

The Relationship Between Spiritual Intelligence and Family Communication Patterns with Students' Bullying Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to examine the relationship between spiritual intelligence, family communication patterns, and bullying behaviors among secondary school students in Tehran.

Methods: The statistical population consisted of secondary school students in Tehran. From this population, 300 students were selected using a stratified random sampling method. Data were collected using the Spiritual Intelligence Questionnaire developed by Zohar and Marshall (2000), the Family Communication Patterns Scale by Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990), and the Olweus Bullying Behavior Scale (1994). Data analysis was conducted using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

Results: The results of statistical analysis indicated a significant negative relationship between spiritual intelligence and bullying behaviors, meaning that as the level of spiritual intelligence increased, bullying behaviors decreased. Additionally, a significant negative relationship was found between healthy family communication patterns and bullying behaviors. Furthermore, a significant positive relationship was observed between spiritual intelligence and family communication patterns, highlighting the role of the family environment in the development of students' spiritual capacities.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that bullying behaviors among students are the result of the interaction between internal capacities (spiritual intelligence) and social environments (family). Enhancing spiritual intelligence and improving communication patterns within the family can serve as effective protective factors in reducing domineering and violent tendencies in educational settings.

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Introduction

Bullying behaviors in educational environments are recognized as one of the most complex psychological and social challenges of adolescence. Bullying refers to repeated aggressive actions—physical, verbal, or relational—carried out with the intention of humiliating, intimidating, or dominating a weaker individual. Rather than being merely a simple disciplinary issue within schools, bullying reflects deeper disturbances in emotional and social development. Research has consistently shown that bullying has significant consequences not only for victims but also for perpetrators. Victimized students frequently experience anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and academic decline, while perpetrators may develop patterns of aggression that extend beyond the school environment. If such behaviors remain unaddressed, they may evolve into broader patterns of antisocial conduct during adulthood (Olweus, 1994).

In recent years, the destructive impact of bullying on students' psychological well-being has intensified with the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies and the emergence of cyberbullying. Unlike traditional forms of bullying, cyberbullying can occur continuously, reach a wider audience, and persist beyond school boundaries, thereby amplifying its psychological harm. Within this context, individuals who engage in bullying often exploit various forms of power—whether physical strength, social influence, or digital anonymity—to compensate for internal insecurities or unmet psychological needs. Psychological analyses suggest that aggressive behaviors among adolescents are often linked to deficits in emotional regulation and empathy. In many cases, adolescents who bully others lack the capacity to manage anger impulses effectively or to recognize and respond to the emotional experiences of their peers. Such difficulties are frequently rooted in both individual personality structures and environmental influences that shape the adolescent's social learning processes (Smith et al., 2004).

Given the serious consequences of bullying, scholars have increasingly sought protective psychological factors that may reduce or prevent such behaviors. One construct that has attracted growing attention in this regard is spiritual intelligence (SQ). Spiritual intelligence can be defined as the capacity of individuals to engage with existential questions, derive meaning from life experiences, and align their behaviors with deeper values and purposes. Unlike cognitive intelligence, which focuses on problem-solving and logical reasoning, or emotional intelligence, which involves understanding and managing emotions, spiritual intelligence enables individuals

to transcend immediate impulses and material concerns in order to reflect on broader moral and existential dimensions of life. Through this capacity, individuals may develop a deeper sense of interconnectedness with others and with the world around them.

From this perspective, spiritual intelligence functions as an inner resource that guides individuals toward compassion, forgiveness, and ethical awareness. Individuals with higher levels of spiritual intelligence tend to exhibit greater empathy, moral sensitivity, and self-reflection, qualities that reduce the need to assert dominance over others through aggressive or humiliating behaviors. Zohar and Marshall (2000) argue that spiritual intelligence plays a crucial role in shaping human values and guiding individuals toward more meaningful and responsible forms of action. Adolescents with well-developed spiritual intelligence are therefore more likely to evaluate the ethical consequences of their behavior and regulate their impulses accordingly.

