

## RECOGNISING EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND MOBBING IN ADOLESCENTS: CAUSES AND IMPACTS

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**Abstract.** *Emotional abuse can cause severe effects on person`s emotional development, e.g., sense of worthlessness, wearing away confidence and self-esteem, anxiety, depression, etc. Psycho-emotional wellbeing becomes essential for the adolescent to become successful at school, which can be reached through emotional support, understanding and self-discovery. Emotional abuse quite often is not recognized, because of possible judgement from family, friends, teachers and community members. Silence about emotional and physical abuse can be the result of fears and emotional abuse situations which can seem as normal for the victim. Therefore, the first step to solve mental problems is becoming aware of a problem and reducing stigma about mental health. Survey results highlight the need for parents to improve their knowledge, attitudes and skills about emotional abuse and understanding of how to communicate with their children about possible emotional abuse situations at schools. Survey results also highlight that one of the main reasons why mobbing occurs is students` attitude towards difference of others e.g. different interests, lifestyle, appearance, clothes, way of communication, sexual orientation, etc.). Using theoretical and empirical research (survey) methods, the aim of the article is: to describe forms of emotional abuse, highlighting the link between emotional abuse and physical abuse and the impact of it on the emotional well-being of adolescent at school. The authors of the article have identified the main problems faced by students, teachers and parents in cases of emotional abuse.*

**Keywords:** *emotional abuse, emotional well-being, mobbing, students, teachers, parents.*

## **Introduction**

Mental health is an integral and essential part of health that is closely linked to the other components of health: physical and social well-being. Good mental health is a prerequisite for stable, secure, mutually supportive wellbeing, leading to the fulfilment one's potential and development, coping with everyday stresses, working productively and contributing to the common good (Slimību profilakses un kontroles centrs, 2016, 8). Nowadays society's attention to the issues of mental health has increased as well as the necessity of promoting and maintaining it at different ages. The article focuses on the mental health issues of adolescents as during this period of time, not only the intensive development occurs, but emotional crisis for the individual becomes quite common as well. The adolescents struggle through the search for identity and ideals. They have unconscious desire not to separate from childhood, and at the same time they have a conscious desire to become an adult; they are in the search for life teachers and quite often experience a denial of previous values. Therefore, their psycho-emotional wellbeing becomes essential to be successful at school, which can be reached through emotional support, understanding and self-discovery. Adolescence developmental challenges include: (I) acceptance of oneself; (II) establishing new relationships; (III) developing emotional independence from parents; (IV) building the foundations for economic independence; (V) building the foundations for a profession choice; (VI) acquiring socially accepted patterns of behaviour; (VII) developing values that harmonise with the environment (Ancāne, Ancāns, Miksons, & Remese, 2014, 9). It must be admitted that emotional wellbeing can be threatened by school violence, which can be characterised as "a multifaceted and multi-layered problem". School violence can affect administrators, teachers, students, parents and all the society as well. Unfortunately, nowadays school violence (including mobbing and emotional abuse) is on the rise and has become an integral part of school life (Bozkus, 2022, 77). At the same time "emotional abuse towards children can be committed by parents as well, using power that renders the child vulnerable. Such acts damage immediately or ultimately the behavioral, cognitive and psychological functioning of the child" (Doyle, 1997, 330-342). Emotionally unhealthy, e.g., disrespectful, manipulative, controlling, oppressive, isolating, apathetic, frightening, relationships in the family can cause psychosomatic illnesses. Silence about mental health problems can be the result of these fears (UNICEF, 2021, 53).

Using theoretical and empirical research (data collection and survey) methods (Martinsons, Pipere, & Kamerāde, 2016), the aim of the article is: to describe forms of emotional abuse, highlighting the link between emotional abuse and physical abuse and the impact of it on the emotional well-being of adolescent at school. The authors of the article have identified the main problems faced by students, teachers and parents in cases of emotional abuse.

