



Teacher's Strategies to Reduce Peer-Group Bullying for Strengthening Elementary Student's Mental Health

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Article History:

Received: Jan 09, 2026

Revised: Feb 05, 2026

Accepted: Apr 12, 2026

Online First: May 01, 2026

Keywords:

Bullying,
Elementary Students,
Friendship Circle,
Mental Health,
Teacher Strategies.

Kata Kunci:

Circle Pertemanan,
Kesehatan Mental,
Perundungan,
Siswa Sekolah Dasar,
Strategi Guru.

How to cite:

Kusumaningrum, D. A. R., & Minsih, M. (2026). Teacher's Strategies to Reduce Peer-Group Bullying for Strengthening Elementary Student's Mental Health. *Edunesia : Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan*, 7(2), 1313-1325.

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Abstract: This study examines how exclusive friendship circles trigger bullying and how teachers respond to strengthen elementary students' mental health at SD Negeri 2 Giritontro, Wonogiri, Central Java. Using a qualitative case study, data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation involving teachers, sixth-grade students, and school records. The findings show that bullying occurs in verbal, social, and physical forms. Verbal bullying includes teasing and derogatory naming, social bullying involves exclusion from peer activities, and physical bullying includes pushing, hitting, and hair pulling. These behaviors emerge from dominant peer-group dynamics that create in-group and out-group boundaries. Bullying negatively affects victims' mental health by reducing confidence, increasing fear, causing social withdrawal, and disrupting learning engagement. Teachers address bullying through preventive, repressive, and curative strategies, including class rules, supervision, immediate reprimands, and emotional support. The study highlights the importance of addressing peer-group dynamics to create a safe, inclusive, and supportive school environment for children and strengthen students' social development and well-being.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana circle pertemanan eksklusif memicu perundungan dan bagaimana guru merespons untuk memperkuat kesehatan mental siswa sekolah dasar di SD Negeri 2 Giritontro, Wonogiri, Jawa Tengah. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif studi kasus, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan guru, siswa kelas VI, dan arsip sekolah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perundungan muncul dalam bentuk verbal, sosial, dan fisik. Perundungan verbal meliputi ejekan dan pemberian nama yang merendahkan, perundungan sosial berupa pengucilan dari aktivitas teman sebaya, sedangkan perundungan fisik mencakup mendorong, memukul, dan menarik rambut. Perilaku tersebut muncul karena dinamika kelompok yang dominan dan membentuk batas antara kelompok dalam dan luar. Perundungan berdampak negatif pada kesehatan mental korban, seperti menurunnya kepercayaan diri, meningkatnya rasa takut, menarik diri dari pergaulan, dan terganggunya keterlibatan belajar. Guru mengatasinya melalui strategi preventif, represif, dan kuratif. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya penanganan dinamika kelompok sebaya agar sekolah mampu menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang aman, inklusif, dan mendukung perkembangan sosial siswa.

A. Introduction

Elementary school is a crucial stage in a child's development, as it plays a significant role in instilling values and shaping character, which ultimately contributes to the formation of moral behavior. Childhood represents a transitional phase marked by substantial physical and emotional changes that influence students' behavior and social interactions (Agustin et al., 2024). At this stage, students often exhibit diverse behavioral problems, such as emotional instability, impulsiveness, and difficulty distinguishing between right and wrong (Minsih, Mujahid, et al., 2025). Furthermore, the rapid advancement of technology has increased children's exposure to digital devices and social media, which may expose them to inappropriate content and negative interactions, including bullying and social exclusion (Wijonarko et al., 2024). These conditions highlight the urgency of addressing behavioral issues that may threaten students' well-being.

In Indonesia, bullying has become a serious educational issue. The country ranks fifth out of 78 countries with the highest number of students experiencing bullying (Amila et al., 2023). Bullying cases are most prevalent in elementary and junior high schools, accounting for 25% of total cases, followed by senior high and vocational schools at 18.75%, while Islamic junior high schools and boarding schools each account for 6.25% (Zulqurnain & Thoha, 2022). Considering that most victims are underage students, the high prevalence of bullying indicates an urgent need for effective interventions and preventive measures within the educational system (Hadinata & Habiby, 2024).

