



The Role of Emotion Regulation as a Mediator between Empathy and Bullying Behavior in Junior High School Students

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ARTICLE INFO:

Received
March 14, 2026

Revised
April 29, 2026

Accepted
May 14, 2026

KEYWORDS:

empathy, emotion regulation, bullying behavior, junior high school students, mediators

How to Cite:

Putri, R. D., Ariyati, I., & Setiawan, A. (2026). The Role of Emotion Regulation as a Mediator between Empathy and Bullying Behavior in Junior High School Students. *Ghaidan: Jurnal Bimbingan Konseling Islam Dan Kemasyarakatan*, 10(1), 78-85. <https://doi.org/10.19109/ct7wff73>

Published by:

UIN Raden Fatah Palembang, Indonesia
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ABSTRACT

Bullying behavior among junior high school students is a serious issue that can negatively affect the psychological development of both victims and perpetrators. However, studies specifically examining the role of emotion regulation as a moderator in the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior among junior high school students remain limited. Therefore, this study aimed to examine emotion regulation as a moderator of the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior among junior high school students. This study employed a quantitative approach with a moderation regression design. The participants were 223 students from SMP Ma'arif 1 Metro, selected using a total sampling technique. The research instruments included the Empathy Scale (Indonesian version of EmQue-CA, $\alpha = 0.96$), the Emotion Regulation Scale ($\alpha = 0.865$), and the Bullying Behavior Scale ($\alpha = 0.88$). Data analysis was conducted using moderated regression analysis in SPSS version 21. The findings revealed that empathy did not have a significant effect on bullying behavior ($p = 0.285 > 0.05$). However, emotion regulation significantly moderated the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$). The R Square value of 0.888 indicated that empathy and emotion regulation contributed 88.8% to bullying behavior. These findings demonstrate that emotion regulation serves as a moderating variable, strengthening the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior among junior high school students. The practical implication of this study is the importance of integrating empathy and emotion regulation development programs into school bullying prevention efforts.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of bullying in the school environment remains a serious challenge in the field of education in Indonesia. Various reports from the mass media and child protection institutions routinely highlight cases of bullying that occur in schools.

starting from elementary to high school levels. The reported forms of bullying also vary, ranging from social exclusion, verbal ridicule, to physical violence and cyberbullying (Rozzaqyah et al., 2024). This condition creates an unsafe, uncomfortable school climate that prevents students from developing their potential to the fullest.

Data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemendikbudristek) shows that bullying remains a worrying issue in educational institutions. The report revealed that between 10% and 60% of Indonesian students have experienced or been involved as bullies (Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.). This figure shows a fairly wide range, showing that despite various regulations and prevention efforts that the government has carried out, bullying still occurs and threatens the psychological development of students. This data is an important signal for stakeholders in the education sector to continue finding effective solutions to reduce bullying.

The negative impact of bullying behavior is not only felt in the short term but also has the potential to have long-term consequences for the victim's mental development. Students who are victims of bullying often experience psychological stress, confidence disorders, decreased academic achievement, and even depression and other mental health risks (Rialdi Siregar et al., 2023). Research shows that physical bullying that involves direct contact, such as hitting or kicking, as well as psychological bullying, such as ostracization and the spread of rumors, both cause deep wounds to a child's social-emotional development.

One psychological factor that is theoretically closely related to aggressive behavior is empathy. Empathy is defined as the cognitive ability to understand others' perspectives (*perspective-taking*) and the affective ability to feel what others feel (*empathic concern*) (Taufik, 2012). In the context of student relationships at school, individuals with high empathy tend to be more sensitive to the negative impact their actions may have on others' feelings. *Batson's theory of altruism* holds that empathy prompts individuals to act prosocially and to avoid actions that can harm others (Rahmah, 2021).

However, a recent longitudinal meta-analysis involving 23 studies and 21,296 participants revealed a more complex dynamic in the relationship between empathy and bullying (Devleeschouwer et al., 2025). The study found that empathy negatively predicted engagement in bullying, and conversely, engagement in bullying also negatively predicted future levels of empathy. These findings suggest a dynamic reciprocal relationship, where low empathy can trigger bullying behavior, and repetitive bullying behavior can further erode the perpetrator's empathy sensitivity. Furthermore, another meta-analysis examining the role of empathy in *observer behavior* found that both cognitive and affective empathy were positively correlated with *defending the victim* (Sabou et al., 2025). In contrast, low empathic affectivity was negatively correlated with a tendency to be *an outsider* (silent) and even supportive of the perpetrator (*pro-bully*). These findings confirm that interventions aimed at changing *observer behavior* need to differentiate approaches to developing cognitive and affective empathy simultaneously.

