

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Physical punishment at home and grade retention related to bullying

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Abstract

Background: Several situations can affect the development and health of school children and adolescents. Bullying, characterized by a set of aggressive, intentional and repetitive behaviors, marked by the imbalance of power between victims and bullies, is one of the most serious problems in this sense, as it occurs in a context in which security and sociability are assumed. Therefore, this study was developed to expand the understanding about this phenomenon, contemplating variables ignored in many studies (family interactions, modes of discipline and school failure).

Objective: To analyze the participation of students in bullying situations and their experiences of vulnerability “to be beaten at home” and “grade retention”.

Methods: the study consisted of 409 students from the 3rd to the 7th grades of Brazilian Elementary Education of two public schools. The data were collected through a questionnaire instrument with structured questions with the purpose of describing the possible roles of participation in bullying and characterizing the students regarding the context of social vulnerability in which they were. Vulnerability indicators were considered: per capita income, schooling of the adult population, housing conditions and crime / violence indices. Two schools were the research scenario. Data were analyzed using inferential statistics using the Chi-square test to verify the association between the variables, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis for comparison between groups.

Results: to be beaten at home was associated with the students' involvement in bullying situations as victims, bullies and bully-victims. These students also differed in relation to years of grade retention and frequency of physical punishment when compared to students not involved in bullying situations. Students classified as bully-victims demonstrated greater vulnerability in relation to the variables investigated. There were no significant differences in the comparison between participants' sex and involvement in bullying situations.

Conclusion: It was observed that physical punishment used as a home discipline strategy and school failure are factors that increase students' vulnerability to bullying or victimization. The data indicate that it is necessary to include families in anti-bullying intervention actions. At the same time, it must be considered that this inclusion should not be restricted to the field of education or school. It is necessary to think in an intersectoral way, especially including the family health teams that have moments with the families and that can be used to think about discipline techniques and how children, children and adolescents are disciplined at home.

Keywords: social vulnerability, violence, bullying.

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Authors summary

Why was this study done?

Several situations can affect the development and health of school-age children and adolescents. Bullying is one of the most serious problems, as it occurs in a context in which security and sociability are assumed. Therefore, this study was developed to broaden the understanding of this phenomenon, including variables ignored in many studies (family interactions, modes of discipline and school failure).

What did the researchers do and find?

This research was developed with data collected through questionnaires. Students answered questionnaires with previous structured questions. The main result of the study refers to the evidence that severe discipline methods increase the chance of students becoming bullies, victims or bully-victims in the school context.

What do these findings mean?

The findings indicate that it is necessary to include families in anti-bullying intervention actions. At the same time, it must be considered that this inclusion should not be restricted to the field of education or school. It is necessary to think in an intersectoral way, especially including family health teams that have moments with families and that can be used to think about discipline techniques and the way children and adolescents are disciplined at home.

INTRODUCTION

School bullying is considered a set of aggressive, intentional and repetitive behaviors, marked by power imbalance between victims and bullies¹. The phenomenon, in general, has no evident motivation and causes pain, anguish and suffering to the victims, reflecting negatively on the emotional and psychological state of those involved². This type of violence does not have a wide visibility in the school scene, as it can be manifested in a secret or unnoticed way (insults, nicknames, gossip or isolation, for example), not only in its explicit or direct forms (such as physical aggression, for example) that can be easily identified³. This aspect makes the victim not to receive assistance or seek support to deal with the situation, since the relationship with the aggressive pairs is marked by a symbolic power imbalance.

According to the specialized literature, bullying occurs mainly in the initial school years, being more prevalent among younger students who are significantly more involved in victimization and double involvement (bully-victims) behaviors⁴. The moments of school transition from one pedagogical cycle to another are also considered as the greatest possibility for the phenomenon to occur². On the other hand, boys are more involved in school bullying behaviors when compared to girls⁵.

In Brazil, the prevalence rates of bullying are high. According to the three editions of the National Survey of School Health (PeNSE) issued in 2009, 2012 and 2015 and developed with more than 100,000 students in the 9th grade from all over country, the victimization rate is 7% and the bullying practice is 20%, on average⁶. In other national studies, in the capillarity of regions and capitals, high and variable prevalence rates were identified⁷, which is justified by the social and cultural issues of each region. These data are corroborated by international studies that analyze aspects related to the occurrence rates of the phenomenon⁸.

