

Study on the Protective Role of Self-Awareness in the Relationship between School Bullying and Adolescent Depressive Tendencies

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Abstract: In the process of adolescent development, school bullying poses a potential threat to mental health, and studies have shown that adolescents who experience bullying have significantly higher rates of depressive tendencies. Existing research has primarily focused on the direct impact of bullying on depression, with less attention given to the buffering role of individual psychological traits. As the psychological foundation for adolescents to understand and regulate themselves, self-awareness plays an important moderating role in the relationship between bullying stress and depressive tendencies. This study analyzes the pathways through which school bullying influences adolescent depressive tendencies, reveals the protective role of self-awareness in blocking negative attribution, regulating stress responses, and providing neuroprotection, and proposes strategies to enhance self-awareness from individual, family, school, and societal levels. It offers a new perspective for the prevention and intervention of adolescent depressive tendencies.

Keywords: Adolescent Depressive Tendencies, Self-Awareness, Protective Role, Psychological Intervention.

1. Introduction

During the critical stage of adolescent development, bullying in the school environment increasingly threatens individual mental health in various forms. Recent research shows that adolescents who experience bullying have significantly higher rates of depressive tendencies compared to those who are not bullied, making the dynamic relationship between the two a research hotspot in developmental psychology and school mental health[1-2]. However, most existing research focuses on the direct impact of bullying experiences on depressive emotions, paying little attention to the mediating role of individual psychological traits in buffering stress. As the psychological foundation for adolescents to understand themselves and regulate their behavior, the developmental level of self-awareness may play a vital role in the relationship between bullying stress and depressive tendencies. Exploring this protective mechanism has significant theoretical and practical value for improving adolescent mental health protection systems.

2. The Relationship between School Bullying and Adolescent Depressive Tendencies

2.1. Direct Causality: Immediate Induction of Depressive Tendencies by Bullying Experiences

School bullying manifests in various forms such as physical harm, verbal insults, and social isolation. When individuals are persistently placed in bullying situations, repeated negative evaluations erode their emotional well-being like corrosive acid, triggering depressive symptoms such as low mood and loss of interest. From a neuroscience perspective, the prefrontal cortex, responsible for emotional regulation, shows significantly reduced activity in bullied adolescents, like an orchestra losing its conductor and failing

to coordinate emotions. Meanwhile, the amygdala becomes hypersensitive in stress responses, akin to a jumpy sentry reacting strongly to minor stimuli. These neural changes provide the physiological basis directly triggering depressive tendencies[3-4]. Moreover, the frequency and severity of bullying are significantly positively correlated with the intensity of depressive symptoms, like continuously adding weights to one side of a balance, deepening the psychological impact on adolescents.

2.2. Bidirectional Cycle: Dynamic Feedback Mechanism between Bullying and Depression

The relationship between school bullying and adolescent depressive tendencies is not a simple one-way connection but forms a mutually reinforcing, escalating dynamic loop. Depressive tendencies shroud adolescents in a gray filter, manifesting as withdrawn and negative behaviors, effectively marking them as “easy targets” and increasing their risk of being bullied. Ongoing bullying, in turn, fuels the fire, exacerbating depressive emotions and making it harder for individuals to adopt positive coping strategies, creating a vicious cycle. This feedback mechanism is especially pronounced during adolescence, when sensitivity to peer evaluations is high. After experiencing bullying, adolescents are more prone to falling into self-denial. In a depressive state, cognitive distortions magnify the negative impact of bullying, turning small incidents into perceived disasters. This perpetuates a downward spiral, deepening the psychological plight and making recovery increasingly difficult.