This is where the regulation of emotions plays an important role as an internal mechanism that determines how emotions, including empathy, are expressed in real behavior. Emotion regulation is defined as a person's ability to recognize, manage, control, and direct emotions so that the responses that arise remain adaptive in social situations (Gross, 2015). A student may feel an empathetic urge to see their friend ridiculed, but without adequate emotion-management skills, that compassion may not be strong enough to overcome peer pressure or fear to act in defense of the victim.

Recent research has shown that interventions designed to improve emotion regulation directly reduce aggressive behavior. A *nurse-led intervention study* in Indonesia that integrated the ROOTS program with *soft skills* training found that strengthening emotional regulation through emotional awareness training, stress management, and empathy development significantly reduced

the risk of bullying among students (Fatoni et al., 2024). The program emphasizes the importance of skills such as *cognitive reappraisal* to help students change how they think about situations that trigger conflict.

The results of initial observations conducted by researchers at SMP Ma'arif 1 Metro revealed a picture relevant to theoretical dynamics. Based on an interview with one of the Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers, information was obtained that bullying behavior often appears in students who have difficulty controlling their emotions and are less sensitive to the feelings of friends. The teacher also explained that although some students try to control themselves, social pressure and group dynamics can sometimes trigger aggressive or intimidating behavior, indicating a gap between goodwill (which may stem from empathy) and actual actions. Although previous research has extensively discussed the direct relationship between empathy and bullying behavior, research that specifically places emotion regulation as a mediator variable in this relationship in the context of junior high school students in Indonesia is still limited. In fact, early adolescence is a critical period in which emotion regulation skills develop rapidly and greatly determine the quality of students' social interactions. Therefore, this research seeks to fill the void by offering a *novel* mediation model that explains how empathy can affect bullying behavior, rather than merely whether it does.

Based on the above background description, the formulation of the problem in this study is: (1) Does empathy affect bullying behavior in junior high school students? (2) Does emotional regulation affect bullying behavior in junior high school students? Moreover, (3) Does emotional regulation function as a mediator in the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior in junior high school students? The purpose of this study is to empirically examine emotion regulation as a mediator of the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior among junior high school students.

METHODS

Research Design

This study uses a quantitative approach with a *correlational ex-post facto design*. This design was chosen because the study aims to test the causal relationship between variables without directly providing treatment or intervention to the study subjects. The quantitative approach allows researchers to objectively measure empathy, emotion regulation, and bullying behavior using standard psychometric instruments, and to test the mediating role of emotion regulation using *pathway analysis* techniques (Sugiyono, 2019).

The research was conducted at Metro Ma'arif 1 Junior High School (SMP) located on Jalan Purwosari 28, North Metro. This school was chosen because its population characteristics align with the research objectives: junior high school students in the early stage of adolescent development. In this phase, empathy skills and emotion regulation begin to develop significantly, while bullying behavioral tendencies become more visible and identifiable. The research was conducted from November to December of the 2025/2026 school year.

The population in this study consisted of all students in grades VII, VIII, and IX of SMP Ma'arif 1 Metro who were actively enrolled in the 2025/2026 academic year. This study used a total sampling technique, in which all members of the population were included as research participants. The use of total sampling was considered appropriate because the population was relatively small and all participants met the research criteria. The inclusion criteria in this study were: (a) active students in grades VII, VIII, and IX; (b) aged between 12 and 15 years as part of the early adolescent developmental stage; and (c) willing to participate by completing the research questionnaire in full. Therefore, the total sample in this study consisted of 223 students.

Participants

Table 1. Population Distribution and Research Sample

Classes	Populasi	Sample	Percentage
VII	75	75	100%
VIII	74	74	100%
IX	74	74	100%
Quantity	223	223	100%

This study involved three main variables measured using psychological instruments. *First*, the independent variable (X), i.e., empathy, is defined as the ability of students to understand and feel others' emotions. The instrument used is the Indonesian version of the *Child and Adolescent Empathy Questionnaire (EmQue-CA)*, which has been adapted and tested by Wuryaningsih et al. (2025). The scale consists of 10 items with three subscales: Affective Empathy, Cognitive Empathy, and Intent to Comfort. *Second*, the mediator variable (M), namely emotion regulation, is measured using a scale developed from Gross's (2015) theory and validated.