The relationship between spiritual intelligence and reduced aggressive behavior can also be explained through the concept of existential awareness. Adolescents with higher spiritual intelligence tend to possess a broader perspective on life, enabling them to interpret interpersonal interactions within a larger moral framework. They are more capable of recognizing the intrinsic value of others and understanding that harming another person ultimately undermines collective well-being. In contrast, adolescents with lower levels of spiritual intelligence may express their impulses without moral reflection or consideration of long-term consequences. When individuals fail to attribute meaning to their experiences or develop a sense of connectedness with others, aggressive and dominating behaviors may emerge as a means of asserting identity or power. Consequently, fostering spiritual intelligence may serve as an effective preventive strategy against bullying behaviors in school settings (Emmons, 2000).

However, individual capacities such as spiritual intelligence do not develop in isolation. They are strongly shaped by the social environments in which individuals grow and mature, particularly the family. According to family systems theory, individual behavior is deeply embedded in the patterns of interaction and communication that characterize family life. The family serves as the first and most influential socialization context, where children learn how to interpret emotions, respond to conflict, and interact with others. Within this environment, adolescents internalize behavioral models that often guide their later interactions in broader social contexts such as school.

If conflicts within the family are typically resolved through coercion, hostility, or authoritarian control, adolescents may learn to view aggression as a legitimate strategy for asserting power. Consequently, such patterns may be transferred to the school environment, where bullying becomes a tool for achieving social dominance or coping with internal frustrations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A more detailed examination of family communication patterns reveals two critical dimensions: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Conversation orientation refers to the extent to which families encourage open dialogue, the exchange of ideas, and the expression of emotions among family members. In families with high conversation orientation, children are encouraged to articulate their opinions, share feelings, and participate in discussions about family matters. This democratic communication climate fosters emotional expression, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution through dialogue rather than aggression. In contrast, families characterized by high conformity orientation emphasize obedience, uniformity of beliefs, and unquestioned acceptance of parental authority. In such environments, children are often discouraged from expressing dissenting opinions or challenging parental decisions. As a result, these communication climates may suppress emotional expression and limit opportunities for adolescents to develop effective interpersonal and emotional regulation skills (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

The detrimental effects of highly controlling communication patterns—particularly those characterized by high conformity and low conversation—can be understood through the concept of accumulated or suppressed anger. Adolescents growing up in such environments often experience significant pressure to conform to parental expectations while lacking safe channels for emotional expression. When disagreement or frustration is consistently met with punishment, criticism, or dismissal, adolescents may internalize feelings of resentment and powerlessness. Over time, these unresolved emotions can accumulate, eventually manifesting as aggressive behaviors directed toward more vulnerable peers in the school environment. In this way, bullying may function as a compensatory mechanism through which adolescents attempt to regain a sense of power and control that they perceive as lacking within the family context (Baumrind, 1991).

At the same time, there exists a reciprocal relationship between family communication patterns and the development of spiritual intelligence. Families that encourage open dialogue and reflective discussion create a supportive environment for questioning, meaning-making, and critical

thinking—all of which are central components of spiritual intelligence. Through conversations about values, moral dilemmas, and life experiences, parents can help adolescents cultivate deeper self-awareness and empathy toward others. Healthy family communication therefore contributes not only to the reduction of aggressive tendencies but also to the strengthening of adolescents' internal moral frameworks.

From a socio-cultural perspective, Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that higher psychological functions develop through social interaction and guided learning within the child's cultural environment. In families where communication is open and supportive, adolescents are provided with opportunities to engage in reflective dialogue and internalize values related to compassion, responsibility, and mutual respect. Such developmental experiences contribute to the formation of an internal regulatory system that discourages aggressive behaviors and promotes prosocial attitudes.

Based on these theoretical considerations, bullying behaviors among students can be understood as the outcome of a complex interaction between environmental pressures within the family and individual psychological capacities. Ineffective family communication patterns may create conditions that foster frustration, emotional suppression, and aggressive tendencies. However, spiritual intelligence may function as a mediating or moderating factor capable of mitigating these negative influences. Adolescents who develop higher levels of spiritual awareness, empathy, and meaning-making abilities may be better equipped to resist impulses toward domination or aggression, even when raised in less supportive family environments (Goleman, 2006).