Thus, one can perceive that involvement in this type of violence can be differentiated according to the experiences, social roles and interpersonal relationship practices shaped by the subjects' culture⁹. In this sense, as in all social and group phenomena, bullying is a complex problem, which requires more extensive and in-

depth investigations regarding not only variables related to the school context, but also family, social, community and cultural variables. The study related to the different nuances that it can present in the multiple sociocultural realities are of fundamental importance for its prevention and coping¹⁰.

In Brazil, specifically, several metropolitan cities have children and adolescents who live in unfavorable conditions and social contexts. High levels of social inequality and access to lower-quality public services place this population in a situation of social and programmatic vulnerability. This vulnerability is complex, multifaceted and surpasses the matters on health, social life, educational contexts, symbolic organizations, ethnic issues, labor camps, as well as those on public policies in general, with regard to living conditions and social support, which are weakened¹. When in line with difficult socioeconomic conditions, it allows great tension among young people, which hampers social integration processes, fomenting an increase in violence, which can have repercussions on relationships between pairs in schools.

In this debate, it is important to consider that physical punishment by parents, guardians or caregivers to discipline children and adolescents increases the vulnerability of students to victimization or practice of bullying at school¹¹. The same can be understood about the situations of school failure that are measured, most of all, by experiences of retention in a given school year¹². These two variables (physical punishment and grade retention) can be considered as situations of social vulnerability, because they reflect the social processes related to tolerance to violence and to pedagogical models based only on the content logic and not on the particular performance of each student.

Therefore, this study was designed considering that the involvement in bullying situations has a tendency to grow when the vulnerability factors that affect children and adolescents beyond the school walls is increased¹. The aim of this study was to analyze the participation of students in bullying situations and their experiences of vulnerability "to be beaten at home" and "grade retention".

METHODS

Study Design

This is an observational and cross-sectional study with intentional sampling (strata/schools), whose objective is to obtain reliable data that at the end of the research will allow to draw reliable and robust conclusions, as well as generate new hypotheses. This design has the advantage of allowing the researcher to observe directly the phenomena to be investigated, to perform the data collection in a short period of time, without the need of participants' follow-up, producing the results faster, being useful to study prevalences¹³.

Study Location and Period

This study was held in the metropolitan area of Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, between February and December 2012. The selection of the participating schools was intentional and followed the indications of the Education Department of Florianópolis for municipalities inserted in regions of greater social vulnerability. The vulnerability indicators considered were: per capita income, educational level of the adult population, housing conditions and crime/violence indexes. The research scenario consisted of two schools.

Study Population and Eligibility Criteria

After the selection of schools, all students in from the 3rd to the 7th grades of the Brazilian Elementary School were invited to participate in the study. The scientific literature justified the choice for these school years due to the higher occurrence rate of bullying in initial school years. In addition, in these periods the students have the ability to respond to the instrument of data collection. The only exclusion criterion adopted in the recruitment of the participants was: to present some intellectual deficiency that prevented the understanding and the management of the self-applied instrument. From the number of students enrolled in schools and a sample calculation that assumed an alpha of 0.5 and a power of 50%, a minimum of 316 participants was expected. The final sample size was 409 students, although in some tables the number of participants is lower because some did not answer certain questions, considered "missing" in the analysis.

Participants were aged between 8 and 16 years, with a mean of 11.1 years for boys (n=207) and 10.9 years for girls (n=202). Participants' school mobility was shown to be equivalent for both sexes, with a mean frequency of 2.5 schools for boys and 2.4 schools for girls. The changes of residence also presented similarities with a mean of 1.8 changes for both sexes. Regarding skin color, boys declared themselves Caucasian (68.6%), Brown (15.9%), Black (9.7%) and pardos (Dark Brown) (5.8%); whereas girls declared themselves Caucasian (73.3%), Brown (15.8%), Black (8.9%) and pardos (Dark Brown) (2.0%).

