8	9	9.2	1	1	1	1
I have experienced being touched in an uncomfortable way and have been sexually harassed.	84	85.7	7	7.1	3	3.1	4	4.1
Someone spread the story that you were on drugs.	92	93.9	4	4.1	0	0	2	2
Someone is spreading rumors about you to attract attention to themselves.	71	72.4	20	20.4	4	4.1	3	3.1
Someone said in front of your friends that you flatter the teacher	64	65.3	22	22.4	8	8.2	4	4.1
Someone has called you selfish and stingy in front of everyone.	74	75.5	17	17.3	5	5.1	2	2
Friends are avoiding you because of your low social status.	93	94.9	2	2	2	2	1	1
I have received SMS messages with unpleasant content.	88	89.8	7	7.1	1	1	2	2
Friends have threatened me through the social network Facebook.	89	90.8	7	7.1	1	1	1	1

For the first statement, “I have experienced being called names, mocked, or insulted by other children,” 41 respondents (41.8%) answered that they have never experienced being called names, mocked, or insulted. A total of 36 respondents (36.7%) answered that they have experienced this once or twice. Thirteen respondents (13.3%) reported that this has happened multiple times, and 8 respondents (8.2%) stated that they experience this almost every day.

For the statement, “I have experienced being hit, pushed, and kicked,” 61 respondents (62.2%) answered that they have never experienced this, 33 respondents (33.7%) stated that it happened once or twice, three respondents (3.1%) reported that it happened multiple times, and one child (1%) stated that they experience this almost every day.

For the statement, “They have tried to turn other children against me by gossiping and spreading lies about me,” 59 respondents (60.2%) answered “never,” 24 respondents (24.5%) stated that this happened once or twice, 12 respondents (12.2%) reported that it happened multiple times, and three respondents (3.1%) stated that this happens almost every day.

From the presented table, we can see that 90 respondents (91.8%) stated that they have never experienced having their money and other belongings taken away or having their belongings destroyed. Six children (6.1%) reported that this happened once or twice, while only one respondent reported that it happened multiple times. Among the respondents, there is one children who stated that they experience money and belongings being taken away almost every day.

For the next statement, “I have experienced being threatened and intimidated,” 81 respondents (82.7%) answered that they have never experienced this, while 15 respondents (15.3%) stated that it happened once or twice. Two respondents (2%) reported that it happened multiple times, and none of the respondents experienced this type of violence every day.

Regarding the statement, “I have been forced to do things I did not want to do and to behave badly,” 87 respondents (88.8%) answered that they have never been forced. Nine respondents (9.2%) reported

that this happened once or twice. One respondent reported that it happened multiple times, and one respondent experienced it almost every day.

For the final statement, "I have experienced being touched in an uncomfortable way and have been sexually harassed," 84 respondents (85.7%) answered that they have never experienced this type of violence, seven respondents (7.1%) reported experiencing it once or twice, three respondents (3.1%) stated that it happened multiple times, and four respondents (4.1%) reported experiencing this type of violence almost every day.

For the statement, "Someone has spread rumors that you are using drugs," 92 respondents (93.9%) answered "never." Four respondents (4.1%) reported that this happened once or twice. Interestingly, no one reported that it happened multiple times, while two respondents (2%) stated that it happens almost every day.

For the statement, "Someone is spreading rumors about you to attract attention to themselves," 77 respondents (72.4%) answered "never," 20 respondents (20.4%) reported that this happened once or twice, four respondents (4.1%) stated that it happened multiple times, and three respondents (3.1%) reported that it happens almost every day.

For the statement, "Someone said in front of your friends that you flatter the teacher," 64 respondents (65.3%) answered negatively. Twenty-two respondents (22.4%) reported that this happened once or twice. Eight respondents (8.2%) stated that it happened multiple times, while four respondents (4.1%) reported that it happens almost every day.

For the statement, "Someone has called you selfish and stingy in front of everyone," 74 respondents (75.5%) answered "never." Seventeen respondents (17.3%) reported that this happened once or twice. Five respondents (5.1%) stated that it happened multiple times, and only two respondents (2%) reported that it happens almost every day.

For the statement, "Friends are avoiding you because of your low social status," 93 respondents (94.9%) indicated that their friends do not avoid them. Two respondents (2%) stated that this happened once or twice, and another two stated that it happened multiple times. Only one respondent reported that it happens almost every day.

