

## The importance of play in creating a bully-free school

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**Riassunto:** Nella scuola primaria è sempre più importante valorizzare il gioco ed il movimento per potenziare la salute psicofisica e la socialità dei più giovani. Attraverso il gioco è possibile formare ed educare gli alunni rendendoli capaci di conoscere non solo se stessi ma anche l'ambiente che li circonda, favorendo la socialità e le relazioni con gli altri compagni. In questo contesto, il gioco, cruciale nel creare un clima emotivamente collaborativo ed inclusivo, è ritenuto strumento strategico nella gestione dei disturbi comportamentali nei bambini. Scopo del presente contributo è, pertanto, quello di analizzare il valore educativo del gioco durante il periodo della scuola primaria quale strumento di prevenzione e risoluzione del bullismo.

**Parole chiave:** bullismo; scuola primaria; inclusione; aspetti pedagogici.

**Abstract:** In primary school it is increasingly important to enhance play and movement to enhance the psychophysical health and sociality of the youngest. Through play it is possible to train and educate pupils by making them able to know not only themselves but also the environment around them, promoting sociability and relationships with other classmates. In this context, play, crucial in creating an emotionally collaborative and inclusive climate, is considered a strategic tool in the management of behavioral disorders in children. The purpose of this contribution is, therefore, to analyze the educational value of play during the period of primary school as a tool for the prevention and resolution of bullying.

**Keywords:** bullying; primary school; inclusion; pedagogical aspects.

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### 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of bullying is deeply delicate and urgent. Always of great and undeniable social importance, in recent times it has also manifested itself in its most modern and deadly version, that of cyber-bullying, with which all limits of space and time are overcome. It is therefore increasingly a social and cultural problem of vast proportions, the resolution of which cannot be placed exclusively on the shoulders of the school. Yet, it is precisely the school that is the privileged place where these attitudes of arrogance and violence, psychological and physical, emerge. And it is at school that they are often formed and crystallized (van Aalst, Huitsing, & Veenstra, 2024).

The term *bullying* defines a set of behaviors with which someone repeatedly performs actions or statements to have power over another person or to dominate him.

*"Bullying is a subcategory of aggressive behavior, but it is a particularly bad type of aggressive behavior, as it is directed, often repeatedly, towards a particular victim who is unable to defend himself effectively, because he is younger, or less strong or psychologically less secure"* (Fonzi, 2006).

It is a type of aggressive behavior characterized by the following characteristics:

- the intentionality of aggressive actions
- the repetition over time of overbearing acts
- the imbalance of power, both psychologically and physically.
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Compared to normal conflicts between peers (even at a very young age), bullying is distinguished by the presence of some essential factors (Nasti, Intra, Palmiero, & Brighi, 2023):

- presence of a persecutor (in the up position) and a victim (in the down position)
- intention, on the part of the persecutor, to do harm, and total lack of compassion towards the victim
- prolonged duration over time, which decreases the victim's self-esteem, with heavy consequences, such as disinvestment in school
- position of power by the bully (due to age, physical strength, etc.)
- vulnerable position on the part of the victim, who is unable to defend himself or herself and is in a situation of total isolation and lack of support from other members of the group
- lack of support: the victim feels isolated and exposed, often very afraid to report bullying episodes, because he fears reprisals and revenge
- consequences: the damage to the victim's self-esteem is maintained over time and leads the person to a considerable disinvestment from school or some victims become aggressive themselves.

This is a more complex definition than it appears at first glance, since it does not refer to a single act, but to a relational situation considered in its development over time.

Bullying at school, in particular, turns out to be a very complex social phenomenon. It is made up of frequent and systematic aggressive actions such as child harassment and attacks on other children, and many adults have personal experience of this in their past school days (Mayeza, & Bhana, 2021).

Although the phenomenon is often described in adolescents, it has origins that date back to and are rooted in primary school. We live in a pluralistic society characterized by a high level of conflict; in primary school, in addition to noting an increase in children with relational difficulties, self-centered, unable to listen and tolerate frustrations, emotionally fragile, cases of bullying, mobbing, prevarication and aggression are already beginning to appear, which become increasingly striking in middle schools (Sidera et al., 2020).