The scale consists of 38 items with four aspects: *strategies for emotion regulation, engaging in goal-directed behaviors, controlling emotional responses, and receiving emotional responses*. *Third*, the dependent variable (Y), namely bullying behavior, is measured using a scale developed based on Rigby's (2007) theory. The scale consists of 15 items with two subscales: Physical Bullying and Verbal Bullying. All instruments use a Likert scale ranging from 1-5 for empathy and emotion regulation, and 1-4 for bullying behavior.

Measures

Instrument Validity and Reliability Test: Validity and reliability testing are performed on all instruments. The validity test results show that all items have a total table-item-> correlation coefficient (0.138) at a significance level of 5%, so it is declared valid. The results of the reliability test using *Cronbach's alpha* are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Instrument Reliability Test Results

Variabel	Alfa Cronbach	N item	Remarks
Empathy	0,741	11	Reliable
Emotion regulation	0,735	15	Reliable
Bullying Behavior	0,772	16	Reliable

In addition, the empathy instrument (EmQue-CA) was tested using an *Exploratory Factor Analysis*, with an SME value of 0.825 and a total variance of 65.97%. It was reliable with an *Alpha Cronbach value* of 0.96. The emotion regulation instrument had a value of the item-total correlation coefficient of the table $> r$ (0.138), and a reliability of 0.865. The bullying behavior instrument was tested using *Confirmatory Factor Analysis*, which showed a good fit (chi-square = 87.37; df = 69; p-value = 0.066; RMSEA = 0.030), with an *Alpha Cronbach reliability* of 0.88. Thus, all instruments are declared valid and reliable for use in the study.

The data analysis technique in this study uses *path analysis*, which is carried out with the help of IBM SPSS Statistics software version 21. Before hypothesis testing, the data were tested for classical assumptions, including normality, multicollinearity, heteroscedasticity, and linearity. The mediation hypothesis was tested by estimating three regression equations as recommended by Baron & Kenny (1986): (1) the influence of empathy (X) on bullying behavior (Y); (2) the effect of empathy (X) on the regulation of emotions (M); and (3) the simultaneous effects of empathy (X) and emotion regulation (M) on bullying behavior (Y). The mediating effect is significant if the influence of X on Y decreases after variable M is incorporated into the model. The significance of the indirect effect was tested using *the Sobel test*.

Data Analysis

Based on the above analysis, the fourth hypothesis (H_4), which states that emotion regulation mediates the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior among junior high school students, is accepted, with *partial mediation*. This means that empathy can affect bullying behavior both directly and indirectly through improving students' emotional regulation skills. Of the total influence of empathy on bullying behavior, 54.0% was direct, while the other 46.0% was indirect, mediated by emotion regulation.

Table 14. Decomposition of Variable Influences

Influence	Track	Coeficin	Percentage
Direct Influence	$X \rightarrow Y$	-0,254	54,0%
Indirect Influence	$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$	-0,216	46,0%
Total Impact		-0,470	100%

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results showed that the majority of students had a level of empathy in the middle category (69.5%). These findings suggest that most students already have the basic ability to understand and feel what others are experiencing, but not optimally. This aligns with the characteristics of early adolescent development, which, according to Piaget, are at the formal operational stage, when the ability to think abstractly and understand others' perspectives begins to develop (Santrock, 2018). However, there are still 14.3% of students who are in the low empathy category, which needs special attention because they are potentially more vulnerable to engaging in bullying behavior. Previous research has also found that low empathy is a significant risk factor for the emergence of aggressive behavior in adolescents (Aini & Rahardjo, 2023).

In the emotion regulation variable, the majority of students were in the moderate category (67.7%). This shows that students are quite capable of recognizing, managing, and expressing emotions adaptively, although they still need reinforcement, especially in stressful situations. These findings are consistent with Gross's (2015) research, which states that the ability to regulate emotions continues to develop throughout adolescence, along with the maturation of the prefrontal cortex, which serves as the executive control center. Research by Baiti & Setiawati (2023) also found that students who are victims of bullying who have good emotional regulation tend to be better able to recover from the psychological impact of bullying.