Bullying in schools is defined as repeated aggressive behavior carried out by individuals or groups against those perceived as weaker (Kamila, 2025). In elementary schools, bullying manifests in various forms, including verbal, social, physical, and cyberbullying, all of which can negatively affect students' development. This issue is particularly concerning because elementary school children are highly vulnerable to peer influence and social dynamics, which may lead to psychological problems. In many cases, bullying is normalized as a form of joking without considering its harmful impact on victims (Kurnia et al., 2024). Such conditions indicate that bullying is not merely an individual issue but is closely related to the social environment in which students interact.

This phenomenon can be observed in various schools, including SD Negeri 2 Giritontro, Wonogiri, Central Java, where students experience bullying behaviors such as exclusion from peer groups and negative treatment from classmates. These behaviors often take the form of verbal, social, physical, and cyberbullying, which can lead to long-term mental health problems (Kurnia et al., 2024). Mental health among elementary school students is a critical yet often overlooked aspect of education (Minsih, Destya, et al., 2025). Mental health refers to a state of psychological well-being characterized by feelings of calmness, safety, and inner peace (Taufik, 2020). However, bullying can lead to severe consequences, including low self-esteem, academic decline, psychological distress, and even suicidal ideation among victims (Lubis & Dafit, 2024).

Previous studies have extensively examined the forms, causes, and impacts of bullying, as well as strategies to address it. However, limited attention has been given to the

role of friendship circles as a primary trigger of bullying behavior in elementary school settings. Exclusive friendship groups can create social boundaries that encourage exclusion, dominance, and collective aggressive behavior toward students outside the group. This indicates that bullying is not only influenced by individual factors but also by group dynamics within peer relationships. Therefore, this study offers a novel perspective by focusing on how friendship circles contribute to bullying behavior and how these dynamics influence students' mental health.

Teachers play a crucial role in preventing and addressing bullying in schools, as they act not only as educators but also as mentors and guides in shaping students' behavior (Amila et al., 2023; Lubis & Dafit, 2024; Sukawati et al., 2020). In this context, understanding effective teacher strategies is essential to create a safe and supportive learning environment. Therefore, this study aims to examine: (1) how friendship circles contribute to bullying behavior among elementary school students, (2) how such bullying affects students' mental health, and (3) how teachers implement preventive, repressive, and curative strategies to address bullying. This study contributes to the literature by integrating social dynamics and teacher intervention strategies, thereby providing both theoretical insights and practical implications for strengthening students' mental health in elementary education.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine bullying phenomena arising from friendship circles and their implications for students' mental health at SD Negeri 2 Giritontro, Wonogiri, Central Java, as well as the strategies used by teachers in prevention and intervention. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation of teaching and learning activities involving students and teachers. The study utilized both primary data obtained from observations of students' behavior and interactions, classroom and school documentation, and interviews with sixth grade students who were victims or perpetrators of bullying, their peers, and teachers, and secondary data including school documents, bullying case archives, and relevant literature. Data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation by comparing information from multiple informants and cross-checking findings from interviews, observations, and documentation. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al (2020), consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, with continuous verification to ensure consistency between findings and field conditions. The overall research procedure is illustrated in Figure 1, which outlines the research flow starting from problem identification, data collection, data analysis, to the interpretation and conclusion of findings.