Therefore, the significance of the present study lies in moving beyond a one-dimensional understanding of bullying behaviors. Instead of focusing solely on disciplinary approaches or individual pathology, this research aims to present a more comprehensive model that examines the dynamic relationships among family communication patterns, spiritual intelligence, and bullying behaviors among students. By identifying these interrelated factors, the findings may assist school counselors, educators, and parents in developing more effective intervention strategies. Such strategies may shift the focus from superficial disciplinary measures toward deeper approaches that emphasize improving family communication climates and fostering adolescents' spiritual and moral development as protective factors against bullying.

Material and Methods

The present study employed a descriptive–correlational research design. This design was selected because the primary objective of the research was to examine the relationships among spiritual intelligence, family communication patterns, and bullying behaviors among students, without manipulating any variables. Descriptive–correlational studies are commonly used in educational and psychological research to explore naturally occurring associations between variables and to provide an empirical basis for developing explanatory models.

Population and Sample

The statistical population of the study consisted of secondary school students in Tehran, Iran. Given the large size and diversity of this population, stratified random sampling was used to ensure that the selected participants adequately represented the broader student population. In this sampling procedure, the population was first divided into relevant strata (such as school districts or grade levels), and participants were then randomly selected from each stratum in proportion to its size.

A total of 300 students were selected as the study sample. This sample size was considered adequate for correlational analysis and for ensuring sufficient statistical power in examining the relationships among the research variables. Stratified sampling increased the representativeness of the sample and reduced sampling bias by ensuring that students from different educational contexts within the city were included.

Instruments

To collect the required data, three standardized questionnaires were used.

Spiritual Intelligence Questionnaire (SQ): Spiritual intelligence was measured using the Spiritual Intelligence Questionnaire, developed based on the theoretical framework proposed by Zohar and Marshall (2000). This instrument is a self-report scale designed to assess individuals' capacity for existential reflection, meaning-making, and value-based thinking.

The questionnaire consists of 20 items organized into four dimensions:

Critical existential thinking

Personal meaning production

Transcendental or existential awareness

Compassion and conscious state expansion

Respondents rate each item based on their agreement with the statements, typically using a Likert-type scale.

In their initial studies, Zohar and Marshall confirmed the content validity of the instrument and reported Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients ranging from 0.80 to 0.90, indicating high internal consistency. Previous studies conducted in Iran have also confirmed the validity of the questionnaire using factor analysis, and reliability coefficients for its subscales have been reported within the range of 0.78 to 0.88. These findings suggest that the instrument possesses acceptable psychometric properties and is suitable for use with Iranian student populations.

Family Communication Patterns Scale: Family communication patterns were assessed using the Family Communication Patterns Scale, originally developed by Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) and later revised in 2002. This instrument is a self-report measure designed to evaluate the dominant communication climate within families. The scale consists of 26 items and measures two primary dimensions of family communication:

Conversation orientation – the degree to which family members are encouraged to openly discuss ideas, feelings, and experiences.

Conformity orientation – the extent to which families emphasize uniformity of beliefs, obedience, and adherence to parental authority.

Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) confirmed the content validity of the instrument and reported strong reliability coefficients. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the conformity orientation subscale was 0.89, while the reliability of the conversation orientation subscale ranged from 0.84 to 0.92.

In Iranian studies, Kouroshnia and Latifian (2007) examined the psychometric properties of the scale and confirmed its validity using factor analysis. The reliability of the scale, calculated using Cronbach's alpha, was reported as 0.81 for the conversation orientation and 0.89 for the conformity orientation, indicating satisfactory internal consistency within Iranian samples.

Bullying Behavior Scale: Bullying behaviors were measured using the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire (1994), one of the most widely recognized and validated instruments for assessing bullying in school contexts worldwide.