Data Collection

First, the Education Department of the Municipality of Florianópolis was contacted to select the schools inserted in contexts of social vulnerability. After the schools were selected, the principals were invited to

join the survey. The participants were duly informed about the research and explained their consent to participate in the research through the Term of Assent (TA), which was elaborated in clear and accessible language for minors. Afterwards, parents/guardians/caregivers and students received information about the objectives and methods of the study. Finally, after collecting the Informed Consent Forms signed by parents, guardians or caregivers, the students voluntarily and collectively responded to the self-report instrument in data collection¹⁴. The questionnaire application was conducted by two trained researchers and lasted, on average, 40 minutes.

An instrument was used to describe the possible roles of participation in bullying and to characterize the students regarding their context of social vulnerability. This instrument was based on questions from the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire¹⁵. Regarding the bullying, students were asked how many times, in the last three months of school, they had been a bullying victim or bully. Thus, the participants were classified into 4 groups: "non-participant", "victim", "bully" and "bully-victim". The variables related to vulnerability were: experience of being beaten at home and grade retention (frequencies of this episode). The following questions were asked: Have you ever been beaten at home?, with a dichotomous choice of "yes" or "no"; How often does this happen?, with five options in Likert system (1=never, 2=little, 3=sometimes, 4=frequently, 5=always); Have you ever been held back in school?, with a dichotomous choice of "yes" or "no"; and How many years?, with open-ended answer.

Data Analysis

Initially, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test was used to verify whether students met the parametric assumptions. As data distribution was not normal, the descriptive and inferential statistical analyses used Chi-square tests to verify the association between the variables; Mann–Whitney U and Kruskal–Wallis tests were used for comparison between groups.

The research data were tabulated and analyzed in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS for Windows) version 20.0, and a 95% confidence interval was adopted (p<0.05).

Ethical and Legal Aspects of the Research

Regarding ethical issues, the research was approved by a Research Ethics Committee with Human Subjects of a public university in the State of Santa Catarina (Opinion 5439/2011).

RESULTS

The results indicated that girls were, more often, victims (19.5%) and bully-victims (5.6%) when compared to boys (14.6% and 4.1%, respectively). However, boys had a higher percentage (10.6%) than girls (5.6%) regarding the practice of bullying. However, although there are differences in the percentages, there was no association between the sexes and the roles in bullying in terms of victim, bully or bully-victim, indicating a homogeneity of these behaviors between boys and girls (Table 1).

Table 1: Association between participation roles in school bullying and the sex of participants.

Roles in bullying	Boys		Girls		X ²	p
	n	%	n	%		
Non-participant	140	70.7	135	69.2	4.876	0.181
Victim	29	14.6	38	19.5		
Bully	21	10.6	11	5.6		
Bully-victim	8	4.1	11	5.6		
Total	198	100%	195	100%		

* n: number of participants; % frequency; x²: Chi-square; p: level of significance ≤0.05.

Approximately 63.0% of both boys and girls answered that they had already been beaten at home, but most answered that this was rare at the time of data

collection. On the other hand, 48.5% of the boys and 40.0% of the girls reported having experienced grade retention. These data can be viewed in Table 2.

Table 2: Information about being beaten at home and grade retention experiences.

Variables	Boys		Girls	
	n	%	n	%
Beaten at home				
No	77	37.4	75	37.1
Yes	129	62.6	127	62.9
Frequency who been beaten at home				
Never	79	38.5	75	37.1
Little	92	44.9	105	52.0
Sometimes	29	14.1	13	6.4
Often	4	2.0	2	1.0
Ever	1	0.5	7	3.5
Grade retention				
No	102	51.5	117	60.0
Yes	96	48.5	78	40.0
Years of grade retention	X	SD	X	SD
	1.70	0.91	1.69	0.81

* n: number of participants; % frequency; X: mean; SD: standard deviation.

The variables of the study were crossed and the result was that the variable “to be beaten at home” was significantly associated among all groups of students. Students who had no part in bullying situations were

those that were less beaten at home (57.8%), followed by the victims (67.2%), the bullies (71.9%) and, the bully-victims (94.7%), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Association between the “beaten at home” variable and the roles of participation in school bullying.