Regarding the statement, "I have received SMS messages with unpleasant content," 88 respondents (89.8%) said they have never received such messages, 7 respondents (7.1%) reported that it happened once or twice, only one respondent stated that it happened multiple times, and two respondents reported that it happens almost every day.

For the statement, "Friends have threatened me through the social network Facebook," 89 respondents (90.8%) answered that they have not received threats. Seven respondents (7.1%) reported that they experienced threats once or twice, one respondent stated that it happened multiple times, and another one reported that it happens almost every day.

For the statement, "I have called other children names, mocked, or insulted them," 48 respondents (49%) answered "never," 39 respondents (39.8%) said it happened once or twice, seven respondents (7.1%) reported that it happened multiple times, and four respondents (4.1%) stated that they called other children names or mocked them almost every day.

Regarding the statement, "I have hit, pushed, and kicked a children," 65 respondents (66.3%) answered "never," 21 respondents (21.4%) said it happened once or twice, seven respondents (7.1%) reported that it happened multiple times, and five respondents (5.1%) stated that it happened almost every day.

For the statement, "I have persuaded children not to be friends with a particular children," 89 respondents (90.8%) answered "never," six respondents (6.1%) said it happened once or twice, no one reported that it happened multiple times, and three respondents (3.1%) stated that it happened almost every day.

For the statement, "I have taken money and other belongings from a children and destroyed their things," 95 respondents (96.9%) answered that they have never done this. One children reported that it happened once or twice. No one reported that it happened multiple times, while only two children stated that they did this almost every day.

**Table 3. Frequency of Bullying Behavior Perpetrated by Children**

	Never		Happened once or twice		Happened multiple times		Almost every day	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
I have called other children names, mocked, or insulted them.	48	49	39	39.8	7	7.1	4	4.1
I have hit, pushed, and kicked a children.	65	66.3	21	21.4	7	7.1	5	5.1
I have persuaded children not to be friends with a particular children.	89	90.8	6	6.1	0	0	3	3.1
I have taken money and other belongings from a children and destroyed their things.	95	96.9	1	1	0	0	2	2
I have threatened and intimidated a children.	81	82.7	14	14.3	2	2	1	1
I forced the children to do what he didn't want to do and to appear ugly.	95	96.9	2	2	0	0	1	1
I touched the children in an unpleasant way and I sexually harassed him/her.	85	86.7	6	6.1	3	3.1	4	4.1
You spread the story that one of your friends is using drugs.	97	99	1	1	0	0	0	0
You spread rumors about someone else or a friend to draw attention to yourself.	92	93.9	6	6.1	0	0	0	0
You talked about how one of the children flatters the teacher.	48	49	34	34.7	11	11.2	5	5.1
You called someone selfish and miserly in front of everyone.	67	68.4	25	25.5	4	4.1	2	2
I avoided my friends because of their insufficient social status.	93	94.9	4	4.1	0	0	1	1
You sent SMS messages with unpleasant content.	95	96.9	0	0	1	1	2	2
You threatened someone via the Facebook social network.	93	94.9	4	4.1	0	0	1	1

Regarding the statement, "I have threatened and intimidated a children," 81 respondents (82.7%) stated that they never threatened anyone, 14 respondents (14.3%) said they threatened someone once or twice, two respondents reported that they threatened others multiple times, and only one respondent stated that they did this almost every day.

For the statement, "I have forced a children to do things they did not want to do and to behave badly," 95 respondents (96.9%) answered that they never forced other children. Two respondents stated that they forced others once or twice. No one reported forcing others multiple times, while only one children stated that they did this almost every day.

For the statement, "I have touched a children in an uncomfortable way and have sexually harassed them," 85 respondents (86.7%) answered "never." Six respondents (6.1%) reported that it happened once or twice, three respondents (3.1%) stated that it happened multiple times, and four respondents (4.1%) stated that it happened almost every day.

Regarding the statement, "I have spread rumors that one of my friends is using drugs," 97 respondents (99%) answered "never," one respondent reported that it happened once or twice. No respondents reported that it happened multiple times or almost every day.

For the statement, "I have spread rumors about a friend to attract attention to myself," 92 respondents (93.9%) answered "never," six respondents (6.1%) reported that it happened once or twice, and no respondents stated that it happened multiple times or almost every day.