The scale contains 24 items organized into three dimensions:

Physical bullying (e.g., hitting, pushing, or physical intimidation)

Verbal bullying (e.g., teasing, insults, or threats)

Relational or social bullying (e.g., exclusion, spreading rumors, or damaging social relationships) In the foundational studies conducted by Olweus (1994), both content validity and construct validity of the scale were confirmed, and the overall reliability coefficient was reported as Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$.

Research conducted within Iran has also confirmed the construct validity of the instrument through factor analysis. Reliability coefficients reported in Iranian student samples have ranged between 0.75 and 0.88, indicating that the scale demonstrates acceptable reliability and cultural compatibility within the educational context of the country.

Procedure

After obtaining the necessary permissions from educational authorities and school administrators, the selected schools were contacted and informed about the objectives of the study. Participants were selected through the stratified random sampling procedure described earlier. The questionnaires were administered to students in a classroom setting during scheduled school hours. Prior to completing the questionnaires, students were provided with brief instructions explaining the purpose of the study and the procedure for answering the items. They were asked to respond honestly and were assured that there were no right or wrong answers. The completion of the questionnaires typically required approximately 20–25 minutes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were carefully observed throughout the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from participants and, where required, from school authorities.

To protect participants' privacy, the questionnaires were completed anonymously, and no identifying information was collected. All collected data were treated as confidential and were used solely for research purposes. The findings were reported in aggregate form to ensure that no individual participant could be identified.

Furthermore, the study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, including respect for participants' dignity, privacy, and psychological well-being. Efforts were made to ensure that the questions did not cause discomfort or distress to the students, and participants were informed that they could skip any question they preferred not to answer.

Results

To examine the relationships among spiritual intelligence, family communication patterns, and students' bullying behaviors, both descriptive statistics and the Pearson correlation coefficient were used. Descriptive statistics were first calculated to determine the overall status of the study variables, followed by correlation analysis to investigate the relationships among them.

Descriptive Analysis of the Variables

In the first stage of analysis, the mean and standard deviation were calculated for each research variable in order to provide a general overview of their distribution among the participants. These results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Variable	Overall Level	Mean	Standard Deviation
Spiritual Intelligence	Moderately High	3.45	0.68
Family Communication Patterns	Moderate	3.10	0.72
Bullying Behaviors	Moderately Low	2.30	0.95

As shown in Table 1, the mean score for spiritual intelligence ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.68$) indicates that students demonstrated a moderately high level of spiritual intelligence. This suggests that many students possess relatively developed abilities related to meaning-making, existential awareness, and compassion toward others.

The mean score for family communication patterns ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.72$) falls within the moderate range, indicating that the overall quality of communication within families, including levels of conversation orientation and conformity orientation, is neither particularly weak nor exceptionally strong among the participants.

In contrast, the mean score for bullying behaviors ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 0.95$) was found to be moderately low, suggesting that although bullying behaviors exist among students, their overall prevalence within the sample is relatively limited.

Overall, the descriptive results suggest that students in the sample generally experience moderate levels of positive family communication and relatively strong spiritual capacities, while the frequency of bullying behaviors remains comparatively lower.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

To investigate the relationships among the research variables, the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated. The results are presented in Table 2 in the form of a correlation matrix.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Matrix of the Study Variables

Variables	Spiritual Intelligence	Family Communication Patterns	Bullying Behaviors
Spiritual Intelligence	1	0.38	-0.52
Family Communication Patterns	0.38	1	-0.35
Bullying Behaviors	-0.52	-0.35	1

The findings presented in Table 2 reveal several important relationships among the study variables. First, a significant negative correlation was found between spiritual intelligence and bullying behaviors ($r = -0.52$). This indicates that students with higher levels of spiritual intelligence tend to exhibit lower levels of bullying behavior. In other words, as students' ability to derive meaning from experiences, demonstrate empathy, and reflect on moral consequences increases, their likelihood of engaging in aggressive or dominating behaviors toward peers decreases.