2.3. Group Heterogeneity: Differences among Adolescent Subgroups

The strength of the bullying–depression relationship varies across adolescent subgroups. Gender differences, as shown in Table 1, indicate that girls are more prone to depressive emotions from social bullying, related to their heightened sensitivity to maintaining harmonious relationships, whereas

boys show more pronounced depressive symptoms from the direct harm of physical bullying. Age-wise, in early adolescence, when self-identity is not yet stable, the impact of bullying on depressive tendencies is more significant. In mid-to-late adolescence, once a relatively mature self-concept has formed, the ability to resist bullying stress increases substantially. Environmental factors also play an essential role: adolescents with strong family support experience emotional buffering, slowing the development of depressive tendencies, whereas those lacking social support are more prone to depression. These group differences suggest that analyzing the relationship between bullying and depression requires a multidimensional approach that integrates individual characteristics and environmental factors to fully reveal its complex mechanisms.

Table 1. Gender Differences in the Relationship between School Bullying and Depressive Tendencies

Differential dimensions	Female characteristics	Male characteristics
Types of vulnerability to bullying	Social bullying (such as relational exclusion, verbal belittlement, etc.)	Physical bullying (such as beating, physical harm, etc.)
Mechanism of depression occurrence	High sensitivity to harmonious interpersonal relationships. Social bullying can easily destroy their emotional support network and trigger depressive moods.	The direct harm of physical bullying is more likely to cause physical and psychological trauma, making depressive symptoms more obvious.
Core influencing factors	Interpersonal relationship status and emotional connection	Degree of physical harm and direct stress response

3. The Protective Role of Self-Awareness under Stress

3.1. Psychological Barrier Blocking Negative Attribution

Self-awareness, defined as the individual’s awareness and understanding of their own existence, primarily functions to help adolescents establish an objective and coherent self-evaluation system. When facing bullying, adolescents with high self-awareness exhibit distinct psychological regulation advantages: they tend to attribute bullying incidents to external situational factors—such as the bully’s malicious intentions, peer group dynamics, or accidental events—rather than mistakenly blaming their own perceived shortcomings, inadequacies, or lack of worth. This rational attribution acts as a powerful psychological buffer zone, effectively interrupting the vicious cycle that leads from self-denial to emotional collapse. Moreover, adolescents with clear self-understanding are more likely to view bullying as a temporary setback or challenge in their developmental journey, rather than as a comprehensive negation of their personal value or identity[5-6]. This mindset protects them from becoming trapped in prolonged negative thinking loops, which can otherwise spiral into chronic low self-esteem and persistent depressive states. Importantly, high self-awareness enables adolescents to contextualize bullying incidents within broader social frameworks, recognizing that many negative peer

interactions stem from factors beyond their control. They may understand that bullies often act out of their own insecurities, social pressures, or desire for dominance, rather than any real flaw in the target. This distancing perspective reduces personal blame and supports healthier emotional processing, thereby maintaining relatively stable mental states. By safeguarding their internal sense of worth, adolescents significantly lower the likelihood of developing depressive tendencies, even when facing repeated or severe bullying stressors, creating a psychological shield that protects their long-term well-being.

3.2. Establishing a Regulatory Channel for Stress Responses

The level of self-awareness directly influences adolescents’ choice of coping strategies when confronted with stress, particularly under the acute pressures of bullying. Adolescents with higher self-awareness possess the capacity to accurately identify and label their emotional states—such as anger, fear, frustration, or sadness—and consciously deploy cognitive resources to regulate and adjust these emotions. Rather than becoming overwhelmed by emotional surges or falling into reactive patterns, these adolescents are more likely to adopt proactive, problem-focused strategies, such as seeking adult support, setting actionable plans, or rehearsing assertive communication. Additionally, they often engage in emotion-focused strategies, such as self-soothing, mindfulness techniques, or cognitive restructuring, which allow them to reframe negative experiences and reduce the psychological burden associated with bullying. Importantly, this capacity for self-regulation reduces the risk of adolescents passively succumbing to feelings of helplessness, despair, or emotional paralysis. Neuroscientific research has demonstrated that individuals with strong self-awareness exhibit enhanced prefrontal cortex regulation over the limbic system, particularly the amygdala, in stressful situations. This regulatory advantage allows them to effectively suppress excessive stress responses, manage arousal levels, and maintain emotional balance from both a psychological and physiological perspective. Furthermore, high self-awareness supports the development of adaptive coping repertoires over time, equipping adolescents to navigate future stressors with greater confidence and resilience. By practicing regulation, adolescents may also improve their social problem-solving skills, expand their emotional vocabulary, and increase their sense of agency—all of which contribute to building long-term psychological resilience and reducing vulnerability to depressive symptoms.