Beaten at home	Non-participant		Victim		Bully		Bully-victim		χ ²	p
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%		
No	116	42.2	22	32.8	9	28.1	1	5.3	12.79	0.005
Yes	159	57.8	45	67.2	23	71.9	18	94.7		
Total	275	100	67	100	32	100	19	100		

*n: number of participants; % frequency; x²: Chi-square; p: level of significance ≤ 0.05.

Moreover, the roles of participation in bullying differed significantly in relation to age, years of school retention and frequency that students were beaten at home. Results showed that the victims were significantly younger than the bully-victims. Finally, those who took no

part in bullying were the ones that failed the least and that were not beaten or were beaten less frequently at home. The bully-victims were the ones who experienced these situations the most. These data are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Differences between roles in bullying in relation to the ordinal variables of the study.

Variable	Non- participant		Victim		Bully		Bully-victim		K	p
	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD		
Years of grade retention	1.64a	0.85	1.70	0.95	1.53	0.72	2.36b	0.81	8.68	0.034
Frequency who been beaten at home	1.72a	0.77	1.91	0.87	1.91	0.82	2.58b	1.12	16.92	0.001

* X: Average; SD: Standard deviation; K: Kruskal Wallis test; p: level of significance ≤ 0.05 .

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze the participation of students in bullying situations and the experiences of vulnerability “to be beaten at home” and “grade retention”, in schools in the metropolitan area of Florianópolis. A prevalence of approximately 30.0% of the participants involved in certain school bullying situation was identified, as well as a high prevalence of reports of being beaten at home at least once and grade retention. In addition, being beaten at home was associated with roles of participation in bullying, especially in relation to bully-victim. Similarly, after comparing the groups, the result was that the bully-victims were the ones that presented the majority vulnerability factors regarding the experiences of physical punishment and retention.

It is noted that in relation to the participants’ involvement in situations of school bullying, a number of those involved higher than the data found in the national scenario was identified, as documented by the National Survey of School Health⁶. The prevalence found was still higher than those found in studies in the USA, England, Japan, Ireland, Australia and Canada, which stood between 15.0% and 20.0%¹⁶.

One of the factors that may have contributed to this higher prevalence of participation in bullying in relation to the aforementioned studies is the trivialization that violence has in communities marked by social vulnerability. This scenario causes people involved in this phenomenon to have a distorted perception of interpersonal violence, describing violent behaviors as acceptable, even when they are intense and frequent, considering violent acts only those that cause serious physical harm to others¹⁷.

Thus, this study emphasizes that school bullying must not be considered a typical characteristic of children and adolescent’s development, but rather a risk factor for school dropout and for adoption of violent behaviors and delinquency at other moments in the life cycle². In developing countries, according to the scientific literature, this reality seems to be aggravated, not only with regard to the levels and rates of occurrence of the bullying phenomenon, but also because of the low incorporation of the theme into public policies, cross-sectional curricular practices and even into the field of science¹⁸. In Brazil, for example, since 2015¹⁹ the law that recommends confronting the issue has been sanctioned, but still, no anti-bullying initiatives with real impact on the reality of schools have been issued.

In another perspective, when the data are compared with other regional or local studies, a scenario similar to that found by this research is perceived. For example, in a survey held by Lopes Neto and Saavedra²⁰, the authors found that 40.5% of a sample of 5,500 students were involved in bullying situations, of which 16.9% were victims, 12.7% bullies and 10.9% bully-victims. Regarding the victims, the number found is equivalent to the findings in the study developed by ABRAPIA in Rio de Janeiro²⁰. However, it is lower than the findings of Carvalhosa *et al.*²¹, in which 24.1% of the participants were classified as victims and higher than those of Freire, Simão and Ferreira²² in which only 4.5% of the students were in this condition.

With regard to the bullies, this study presented data with values higher than those of Freire *et al.*²², who reported only 2.5% of the participants playing such role, but lower to those of Carvalhosa *et al.*²¹ and Lopes Neto and Saavedra²⁰, who found 10.2% and 12.7%, respectively. When analyzing the cases of double involvement, the number was considerably lower than that found in the ABRAPIA studies²⁰, which revealed 10.9% of the participants in this situation.