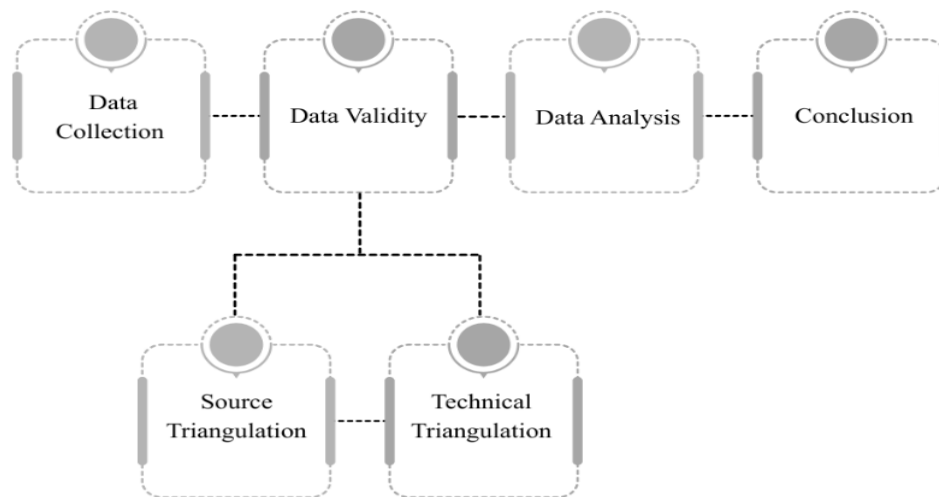


Figure 1. Research Flow

C. Result

This study found that bullying in the sixth grade at SD Negeri 2 Giritontro emerged in relation to peer-group dynamics and was expressed through verbal, social, and physical forms. These bullying behaviors affected students' comfort in learning, peer interaction, and emotional well-being, while teachers responded through preventive, repressive, and curative strategies to maintain a safe classroom climate.

Friendship Circle as the Core Trigger

Observations showed that sixth-grade students tended to cluster in exclusive friendship circles, spending more time with their own groups during learning, breaks, and informal activities. These circles created social boundaries between in-group and out-group students, and in several cases, the most dominant child in a group influenced peers to engage in bullying behavior toward classmates outside the circle. This pattern suggests that bullying did not arise only from individual aggression, but from group dynamics that normalized exclusion and domination.

Forms of Bullying

The bullying identified in this study appeared in three main forms. Verbal bullying included teasing, calling classmates by their parents' names, and using degrading nicknames. Social bullying was shown through exclusion, not inviting certain students to play, and intentionally isolating them from peer activities. Physical bullying included pushing, hitting, hair pulling, and other direct aggressive actions. The findings indicate a progression from verbal ridicule to social exclusion and, in some cases, physical aggression when conflict escalated within peer groups.

Table 1. Forms of Bullying Resulting from Friendship Circles

Aspect	Observation results	Interview results
Student interaction in friendships	Students were seen to be more active and play more with their respective circles of friends, while students outside these groups tended to be less involved.	The teacher said that there were quite a few friendship circles in the sixth grade, but sometimes bullying behavior emerged from these small groups. For example, there was one student who was the most daring or liked to boss others around, and would encourage his friends to bully other students.
Form of bullying	Bullying that often occurs in sixth grade includes verbal, social, and physical bullying. Examples of verbal bullying include students frequently teasing their friends and calling them names related to their parents. Examples of social bullying include ostracizing friends, while physical bullying includes pushing, hitting, and hair pulling.	The teacher said that bullying in sixth grade includes teasing, calling classmates by their parents' names, and calling classmates by names that are not their own. Students often exclude their classmates without any apparent reason, and they like to use physical violence such as hitting, pushing, and hair pulling.
The impact of bullying on victims	Victims of bullying become quiet, withdrawn, and lack confidence when interacting with their peers.	Teachers say that students who are victims of bullying usually become quiet, shy, and find it difficult to interact with their friends. These children can become angry or offended immediately if they are called by their parents' names.

Table 1 illustrates that bullying occurs in three interconnected forms verbal, social, and physical closely linked to friendship circle dynamics. Verbal bullying, such as teasing and derogatory nicknames, often emerges first and is normalized as joking. It then develops into social bullying through exclusion and isolation, reflecting strong in-group and out-group boundaries. As conflicts escalate, these patterns may lead to physical bullying, including pushing and hitting. These findings indicate a progression from verbal to social and physical aggression, showing that bullying is a dynamic process shaped by peer-group interactions rather than individual actions alone.