Meanwhile, the majority of students (68.2%) are in the middle category, with 13.0% in the high category. Although the percentage of students with high levels of bullying behavior is relatively small, the figure of 13.0% corresponds to about 29 students out of a total of 223 respondents. This figure cannot be ignored because any act of bullying, even if a handful of students carry it out, can create an unsafe school climate and negatively impact many victims (Olweus, 2013). Latifah's research (2024) identified that psychological factors such as poor emotional regulation and low empathy are the main causes of bullying behavior in adolescents.

Discussion

The main finding of the study is that emotion regulation partially mediates the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior. The results of the Sobel test showed a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.01$) with an indirect effect of -0.216. This means that 46.0% of the total influence of empathy on bullying behavior occurs through improved emotion management skills, while the remaining 54.0% is a direct influence.

These findings make a theoretical contribution by elucidating the mechanisms by which empathy can reduce bullying behavior. Students with high empathy tend to have better emotional awareness, which makes it easier for them to recognize and manage negative emotions such as

anger and frustration. This good emotion regulation ability further helps students respond to conflict situations more adaptively, rather than resorting to aggression.

Research by Wulandari & Sari (2022) on empathy, emotion regulation, and prosocial behavior among junior high school students found that emotion regulation mediates the relationship between empathy and prosocial behavior. These findings align with current research, which shows that emotion regulation shapes the influence of empathy on both prosocial and aggressive social behavior.

Research by Retnowati & Rahmawati (2022) found a negative relationship between empathy and bullying behavior in junior high school adolescents. However, this study has not examined emotion regulation as a mediating factor. Current research complements these findings by showing that emotion regulation is a variable that helps explain this relationship mechanism.

Research by Baiduri & Widyorini (2023) also confirms the mediating role of emotion regulation, albeit in a different context, namely the relationship between *insecure attachment* and aggressive behavior. The consistency of these findings suggests that emotion regulation is indeed an important psychological mechanism for explaining how internal factors (such as empathy or attachment patterns) affect external behaviors (such as aggression or bullying).

In the context of education in Indonesia, these findings have important practical implications. It is not enough to prevent bullying in schools to focus on developing empathy through activities such as *taking a perspective* or discussing the impact of bullying. Schools also need to simultaneously develop students' emotional regulation skills, for example, through emotional awareness training, *cognitive reassessment techniques*, and stress management.

Programs such as those developed by Fatoni et al. (2024) that integrate stress and emotional management for junior high school students are effective in improving mental health and academic achievement. Similar programs can be adapted for bullying prevention by adding components on empathy development and conflict resolution skills.

Research by Putri et al. (2023) on the influence of emotion regulation and family social support on students' academic resilience shows that effective emotion regulation helps students overcome academic difficulties. The same can be applied in the context of bullying, where good emotional regulation helps students not to dissolve in negative emotions and to be able to find constructive solutions when facing conflicts with peers.

Thus, integrating empathy development and emotion regulation into school guidance and counseling programs is a comprehensive and effective strategy to prevent bullying behavior. School counselors can design intervention modules that include: (1) emotional awareness training to recognize the emotions of themselves and others; (2) the development of cognitive and affective empathy through case discussion and role-playing; (3) training in adaptive emotion regulation strategies such as *cognitive reassessment*; and (4) the development of conflict resolution and assertive communication skills.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis and discussion, this study concludes that emotion regulation partially mediates the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior among junior high school students. Empathy has been shown to have a direct negative influence on bullying behavior, meaning that the higher a student's empathy, the lower their tendency to bully. In addition, empathy positively affects emotion regulation, and emotion regulation negatively affects bullying behavior. The findings of the mediation analysis show that empathy can reduce bullying behavior both directly and indirectly, by improving students' emotional regulation skills. As many as 46% of the total influence of empathy on bullying behavior was explained through emotion regulation mechanisms, which confirms the importance of this variable in understanding the psychological dynamics behind bullying behavior.

The implication of this study is the need for school-based intervention programs that not only develop empathy but also strengthen students' emotional regulation abilities as a more comprehensive bullying prevention strategy. School counselors, teachers, and parents need to work together to create an environment that supports students' social-emotional development, including through emotional awareness training, *cognitive reassessment techniques*, and the development of conflict-resolution skills. Further research can test the effectiveness of such integrated intervention programs and consider other moderator variables, such as gender, socioeconomic status, or social support, that may affect the strength of relationships among variables.

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