For the statement, "You talked about how one of the children flatters the teacher" 48 respondents (49%) answered "never," 34 respondents (34.7%) said it happened once or twice, 11 respondents (11.2%) reported that it happened multiple times, and 5 respondents (5.1%) stated that it happens almost every day.

Regarding the statement, "I have called someone selfish and stingy in front of everyone," 67 respondents (68.4%) answered "never," 25 respondents (25.5%) said it happened once or twice, 4 respondents stated that it happened multiple times, and 2 respondents (2%) reported that it happens almost every day.

For the statement, "I have avoided friends because of their low social status," 93 respondents

(94.9%) answered “never,” 4 respondents (4.1%) said it happened once or twice. No one reported that it happened multiple times, and only 1 respondent stated that it happens almost every day.

Regarding the statement, “I have sent SMS messages with unpleasant content,” 95 respondents (96.9%) answered “never,” none reported that it happened once or twice, 1 respondent stated that it happened multiple times, and 2 respondents (2%) reported that it happens almost every day.

For the statement, “I have threatened someone through the social network Facebook,” 93 respondents (94.9%) answered that they have never threatened anyone through Facebook. Four respondents (4.1%) said it happened once or twice. No one reported that it happened multiple times, and only one respondent stated that it happens almost every day.

**Table 4.** *Exposure to Violence Throughout Entire Schooling*

	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Never	50	51.0	51.0	51.0
Happened once or twice	38	38.8	38.8	89.8
Happened multiple times	8	8.2	8.2	98.0
Almost every day	2	2.0	2.0	100.0
Total	98	100.0	100.0	

The table presents the frequency and percentage of children’s exposure to peer bullying throughout their schooling. Results present that:

- Never: 50 children (51.0%) reported that they have never been exposed to peer bullying.
- Happened once or twice: 38 children (38.8%) experienced bullying once or twice.
- Happened multiple times: 8 children (8.2%) reported multiple instances of bullying.
- Almost every day: 2 children (2.0%) faced bullying almost every day.

Overall, more than half of the children have never experienced peer bullying, while a significant portion has encountered it at least once or twice, indicating that bullying is a recurring issue for a minority of the children.

## Conclusion

From the obtained results, we can conclude that children are most frequently exposed to name-calling, mocking, or insulting. To a lesser extent, children are exposed to being touched in uncomfortable ways, sexually harassed, and being accused of flatters the teacher in front of their peers. Additionally, we can conclude that children most frequently exhibit violence through hitting, pushing, and kicking other children, and spreading rumors about others that flatters the teacher. Regarding the overall exposure to violence throughout their schooling, we can conclude that more than half of the children have never experienced violence.

On the other hand, the emerging form of violence, cyberbullying among children, requires a comprehensive approach that includes education, prevention, and intervention. It is important for schools and parents to educate children about safe internet use and the dangers of cyberbullying. Moreover, it is necessary to develop programs that promote empathy and digital literacy. Intervention includes quick and effective responses to reported cases of cyberbullying, providing support to victims, and ensuring appropriate consequences for perpetrators.

The research reveals that over half of the children have never encountered bullying, indicating a generally safe school environment; however, 38.8% have experienced bullying once or twice, and 10.2% have faced it multiple times or almost daily, underscoring that a significant minority still struggles with persistent bullying. The prevalence of both peer and cyberbullying suggests a pressing need for targeted interventions and comprehensive anti-bullying strategies. Schools should focus on fostering a culture of empathy and digital literacy to prevent cyberbullying and ensure quick responses to incidents. The implications are clear: while many children feel safe, efforts must continue to protect those vulnerable to bullying and to educate all children on the impact of such behaviors. This dual approach can help create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment, emphasizing the necessity of ongoing vigilance

and prevention initiatives.

In summary, while peer bullying in schools is not highly prevalent, it is essential to continue with violence prevention efforts in schools, as well as to educate about the new form of violence—cyberbullying—from the very beginning of schooling.

### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Author Contributions

Conceptualization, L.S., I.S. and A.J.; methodology, L.S., I.S.; writing—original draft preparation, L.S., I.S. and A.J.; writing—review and editing, L.S., I.S. and A.J.; Analysis, discussion and conclusion, L.S., I.S. and A.J.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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