### **Theoretical aspects of emotional abuse and mobbing**

The Article 19 of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that “children have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, physically or mentally. Governments should ensure that children are properly cared for and protect them from violence, abuse and neglect by their parents, or anyone else who looks after them” (United Nations, 1989). Jantz and McMurray states “all of us need relationships with people who love us; who build us up and who support us as we learn and grow” (Jantz & McMurray, 2013, 11). Mathews (2016) emphasizes that it is also important to understand what is not emotionally abusive, e.g. ending friendship, expressing opposing opinion with a respect towards the different opinion, raising voice to “higher and louder octaves in order to express emotions and once the emotion has expressed, it probably would be a good idea to sit down and talk it out to find a solution to the problem” (Mathews, 2016). Elliot-Wright (2016) highlights that “emotional abuse occurs when one person persistently causes another to experience severe fear and distress. And the aim of abuser is always the same to dominate and control the victim”. She describes emotionally abusive behaviour as controlling, wearing away confidence and self-esteem and verbally abusive. Emotional abuse has different forms of expression, e.g., telling a person that he has no choice to any decision; destructive criticism; verbal abuse, including shouting, mocking, accusing, name calling, threatening; disrespect, including not listening or responding, silent treatment, interrupting; breaking trust, including lying, withholding information, breaking agreements; isolation; harassment; denial: being only publicly gentle and patient (Elliot-Wright, 2016, 1-2), silencing or making fun of a person and imposing inappropriate expectations and serious bullying (including cyber bullying) (National Institute for Health and care excellence, 2017). Garbarino and Garbarino (1994) describes emotional abuse as maltreatment, which “involves words, actions, and indifference separately or in different combinations. (..) Abusers constantly reject, ignore, belittle, dominate, and criticize the victims” (Garbarino & Garbarino, 1994). Jantz & McMurray (2013) states that emotional abuse almost always accompanies physical abuse and it can be present on its own as well. In most of the cases when people suspect they were abused, they were (Jantz & McMurray, 2013, 11-16). Sometimes oppressor may feel abused being not successful in gaining domination, then abuser can accuse a person who does not obey commands (Evans, 2010, 227).

Mobbing was first defined by Lorenz (1963) as harmfully targeting a single group member. Leymann (1990) defines mobbing as the combination of hostile actions, which repeat systematically and intentionally and are directed to the victim. Leymann (1990) and Cornoiu & Gyorgy (2013) highlight the repetitive character of mobbing (Cornoiu & Gyorgy, 2013). Mobbing can include both:

verbal and physical aggression, as well as bullying, unethical communication, etc. Quite common results of mobbing are victim's psychic, psychosomatic and social misery (Leymann, 1990). One of the negative effects of mobbing at school is a low performance (Josipovic-Jelic, Stoini, & Celic-Bunikie, 2005), as well as absenteeism and burnout, which quite often is mental exhaustion and tension caused by high workload (Maslach, 2003). Garbarino & Garbarino (1994) points out that emotional abuse is difficult to be spotted, while Jantz & McMurray (2013) emphasizes that emotional abuse "has a bizarre sense of normalcy" (Jantz & McMurray, 2013, 13). Evans (2010) argues: "some people recognize that they have been emotionally abused only when they get away from abusers" and most often "abusers are not motivated to change" (Evans, 2010, 24).

Centre for Disease Prevention and Control of Latvia (2016) in the research paper "*Mental health in Latvia in 2016*" points out that mental health cannot be achieved in a society where there is a stigma against mental illness, which include myths, prejudices, fear of seeking help and mental health services. These factors often discourage people from seeking help to receive modern and effective treatment before the illness has put a significant impact on a person's ability to function socially (Slimību profilakses un kontroles centrs, 2016, 8). These stigmas about mental health in the society might block children and young people from finding treatment and limit "their opportunities to grow, learn and thrive" (UNICEF, 2021, 51).

Emotional abuse is linked to a range of negative psychosocial outcomes (Freyd & Goldsmith, 2005, 98). Tough highlights that the stress and trauma affect a child's brain development (Tough, 2012). Lipinski (2001) argues that the emotional abuse coping mechanisms can be classified as "active" or "passive": "active" coping strategies involving attempts to change the stressful environment, whereas "passive" coping strategies involve changing the victim's own emotional response to the stress (Lipinski, 2001). Emotional abuse can cause severe effects on person's emotional development, e.g., sense of worthlessness and lack of opportunities to express own views (National Institute for Health and care excellence, 2017). Depression is one of the effects of emotional abuse as well and is one of the major causes of suicide. Jantz & Murray emphasize that depression for a child can be the result of authoritative and narcissistic parenting style as well. In their book "*Hope and Healing from Emotional Abuse*" a life of David, who had to achieve his father's dream- to become a very successful football player, has described. And "there was always another level to reach for David, more he still had to do" (Jantz & McMurray, 2013, 11). David chose to commit a suicide, thus, he "had never been beaten or molested, but David died of abuse – emotional abuse" (Jantz & McMurray, 2013, 11). This case reveals a situation when real interests and needs of a child became "invisible". Emotional abuse has been described in the literature as well, e.g., English novelist Jane Austen (1775-1817) in her novel "*Mansfield Park*" describes maltreatment towards Fanny Price. Jane