3.3. Neuroprotective Regulation of Stress Responses

Serving as a vital bridge between psychological cognition and neural mechanisms, self-awareness plays a key role in optimizing how individuals appraise and respond to stressful events, including bullying. When adolescents cultivate good self-awareness, their cognitive evaluations of bullying experiences become more objective, reflective, and rational, which directly shapes their physiological responses to stress. Specifically, this cognitive mode helps regulate the activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, a central stress-response system, resulting in reduced peaks of stress hormone (such as cortisol) secretion and quicker recovery to baseline levels after exposure to bullying stimuli. This neuroprotective regulation is particularly critical for safeguarding sensitive

brain regions, such as the hippocampus, which is essential for memory encoding and emotional regulation. Prolonged high cortisol concentrations can damage hippocampal neurons, impairing cognitive functioning and increasing susceptibility to mood disturbances. By supporting efficient prefrontal cortex control over limbic system activity, self-awareness reduces the frequency and intensity of amygdala hyperactivation, thereby alleviating the physiological drivers that contribute to persistent depressive emotions. This neurobiological modulation creates a closed-loop protective system, integrating cognitive, emotional, and physiological levels of functioning to reduce the long-term risk of depressive tendencies. Additionally, recent research suggests that individuals with higher self-awareness may exhibit enhanced neuroplasticity, meaning their brains are better able to adapt, reorganize, and form new neural connections in response to emotional challenges. This plasticity strengthens resilience, promotes faster recovery from emotional setbacks, and equips adolescents with more flexible and adaptive mental health responses, providing a robust neurocognitive defense against the cumulative impacts of bullying.

4. Strategies for Enhancing Self-Awareness

4.1. Individual-Level Cognitive Training

During the cultivation of adolescent self-awareness, external factors can easily interfere with the differentiation and integration of cognitive abilities, especially the negative evaluations brought by bullying, which may cause self-perception biases. Individual cognitive training should center on “constructing an interference-resistant self-concept system.” Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)-based self-awareness training, using emotional journaling and event

attribution analysis, can help adolescents establish a “observe–reflect–adjust” cognitive cycle, transforming negative emotions from bullying into materials for self-cognitive revision. Mindfulness meditation techniques, such as breath awareness and body scanning, enhance individuals’ metacognitive abilities regarding their current emotional states, using “detached observation” to avoid emotional entanglement caused by bullying stress[7-8]. Similarly, “strengths discovery” activities, essentially involving positive self-affirmations, help build psychological buffers: when adolescents can clearly list ten or more personal strengths, their self-identity stability increases, enabling them to maintain independent self-perception in bullying situations.

4.2. Family-Level Support Systems

In the complex, fast-paced modern society, the family parenting environment is undergoing significant changes, making the construction of family support systems crucial (see Figure 1). Parents often fall into the trap of overprotection due to anxiety or display emotional neglect under work pressures, both of which invisibly undermine the normal development of adolescents’ self-awareness. Particularly when children face bullying, the absence of appropriate family support can foster the misconception of “self-exposure risk,” making them wrongly believe that expressing genuine emotions will bring more harm, thus closing off their inner world. Building a scientifically sound family support system has become a key task in contemporary parenting. This system needs to strengthen both “emotional safe base” and “autonomous development space”: children must receive unconditional emotional acceptance at home, while also being given room for independent exploration. Balancing protection and autonomy helps adolescents build psychological resilience against bullying and cultivate core competencies for self-development.