Children who give rise to bullying often have disorders in the regulation and management of emotions, from which impulsivity derives. They suffer from emotional instability, mood and anger crises that they tend to resolve with impulsive, destructive and abusive behavior. One of their most serious difficulties is the oscillation between inhibiting emotions and being overwhelmed by them. They act impulsively and with little awareness of their mental states.

Bullying in primary school is based on prevarication and discrimination, isolation

and aggression towards those children with an introverted or shy character. Small thefts of snacks, study tools such as pencils, backpacks and notebooks are then carried out, the victim is excluded from the groups that are formed in the classroom (Francis et al., 2022).

Bullying in the classroom can be addressed with strategies that can impact both the phenomenon when it is taking place and to prevent it. In this sense, in the context of Primary School, the role and importance played by play in creating an emotionally collaborative and inclusive climate capable of building positive relationships that foster a sense of welcome among students appears crucial (Scheithauer, Leppin, & Hess, 2020). The purpose of this contribution is, therefore, to analyze the educational value of play during the period of primary school as a tool for the prevention and resolution of bullying.

## **2. The educational value of play in primary school**

In primary school it is increasingly important to enhance play and movement to enhance the psychophysical health and sociality of the youngest. Through play, it is possible to train and educate pupils, making them able to get to know not only themselves but also the environment around them, promoting sociability and relationships with other classmates (Sibold et al., 2020).

Play plays a fundamental role in children's development, representing one of the key aspects to understanding human nature. Both animals and humans engage in play in characteristic ways that allow for the release of energy, learning, and preparation for knowledge and skills necessary for adult life. Play is also a means of exploring reality, expressing emotions and stimulating creativity, but, above all, it is an intrinsically joyful experience, since it is played for the pure pleasure of the game itself (Fernandez-Rio et al., 2020).

The social sciences, in particular pedagogy, have shown a great interest in play, studying its educational and training implications. They identified many ways and purposes through which play can be used as a tool to achieve more complex goals, including learning. Consequently, one of the main objectives of education is to ensure that children have the opportunity to play spontaneously, free from the influences of adult society and the media that often monopolize their time, limiting the expression of their child's creativity. In addition, games can be tools through which children can explore and reflect on their own experience of reality (Tokhirzhonovich, 2023).

Play also has an important therapeutic role, especially for children with relational difficulties. The positive potential of play as a learning vehicle is progressively integrated into the educational system, from kindergarten to primary school. Playful experiences, in fact, allow the child to develop a process of acquisition of knowledge, skills and meanings.

By playing, you can experience a wide range of emotions, ranging from excitement to fun to pleasure and upset. The game offers an experience similar to life itself, as it involves a range of conflicting and unpredictable emotions. It is a way to explore one's inner self and one's relationship with others. Play, in fact, plays a fundamental role in the formation of social skills. Through play, the child has the opportunity to build and consolidate social relationships. By interacting with his peers, he learns to create bonds of friendship, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts and to share positive experiences. This social

interaction is crucial for the development of a healthy and harmonious social life in the future (Arufe-Giráldez et al., 2023).

Through playful activities, the child learns to communicate, interact with others and understand social dynamics. One of the main aspects that the game favors is learning social rules. In the play environment, the child learns to respect the rules of the game, to share and collaborate with others. This helps him gain a sense of responsibility, understand the importance of mutual respect, and manage his emotions in a social context.

During play, the child has the opportunity to interact with his peers, communicate his desires, express his emotions and understand those of others. Through verbal and non-verbal communication, learn to listen, understand, negotiate, and resolve conflicts peacefully. These communication skills will be fundamental in daily life and future interpersonal relationships (Arufe-Giráldez et al., 2023).

In addition, play allows you to develop social skills such as empathy, an essential skill for understanding and respecting the emotions and feelings of others. Through role-play, the child can put himself in another person's shoes, understand his needs and find appropriate solutions. In this way, he learns to be empathetic and develop a sense of solidarity and understanding towards others.

In particular, team games represent an intricate fabric of shared personalities, emotions and goals. By participating in them, children immerse themselves in a community that requires and promotes empathy, communication, and collaboration. This immersion creates an environment where team members not only understand their own strengths and weaknesses but also learn to accept those of others, thus building a deep sense of identity and belonging.