Austen was aware of things related to emotional abuse “long before researchers started studying them. Mansfield Park is about the stress of a disadvantaged childhood and the hope of recovery through resilience” (Tough, 2012, 122). Evans (2010) analyses the feelings of a victim of emotional abuse, which are: (I) feeling temporarily thrown off balance; (II) feeling lost; (III) feeling disconnected, confused, disoriented; (IV) feeling off balance; (V) feeling generally “bugged” by the simple presence of a person; (VI) feeling of emptiness; (VII) feeling a strong wish to get away, sometimes “unable to move, as if frozen” (Evans, 2010, 24).

UNICEF (2021) report “*On my mind the state of the world’s children 2021: Promoting, protecting and caring for children’s mental health*” focuses on top causes of death among adolescents aged 15 – 19. It is dreadful that suicide is the first cause of death in Eastern Europe while in the Western Europe it is the second most prevalent cause of death after road injuries. Interpersonal violence, which can also be the result of bullying, is the third most prevalent cause in the Western Europe (UNICEF, 2021). World Health Organization focuses on the necessity to find solutions for the problem of mental health as “suicide mortality rates are highest in the European Region (14.1 per 100000 of population) (World Health Organization, 2017, 32).

### **Empirical research: The impact of Emotional and physical abuse on the physical and social well-being**

In order to achieve the goal of the article: to analyse the impact of emotional and physical abuse on the emotional well-being of adolescent at school, the survey was carried out. The survey was organized in one general educational institution in October – November 2022 using the *Google Survey* platform. The survey was chosen as the empirical research method as “surveys gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2006, 169). The survey was designed in order to capture data from multiple choice, closed questions and open-ended questions. Convenience sample was chosen as sampling strategy for all the target population (there are 431 students from grades 5-12 in the school where research had been carried out). All 431 students were asked to complete the survey. However, only 298 students did it. It must also be admitted that the topic of emotional abuse might be unpleasant for particular students and this could be the reason for some students not to get involved in the survey. There were also parents` (N=125) and teachers` (N=37) surveys carried out.

#### **The results of parents` survey (N=125)**

Answering the question: *Do you know what mobbing is?*, the vast majority of the respondents (84%) answered positively. Less respondents (76%) could

recognize the manifestations of mobbing in their child and even less respondents (61.6%) would find out if their child became abuser. Less than a half of the respondents have received information about mobbing from school authorities. Only half of the respondents (50,4%) would know about the best support to their child in the case of mobbing, but even less parents (44,8%) would know how to react if their child became abuser. Results highlight the necessity for parents to talk about the issues of mobbing with their children as only 42,4% of respondents have talked to their children about mobbing, its consequences and overcoming it during the last 12 months, but 33,6% of parents do talk with their children only when they see a necessity. The results also show that more than 1/3 of the respondents admit that their child has been an eyewitness of a mobbing situation or been involved as a victim or abuser in mobbing. Parents were asked to remember their school life as well and almost a half of the respondents (46,4%) admitted that had experienced (as an eyewitness of a mobbing situation or been involved as a victim or abuser) mobbing situation at school when they were students. They were also asked to assess their understanding of solving mobbing situations amongst adults and more than a half of them admitted that they do not know how to do it.