Impact on Mental Health

The victims of bullying showed clear behavioral and emotional changes, including becoming quieter, more withdrawn, less confident, and reluctant to interact with peers. These conditions also affected learning, as the students became less enthusiastic, had difficulty concentrating, and felt less comfortable participating in class. In contrast, the perpetrators often displayed dominant behavior and encouraged ridicule within their group. Overall, the findings show that bullying had a direct negative impact on students' mental health and social development.

Table 2. Impact of Bullying on Students' Mental Health

Aspect	Observation Results	Interview Results
Emotional condition	Students appeared more withdrawn, quiet, and less confident in interacting with peers	Teachers reported that victims often feel shy, insecure, and easily offended when teased or called inappropriate names
Social interaction	Victims tended to isolate themselves and avoided participating in group activities	Students stated that they preferred to stay away from peers due to fear of being bullied again
Learning behavior	Students showed decreased enthusiasm for learning and difficulty concentrating in class	Teachers observed that victims were less active in class and reluctant to engage in learning activities
Psychological pressure	Students experienced fear, discomfort, and emotional distress in the school environment	Victims expressed feelings of anxiety and fear when interacting with certain peer groups

Table 2 demonstrates that bullying significantly affects students' mental health across emotional, social, and academic dimensions. Victims tend to become withdrawn, less confident, and socially isolated due to fear of repeated negative experiences. This condition also impacts learning, as students show decreased motivation, reduced participation, and difficulty concentrating. Furthermore, bullying creates psychological pressure in the form of fear, anxiety, and emotional distress, indicating that its effects extend beyond short-term reactions and disrupt students' overall well-being, thus requiring comprehensive intervention.

Teacher Strategies

The findings also show that teachers applied three strategies in handling bullying: preventive, repressive, and curative. Preventive efforts included teaching students about bullying, establishing classroom rules, forming random groups, and continuously reminding students to respect one another. Repressive action was taken immediately when bullying occurred through reprimands, advice, and educational consequences. Curative efforts focused on personal monitoring, emotional support, and guiding both victims and perpetrators toward behavioral improvement. These strategies were strengthened through coordination with other school actors and parents when needed.

Table 3. Teacher Strategies for Reducing Bullying

Aspect	Observation results	Interview results
Preventive Strategy	Teachers were seen warning students to respect each other, monitoring student interactions in the classroom and school environment, and forming random study groups to prevent the formation of exclusive friendship circles.	Teachers convey that they provide students with an understanding of bullying and its impact, and establish strict classroom rules that prohibit all forms of bullying.
Repressive Strategy	When teasing or physical abuse occurs, teachers immediately reprimand the	The teacher explained that when bullying occurs, teachers

Aspect	Observation results	Interview results
	perpetrator and stop the action so that it does not continue.	immediately reprimand the perpetrator, give advice, engage the student in dialogue, and impose educational consequences.
Curative Strategy	After the bullying incident occurred, teachers were observed approaching the students involved personally and continuously monitoring the behavior of the perpetrators and the condition of the victims.	The teacher stated that after the bullying occurred, the teacher invited the perpetrator to talk privately, instructed them to apologize, improve their attitude, and continued to monitor the student's behavior so that they would not repeat the action.

Table 3 shows that teachers apply preventive, repressive, and curative strategies in addressing bullying. Preventive efforts include educating students, setting rules, monitoring interactions, and forming random groups to reduce exclusivity. Repressive actions involve immediate responses such as reprimands, guidance, and educational consequences. Curative strategies focus on follow-up through personal support, monitoring, and behavioral improvement. These findings indicate that effective bullying management requires integrated prevention, intervention, and sustained support.

Across the findings, a clear pattern emerged: exclusive friendship circles created social boundaries, those boundaries encouraged exclusion and aggression, bullying then affected students' mental health, and teacher intervention worked as a balancing mechanism. In other words, friendship groups functioned as both a social structure and a risk factor when their dynamics became exclusive and dominant. Teacher strategies were most effective when they addressed not only the behavior itself, but also the peer relations that sustained it.