When separated by sex, the prevalence found in relation to the victims and the bullies also presented similarities and divergences in relation to other published studies. In relation to the victims, 14.5% of the boys and 19.5% of the girls assumed this role in the present study, whereas in the study by Carvalhosa *et al.*²¹, a higher number was found for the victimized boys (23.6%) and the girls had values equal to the present study. Regarding the number of bullies, a value of 10.6% was found for boys and 5.6% for girls. This was lower than the study by Carvalhosa *et al.*²¹ for both sexes, in which 11.2% of the boys and 9.2% of the girls reported being bullies.

Still in relation to the roles in bullying, it was verified that although some differences in the frequencies of participation in bullying between boys and girls were found, there was no association between the variables “participation roles in bullying” and “sex”, indicating a homogeneity between participants, regardless of the sex. However, the greater numerical participation of boys corroborates studies that have been pointing boys as the most involved in bullying⁵. This can be explained by the social and cultural characteristics that tend to associate the masculine with the greater expression of aggressive behavior or violence²³.

In this context, the analyzed variables, “to be beaten at home” and “grade retention”, presented high prevalence values. When inferences were made about these variables, it was confirmed that the individuals who took no part in bullying were those who presented the least inferences, whereas the bully-victims were those who presented them the most. Thus, bullying, as a phenomenon composed of multiple dimensions, must be evaluated in the community internal and external to the school context, aiming to understand the family structures as well.

Moreover, the characteristics found in this study point to a phenomenon called domestic violence that, according to the Ministry of Health and the Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, is defined as aggressive and violent ways of the family to relate, solve conflicts or educate, besides the lack of basic care with the children and their exposure to violent situations at home, at school, in the community or on the street. The findings of the present study also corroborate that of Gabatz, Neves, Beuter and Padoin²⁴, who estimated that 600 thousand children and adolescents are victims of several forms of domestic and/or intrafamily violence. These children and adolescents have the tendency of becoming more prone to developmental impairment, more aggressive or a victim of abuse at school, repeating and externalizing the aggressiveness experienced in the family²⁵.

This process can be explained by the Social Learning Theory. According to this theory, the observation or experience of conflicting/violent situations in the family promotes learning by imitation and is constituted as models of cognitive and behavioral patterns that are reproduced in other environments²⁶. In such cases, violence is considered a suitable way to solve conflicts and, for example, up to 70% of bullies are likely to commit a criminal act in adulthood, due to behavioral problems arising from the reproduction and repetition of violent behaviors that have been internalized²⁵. This logic reinforces the idea spread by several studies that consider violent homes as risk factors for the development of inappropriate behaviors such as bullying²⁷.

Considering the high index of grade retention, the literature indicates a strong relationship between bullying and school failure, in which both situations can be the cause or the consequence. Students with lower academic performance and high grade retention rates present greater chances of school disassociation, withdrawal and manifestation of behavioral problems, which are mainly due to frustration regarding the capacity for learning, and can contribute strongly to the occurrence of bullying in school¹.

In contrast, a good performance or the school success can cause a protective effect, decreasing the emergence of psychosocial and behavioral problems, because it adds positive elements to the educational experience, such as the interest for the contents

learned or for the relationship with the pairs. On the other hand, considering strictly the teaching-learning process, the students involved in bullying can present grade retention, school failure or withdrawal, as well as episodes of indiscipline²⁸.

Finally, despite acknowledging that this study contributes to broadening the debate about school bullying and some contextual variables related to it, its results must be interpreted in light of its main limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional design prevents the conduction of inferences about the direction of the relationships identified, not allowing the establishment of causality. New studies may adopt a longitudinal design, thus enabling the monitoring of changes occurring over time, identifying the effects exerted by different variables in bullying situations. Another limitation refers to the evaluation of the situation of social vulnerability of the participants that was not conducted directly. Likewise, data from other groups of students without social vulnerability were not collected, which limits the interpretation of the results in comparative terms. Other studies may include groups for comparison between different social realities and start from the direct establishment of the students' profile of social vulnerability.

■ CONCLUSION

It is emphasized that, when aiming to analyze the students' participation in bullying situations and their vulnerability experiences “to be beaten at home” and “grade retention”, this study revealed that studies without involvement in situations of violence at school reported less experiences of physical punishment and grade retention. Such result inversely allows the inference that adequate parental discipline practices and school success are protective factors in relation to bullying. The situation of bully-victims was emphasized in this scenario, demanding higher attention of this group by other studies and strategies of antibullying intervention. At the same time, other variables related to sex and that impact on the bullying dynamics must be explored by other studies because the data presented are inconclusive.