### **The results of teachers' survey (N=37)**

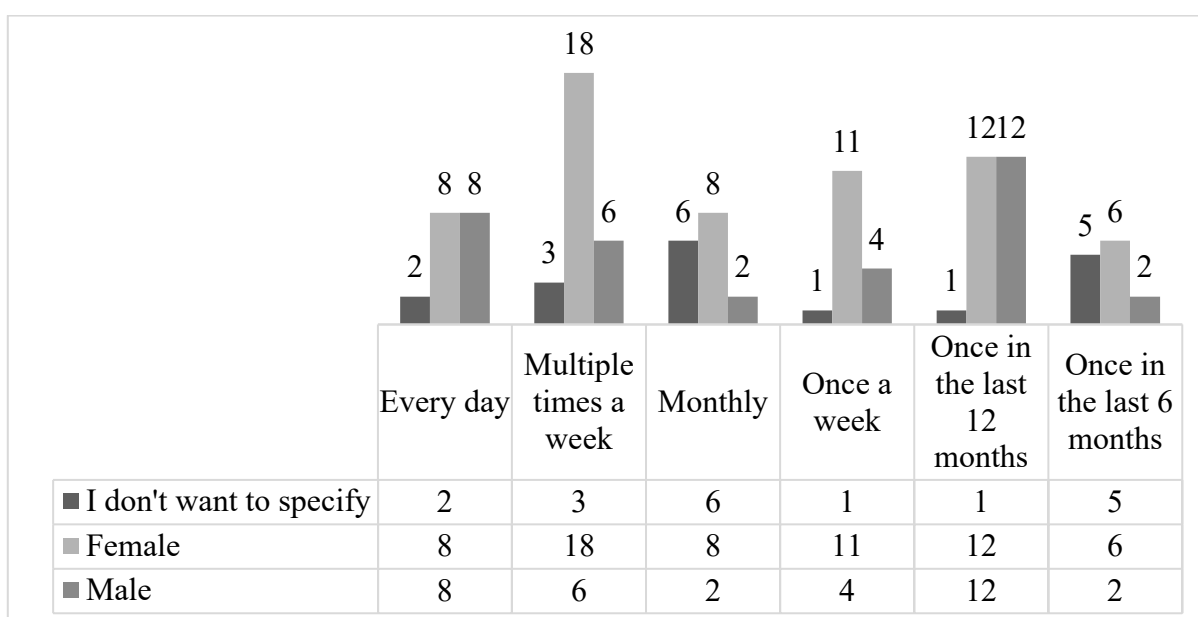
The analysis of teachers' survey results (N=37) show that more teachers in comparison with parents answered positively (91.9%) to the question: *Do you know what mobbing is?* and more than a half of them (62,2%) have improved their understanding in study courses about mobbing during the last 12 months. All the respondents agreed that they can recognise mobbing situations. Even though almost all the respondents (97,3%) are certain about their abilities to solve mobbing problems, only 32,4% of them admitted that they would have the necessary skills and abilities to solve severe mobbing problems.

Results also show that teachers speak with students about mobbing problems more often (96,7% of teachers have spoken with their students about mobbing situations during the last 12 month) than their parents. At most of the respondents (64,9%) have observed mobbing situations among their students during the last 12 months and 82,8% of the respondents have been actively involved in the solving process of particular mobbing situation. Teachers were asked to remember their school experience and more than a half of the respondents (64,9%) have experienced (as an eyewitness of a mobbing situation or been involved as a victim or abuser). They were also asked to assess their understanding of solving mobbing situations amongst adults and more than a half (56,1%) of them admitted that they do not know how to do it. It can be concluded that in comparison with parents' answers, more teachers have experienced mobbing situations when they were students and their self-assessment of mobbing solving skills is higher as well. The

reason for the difference in their answers can be the fact that teachers are more informed and knowledgeable than parents about mobbing and its expressions.

### The results of students' survey (N=298)

The analysis of 12-19-year-old students' survey results show that most of them (77,2%) know about mobbing and half of them (51,4%) have had a lesson or lessons about mobbing in the last 12 months, while 15,1% of them would like to know more about mobbing. Empirical research results (Fig. 1) point to a worrying trend: out of 125 respondents, 115 students (92%) are hurt – respondents note in their answers that mostly people (88%) are hurt by their own peers.



*Figure 1 Students' self-assessment: "How often did you get hurt?" (made by authors)*

The questionnaire results show that most often respondents experience bullying from their classmates (65,5%); 26,7% from other students at school; 24,1% from students of other schools; 15,5% from teachers; 23% from parents and 25% from other adults. 53,1% of the respondents have experienced mobbing quite often: 15,7% have experienced mobbing every day; 23, 5% several times a week and 13,9% once a week.