One of the most significant aspects of teamwork is its ability to develop mental resilience. The ups and downs, the victories and defeats, and the unforeseen challenges, help to forge an individual capable of facing adversity at their best not only on the field, but in everyday life. Learning to manage stress and anxiety in pressured situations, adapting to ever-changing scenarios, and staying focused towards a common goal are all skills that find their origin in the heart of teamwork (Lähdesmäki, Maunumäki, & Nurmi, 2023).

In addition, the social aspect of teamwork offers an antidote to loneliness, a condition that is increasingly prevalent in modern society. By creating support networks and promoting positive interactions, teamwork encourages lasting bonds and a sense of solidarity. This environment not only dispels isolation but also nurtures personal and interpersonal trust, providing a foundation for solid collective well-being.

Immersing yourself in team sports means entering a world where collaboration, strategy and emotions are intertwined in a unique experience. One of the main psychological benefits of group play is the strengthening of self-esteem. Every step, winning strategy or gesture of support between teammates serves to build self-confidence. This continuous process of learning and sharing achievements highlights personal abilities, encouraging a more positive view of oneself and one's abilities (Aslam et al., 2024).

Equally crucial is the development of social skills. Team sports are a melting pot of different personalities, where communication is key. Learning to interact, share ideas, express support or even discuss constructively are fundamental aspects that enrich

interpersonal relationships. This social awareness, honed in the field, then translates into greater empathy and collaboration skills in daily life (Muratovna, 2023).

In addition, we cannot ignore how group play contributes significantly to stress management. The physicality of the sport, combined with the atmosphere of solidarity and support from teammates, creates an experience that can significantly reduce stress and anxiety levels. It is a time when everyday worries can be put aside, leaving room for a sense of belonging and a collective focus on shared goals.

Last but not least, group play promotes mental resilience. Facing defeats, accepting constructive criticism and working together to overcome difficulties are experiences that temper the spirit and the mind. Not only does this help people better manage future challenges, but it also prepares them to face life's uncertainties with greater balance.

### **3. The role of the teacher in the enhancement of play**

Teachers who consider play a fundamental activity must be able to balance structured activities, routines and moments of spontaneous play. Good time planning and a careful attitude during the transition from one activity to another can help create a school environment that is conducive to authentic play (Gréhaigne, Richard, & Griffin, 2012).

The proposed play activities should not be monotonous or repetitive, but should be adapted to the children's skills and abilities, stimulating their development. Even the most structured activities should be characterized by a playful approach, so as not to create a dichotomy between play and work.

It is also important to provide ample opportunities for free play, with a properly prepared environment. Adults must take on the role of observers when their intervention is not required, avoiding acting as referees of the game, but rather acting as directors of the playful film created by the children. These directors can also become actors, participating and sharing the playful experience with children (Johnston, Roskowski, He, Kong, & Chen, 2021).

Playful activities must be adapted to the child's skills and abilities and stimulating for development, neither forcibly repetitive nor stereotyped. It is necessary to find the balance between the need to organize, design and "direct" and that of allowing children to experience themselves and the world in complete freedom and safety.

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1. Motivate the class group - Motivation is the main drive because it is what incites the children to accept the challenge, to believe in themselves and to become passionate about the proposed activities. Creating motivation means organizing a welcoming environment with stimulating activities, respectful of the needs of that specific age group and projected to meet the needs of the pupils. In this way, the class feels ready to conquer those skills that are only apparently practical-instrumental because they hide moral, cultural and didactic information.
2. Focus on individuality - To obtain the desired results, it is necessary to start from the child understood as "uniqueness" with his feelings, his inner world, his psycho-physical balance, his potential and limits, his previous knowledge and the specific goals that are intended to be achieved, helping him to acquire important *skills* such as *problem solving*, the ability to collaborate, to be with others without wanting to prevail but finding one's right place there.
3. Coordinating each activity - The most difficult task of the teacher is probably the coordination of activities. This means matching the *location*, which must be appropriate to the type of activity, the work to be done, which must follow specific canons, and the interest of the class. A complex job that requires planning to assign homework to each student and explain well the type of work to be done, also creating expectations that stimulate them to do better and better.
4. Create socialization – the educational approach must start from the individual to perfect itself in the group, the true meeting point of every human being. Teaching that stops at the individual does not encourage growth and training since the real strength is to give life to a conscious, active and responsible member of society. In this direction, the classroom as a small social group becomes a sort of gym to train every day to enter real society, where we expect to find passionate men and women, responsible for their actions and capable of dealing with even the most critical situations.