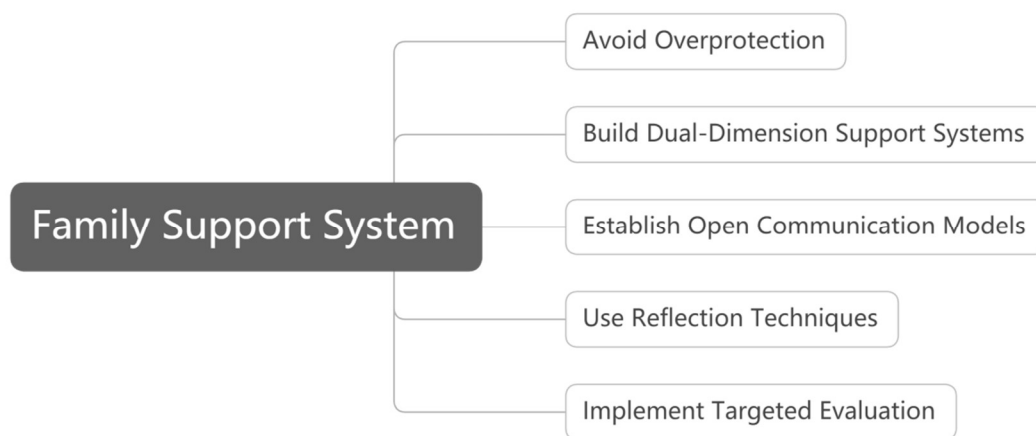


Figure 1. Family Support System

4.3. School-Level Curriculum Interventions

Current school mental health education faces challenges in curriculum effectiveness, and the integration of self-awareness cultivation with bullying response is notably lacking. A systematic curriculum intervention framework needs to be constructed. At the school level, interventions should adopt a dual-track model of “developmental cultivation + crisis intervention.” During regular curriculum periods, activities aligned with the cognitive styles of

elementary students—such as visual “strength trees”—can help younger children convert abstract self-perceptions into concrete visual forms, gradually building a basic self-concept structure. For adolescents in middle and high school, stress-coping workshops using bullying scenario simulations can guide students in balancing self-assertion and seeking social support through role-play. In existing bullying cases, rapid response mechanisms should prioritize post-trauma self-reconstruction interventions: counselors can use event-restructuring techniques to help bullied students reinterpret

negative beliefs such as “being bullied means I am flawed” into positive cognitive frameworks like “bullying reflects the perpetrator’s character problems, and actively seeking help demonstrates personal resilience,” thereby breaking the mental process of collapsing self-worth.

4.4. Societal-Level Environmental Construction

In the modern era of media information explosion and fragmented real-world support, adolescent self-awareness development faces the dual challenges of blurred value coordinates and fragmented support networks. To build a supportive societal environment, efforts should be coordinated across cultural communication, practical platforms, and institutional design. Mass media must take on the task of positive guidance: when reporting on school bullying, media outlets should not only present facts objectively but also include expert-designed coping guides to alleviate adolescents’ psychological panic caused by informational biases. Communities should serve as primary sites for self-awareness practice, using activities such as public service volunteering and outdoor development to create multiple experiential contexts. When adolescents serve as team leaders or task managers in community projects, the process of verifying self-efficacy significantly enhances the clarity of self-identity[9-10]. Laws and regulations should establish a comprehensive chain of protection mechanisms, with detailed guidelines for reporting processes, the division of intervention responsibilities among different stakeholders, and subsequent follow-up measures, clearly defining the roles of schools, families, and communities[11-12]. Through collective efforts and institutional safeguards, barriers to seeking help can be eliminated, creating a socially collaborative ecosystem for the development of adolescent self-awareness.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically reveals the protective mechanisms of self-awareness in the relationship between school bullying and adolescent depressive tendencies, confirming that it forms a multidimensional defense network against depressive tendencies through emotional strategy regulation and physiological intervention. The proposed four-dimensional strategies-individual cognitive training, family support construction, school curriculum intervention, and societal environmental creation-provide actionable frameworks for adolescent mental health protection. Future research should further explore the dynamic protective mechanisms of self-awareness, strengthen comparative

evaluations of different intervention strategies, and promote the translation of theoretical research into precise, personalized intervention practices to offer stronger psychological safeguards for adolescents facing bullying situations.

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