Only 35, 9% of the respondents in the last 12 months have been talking to their parents about mobbing they have experienced at school. The vast majority of the respondents have experienced (as an eyewitness of a mobbing situation or been involved as a victim or abuser) a mobbing situation. 58 respondents admitted that they have become a victim in mobbing situation, 109 respondents have become an eyewitness and 26 respondents became abusers. Students were also asked to characterise particular mobbing/emotional abuse situation they have

experienced at school: 76 respondents have experienced humiliation and belittling, 38 have experienced physical abuse (e.g., they have been tugged by the hair, punched, kicked), 50 respondents have experienced silent treatment and ignoring and 52 respondents have experienced cyber bullying. Respondents mentioned different reasons why mobbing occurs and one of the main reasons is a difference in many aspects, e.g., interest, lifestyle, appearance, clothes, way of communication, sexual orientation, etc. Also respondents admitted that they have been bullied because of better/worse grades, family incomes, bigger or smaller size of family and other reasons. The most shocking for the authors of the publication was the finding that less than a half of respondents (32,5%) have been looking for a help after the situation of emotional or physical abuse. Respondents admitted that after experiencing emotional or physical abuse they were asking help to their parents (54,9%); friends (64,9%); teacher (21,6%); psychologists (2,7%); helpline (8,1%). While those respondents who were not looking for a help as reason for this admitted: shame (26%); readiness to solve own problems himself/herself (52,1%) and the belief that the violence did not have consequences (38.3%). It must be admitted that the vast majority of the respondents (94,1%) who were an eyewitnesses of emotional abuse felt sad or very sad for what was happening in this situation and 14,5% felt guilty for the situation. While students who have been abusive admitted that while being emotionally or physically abusive they felt guilty (37,5%); angry (31,8%); sad (18,2%); powerful (14,8%); ignorant (20,5%); jealous (8%); excited (5,7%). As the reasons for being abusive they mentioned the willingness to get attention (25,9%); not accepting the difference in others – different interests, clothes, appearance, behaviour, sexual orientation, etc., (74,4%).

## **Conclusions**

1. Mobbing can include both: verbal and physical aggression, as well as bullying, unethical communication, etc. While emotional abuse almost always accompanies physical abuse and it can be present on its own as well. Emotional abuse can have different forms of expression, e.g. humiliation; destructive criticism; verbal abuse, threatening; disrespect, silent treatment, breaking trust, isolation; harassment, denial, bullying and cyber bullying. Emotional abuse can cause severe effects on person`s emotional development, e.g., sense of worthlessness, lack of opportunities to express own views, wearing away confidence and self-esteem, anxiety, depression, etc. The adolescents, struggling through the search for identity and ideals, often experience a denial of previous values. Psycho-emotional wellbeing becomes essential for the adolescent to become successful at school, which can be reached through emotional support, understanding and self-discovery. Emotional abuse quite often is not recognized by adults, because teenagers can be afraid of possible



judgement from family, friends, teachers and community members if they disclosed their mental health problems. Silence about emotional abuse can be the result of these fears and sometimes these situations can seem as normal for the victim and can be spotted only when victim gets away from abusers. Therefore, first step to solve mental problems is becoming aware of a problem and reducing stigma about mental health.

2. Schools and education policy makers should put emphases on informing and educating parents about mobbing, including manifestations of mobbing in person`s behaviour (both: victim`s and abuser`s); actions in the case of mobbing (both: if their child is suffering from mobbing or if the child has become an abuser). There is a need not only for *parents* to improve their knowledge, attitudes and skills about mobbing, especially solving mobbing situations, but also to improve their understanding *of* how to communicate with their children about emotional abuse situations at schools.
3. Teachers` survey highlighted that even though almost all the respondents are certain about their abilities to solve mobbing problems, only 1/3 of them admitted that they would have the necessary skills and abilities severe mobbing problems.
4. Students` survey results show that most often respondents experience bullying from their classmates, from other students at school, from students of other schools, from teachers, from parents and from other adults. Respondents mentioned different reasons why mobbing occurs and one of the main reasons is difference in many aspects, e.g. interest, lifestyle, appearance, clothes, way of communication, sexual orientation, etc. Also respondents admit that they have been bullied because of better/worse grades, family incomes, bigger or smaller size of family and other reasons. The most shocking for the authors of the publications was the finding that less than a half of respondents have been looking for help after the situation of emotional or physical abuse.
5. Assistance in cases of mobbing and violence must be dealt with immediately. By withholding it, further development of the conflict is reinforced. It cannot be solved, involvement of adults is imperative, for successful and constructive resolution and prevention of the situation. Teachers are advised to pay heightened attention to the psychoemotional environment in the classroom, to raise issues about diversity among the public, about acceptance and mutual respect, as well as empathy. It is recommended to raise the issue of the seriousness of mobbing and the necessary support for student among parents, to maintain contact with the educational institution.

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