Second, a significant negative relationship was observed between family communication patterns and bullying behaviors ($r = -0.35$). This finding suggests that healthier and more constructive communication within families—particularly environments characterized by open dialogue and supportive interaction—are associated with lower levels of bullying behavior among students. Families that promote constructive discussion and emotional expression may therefore play an important role in preventing aggressive behaviors in school settings.

Third, the results show a significant positive correlation between spiritual intelligence and family communication patterns ($r = 0.38$). This indicates that students who grow up in families with more open and supportive communication environments tend to demonstrate higher levels of spiritual intelligence. Such family environments may facilitate reflective thinking, moral development, and meaning-making processes, all of which contribute to the development of spiritual capacities.

Overall, the correlation findings support the theoretical assumption that bullying behaviors among students are influenced by both internal psychological capacities and family environmental factors. While supportive family communication patterns appear to foster the development of spiritual intelligence, both of these factors independently contribute to reducing the likelihood of bullying behaviors among adolescents.

Discussion

This study was conducted with the aim of examining the relationship between spiritual intelligence, family communication patterns, and bullying behaviors among secondary school

students in Tehran. The statistical findings of the research indicated that the variables under study had significant relationships with one another. Specifically, both spiritual intelligence and healthy family communication patterns showed a negative and inverse relationship with bullying behaviors among students. These results suggest that as an individual's level of spiritual capacity increases and the quality of interactions within the family environment improves, the tendency to display domineering and violent behaviors in the school environment decreases.

In analyzing the relationship between spiritual intelligence and bullying behaviors, it was observed that as the level of spiritual intelligence increases, the incidence of bullying behaviors significantly decreases. This finding is consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Zohar and Marshall, which suggests that spiritual intelligence enables individuals to act beyond momentary impulses and the need for dominance. In fact, adolescents who score highly on dimensions such as compassion and existential awareness tend to view others as part of a unified whole and perceive harm to others as harm to themselves. From this perspective, spiritual intelligence functions as an internal moral barrier that reduces the individual's need to compensate for psychological deficiencies by humiliating others. Therefore, it can be argued that a lack of meaning and feelings of emptiness in adolescents may push them toward aggressive behaviors as a way to gain a sense of power and visibility.

Alongside internal capacities, the family environment also plays a crucial role in predicting bullying behaviors. The negative correlation between family communication patterns and bullying behaviors indicates that the quality of family interactions is a strong predictor of adolescents' social behavior at school. According to family systems theory, adolescents learn patterns of reacting to stress and methods of conflict resolution from their parents. In families where healthy communication patterns based on dialogue and acceptance prevail, adolescents learn to accept differences and manage their anger through verbal and empathetic means. In contrast, families characterized by authoritarian and suppressive communication patterns create an environment in which adolescents, in order to escape psychological pressure and feelings of inferiority, search for victims in the school environment so that they can compensate for their sense of powerlessness at home by dominating others.

Moreover, the positive and significant relationship between spiritual intelligence and family communication patterns suggests that the family environment is not merely a physical space but

also a context for the development of internal capacities. Healthy family communication provides opportunities for questioning, reflective thinking, and meaning-making, all of which are key components of spiritual intelligence. Therefore, families that operate on the basis of dialogue and empathy indirectly promote the development of their children's spiritual intelligence, and this inner growth ultimately leads to a reduction in aggressive tendencies in educational settings. Overall, the findings of this research confirm that bullying behavior is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but rather originates from the interaction between an individual's psycho-spiritual capacities and the quality of family relationships.

Finally, considering the obtained results, it is recommended that school counselors, instead of focusing solely on punishing bullying behaviors, design programs aimed at enhancing spiritual intelligence through meaning-centered workshops and compassion training. It is also necessary for educational interventions to move toward transforming family communication patterns from authoritarianism and forced conformity toward dialogue and acceptance in order to address the roots of violence among adolescents. For future research, it is suggested that the effects of other mediating variables, such as empathy or secure attachment, be examined alongside spiritual intelligence to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the predictors of bullying behaviors.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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