#### **4. The Game-Sport as a model for the creation of a Bullying-free school environment**

Bullying is fought first of all on its territory, that is, at school, but not only. The other important ally is the game, team sport, movement, which together with school and family, has always been a pillar of youth education. It is precisely from his role that we should start to combat the phenomenon of bullying (Sgrò, & Lipoma, 2019).



Healthy sports play, far from economic interests and unattainable goals, is a fundamental ally in the fight against bullying for its undoubted social and educational value. The gym thus represents a serene, sincere, loyal environment, a positive outlet to release those tensions that would otherwise explode into bad attitudes.

Furthermore, educating about sport means training new aware and responsible citizens, capable of taking the field against violence and exclusion (Coco, 2014a).

Among the didactic indications related to motor activities, in fact, the most convincing and the most shared is the following "*Motor activities, to be functional and positively affect all dimensions of the personality, must be practiced in a playful, varied, multipurpose and participatory form*".

To implement all this, the essential and irreplaceable tool is the game-sport. The term gamesport does not mean miniature sport, nor specific training to learn the fundamentals (technical-executive models), but it means an activity that serves to offer the child wide-ranging opportunities with his total involvement from a cognitive, emotional, social and motor point of view (Farne, 2010).

The game-sport activity can be inspired by one or more sports disciplines (*individual or collective*), but this should not be understood as early training in one or more sports disciplines (*conditioning, exercise rhythms, times and training to be respected, etc.*), which end up denying the participatory and playful component of the subject.

It is configured as an important laboratory of pro-sociality, of education to respect others and legality, which can fill the great void, the sense of loneliness, the desert of superficial relationships, the lack of any empathic communication between peers or with adults, which are the basis of aggressive and violent behavior, linked to manifestations of bullying and cyberbullying (Bortolotti, & Ceciliani, 2010).

The School, through the enhancement and enhancement of this activity, supported by the other Agencies, can play a fundamental role, creating, within it, Youth Aggregation Centers (such as Game-Sport Centers and School Sports Centers), in which activities can be carried out at a recreational-promotional level or at a competitive level (participation in activities organized at an institutional level). Ultimately, it is a matter of giving children back the spaces of freedom, imagination, play and protagonism, which today's society has taken away from them.

In this perspective, recreational-motor-sports activity, which invests various multifunctional fields of meaning, from the strictly enabling-performance to the hygienic, healthy and behavioral, certainly constitutes a privileged tool for the development of children's way of thinking, feeling and acting (Farné, 2024).

Respect for the rule and for others, which represents the way of being of the game and sport, must be experienced as a daily mental habit and as a permanent lifestyle, which translate into responsible *action* within the community to which one belongs, with a view to a complete development of relational skills. The comparison and the personal technical-competitive potential must thus be conveyed in constructive and productive terms, using maturity of judgment and full emotional balance. Self-affirmation and self-promotion, through sport, in particular, takes the form of a personal life project in which other subjects are necessary partners, with whom to confront each other, whether they are teammates or opponents to beat. The internalization of the sports rule, transferred to first-hand experience, thus becomes a permanent ethical and cultural heritage, which facilitates personal participation in civil and social life (Coco, 2014b).

Schools and all educational agencies operating in the area, having to pursue an *educational mission* that promotes the development of the person also from an emotional, socio-relational and behavioral point of view, through the use of recreational-motor-sports activities, must study and implement intervention strategies, which serve to prevent and stem the phenomenon of deviant behavior, such as bullying and cyberbullying, which concern not only individuals, but also and above all the peer group as a whole and, above all, increasingly lower age groups.

## 5. Conclusions

Movement and play, essential moments in the child's growth, respond to a primary need of the person and, through correct interdisciplinary action, contribute to his harmonious development, promote the culture of respect for others and respect for the rules and represent important vehicles for social inclusion and contrast to problems related to youth discomfort. In order to create contexts of experience that allow the coexistence of diversity and respect the different characteristics of the subjects, movement experiences must be proposed through teaching that contributes to the construction of a positive and welcoming relational environment. From this point of view, a child who finds passion, friendship and trust through play and sport will be a satisfied, motivated and self-confident child who will not need to find other emotions in bullying episodes.

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