These results have implications on the fields of health and education. As there was a high prevalence rate of bullying, intervention programs should be intersectoral, focused on improving students' academic performance, as well as developing feelings of empathy and solidarity, for example, which may decrease the occurrence of the phenomenon. Health teams, especially in primary health care, can assist families in strengthening their bonds and adopting more positive or dialogic discipline practices. Intervention programs should also aim at strengthening the relationships between pairs to promote a social support system in schools. This can be done by education professionals and health teams that perform actions related to the School Health Program (PSE – Programa Saúde na Escola).

Author Contributions

Marcela Almeida Zequinão: Study design, data tabulation, statistical analysis, preparation and writing of the manuscript.

Wanderlei Abadio de Oliveira: Study design and writing of the manuscript.

Pâmella de Medeiros: Data collection, data tabulation and writing of the manuscript.

Paula Cidade Cordeiro: Data collection, data tabulation and preparation of the manuscript.

Beatriz Pereira: Orientation of the project and outline.

Fernando Luiz Cardoso: Orientation of project, supervision and revision of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Resumo

Introdução: Várias situações podem afetar o desenvolvimento e a saúde de crianças e adolescentes em idade escolar. O bullying, que se caracteriza por um conjunto de comportamentos agressivos, intencionais e repetitivos, marcado pelo desequilíbrio de poder entre vítimas e agressores, é uma das mais graves problemáticas nesse sentido, pois ocorre em um contexto em que se pressupõe segurança e o desenvolvimento da sociabilidade. Por isso esse estudo foi desenvolvido, para ampliar a compreensão sobre esse fenômeno, contemplando variáveis ignoradas em muitos estudos (interações familiares, modos de disciplina e fracasso escolar).

Objetivo: Analisar a participação de estudantes em situações de bullying e suas experiências de vulnerabilidade “apanhar em casa” e “reprovação escolar”.

Método: Participaram do estudo 409 estudantes, entre 8 e 16 anos, do 3º ao 7º ano do Ensino Fundamental de duas escolas públicas. Os dados foram coletados por meio de um questionário com perguntas estruturadas com finalidade de descrever os possíveis papéis de participação no bullying e caracterizar os estudantes quanto ao contexto de vulnerabilidade social em que se encontravam. Foram considerados como indicadores de vulnerabilidade: renda per capita, escolaridade da população adulta, condições de moradia e índices de criminalidade/violência. Duas escolas foram cenário da pesquisa. Os dados foram analisados por meio de estatística inferencial com o uso dos testes Qui-quadrado, para verificar a associação entre as variáveis, U de *Mann-Whitney* e *Kruskal Wallis* para comparação entre grupos.

Resultados: Encontrou-se que apanhar em casa foi associado ao envolvimento dos estudantes em situações de bullying como vítimas, vítimas-agressoras e agressores. Esses estudantes também se diferenciaram em relação aos anos de reprovação escolar e frequência de punição física quando comparados com estudantes não envolvidos em situações de bullying. Estudantes classificados como vítimas-agressoras demonstraram maior vulnerabilidade em relação às variáveis investigadas. Não houve diferenças significativas na comparação entre o sexo dos participantes e o envolvimento em situações de bullying.

Conclusão: Observou-se que a punição física utilizada como estratégia de disciplina em casa e a reprovação escolar são fatores que aumentam a vulnerabilidade dos estudantes em relação à prática do bullying ou à vitimização. Os dados sinalizam que é necessário incluir as famílias nas ações de intervenção antibullying. Ao mesmo tempo, é preciso considerar que essa inclusão não deve ficar restrita ao campo da educação ou da escola. É preciso pensar de forma intersetorial, principalmente incluindo as equipes de saúde da família que possuem momentos junto às famílias e que podem ser utilizados para pensar as técnicas de disciplina e o modo como os filhos, crianças e adolescentes são disciplinados em casa.

Palavras-chave: vulnerabilidade social, violência, bullying.

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