Overall, the results demonstrate that bullying in this setting was strongly shaped by peer-group exclusivity and had serious consequences for students' emotional security and classroom participation. The study shows that friendship circles can become a major trigger of bullying when they foster exclusion, dominance, and collective aggression, while integrated teacher strategies can reduce these negative effects and support a more inclusive school environment.

D. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that bullying among elementary school students occurs in verbal, social, and physical forms and is strongly influenced by the dynamics of friendship circles. In the observed context, exclusive peer groups create clear in-group and out-group boundaries, where dominant individuals within the group can encourage others to engage in bullying behavior toward students perceived as weaker. This finding reinforces the view that bullying is not merely an individual act of aggression, but a social process shaped by group interactions and peer influence (Kamila, 2025). The forms of bullying

identified in this study are consistent with previous findings that classify bullying into verbal, social, and physical categories (Fatkhianti et al., 2023). However, this study further highlights that these forms often emerge sequentially, beginning with verbal ridicule, developing into social exclusion, and in some cases escalating into physical aggression. This progression occurs because friendship circles, while initially formed based on shared interests and a sense of belonging, can also produce negative group norms that legitimize exclusion and dominance (Umaira et al., 2025). In line with this, previous studies have identified multiple contributing factors to bullying, including family, school environment, and social context, with peer-group dynamics being one of the most influential (Andryawan et al., 2023). Thus, this study extends prior research by emphasizing that exclusive friendship circles function not only as a background context but as an active mechanism that facilitates bullying behavior.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that bullying has significant implications for students' mental health, affecting emotional, social, and academic dimensions simultaneously. Victims tend to become quieter, withdrawn, less confident, and reluctant to interact with peers, indicating a decline in self-esteem and social functioning. These conditions also disrupt the learning process, as students show decreased motivation, reduced participation, and difficulty concentrating in class. This supports previous research stating that bullying negatively impacts students' psychological well-being and academic performance (Dewi & Minsih, 2023). Moreover, the emotional pressure experienced by victims, such as fear, anxiety, and discomfort, reflects the broader impact of bullying on mental health, as highlighted by Kamila (2025), who emphasizes that repeated aggressive behavior can lead to long-term psychological disturbances. The findings are also consistent with Kurnia et al (2024), who argue that bullying is often underestimated as a form of joking, despite its serious consequences for victims. In the context of elementary education, where students are still in a critical stage of emotional and social development, these impacts become more significant (Minsih, Destya, et al., 2025). Therefore, this study confirms that bullying is not only a behavioral issue but also a major threat to students' mental health and overall development.

In response to these challenges, the study finds that teachers play a crucial role in addressing bullying through preventive, repressive, and curative strategies. Teachers are not only responsible for delivering academic content but also for guiding students' social and emotional development, as emphasized in previous studies (Yestiani & Zahwa, 2020; Putri & Dasalinda, 2023). The preventive strategies implemented, such as educating students about bullying, establishing classroom rules, and forming random groups, aim to reduce the formation of exclusive friendship circles and promote inclusive interactions. This aligns with the view that structured classroom management and social skill development can minimize negative peer dynamics (Wulandari et al., 2020; Rustanto et al., 2023). Meanwhile, repressive strategies, including immediate intervention, reprimands, and educational consequences, function to control and stop bullying behavior when it occurs, consistent with findings by Ningsih & Mulyani (2023). Curative strategies, such as providing

emotional support, personal guidance, and continuous monitoring, are essential for restoring victims' confidence and ensuring that perpetrators do not repeat their actions. This approach is supported by [Ardaniyah & Widiyono \(2023\)](#), who emphasize the importance of counseling and follow-up interventions in addressing bullying cases. These findings suggest that effective bullying management requires a comprehensive approach that integrates prevention, intervention, and recovery.

Overall, this study reveals a clear pattern in which exclusive friendship circles create social boundaries that encourage exclusion and aggressive behavior, which in turn negatively affects students' mental health, while teacher interventions serve as a critical mechanism to mitigate these effects. This integrated perspective highlights that bullying should be understood as a dynamic interaction between peer-group structures and individual behavior, rather than as isolated incidents. By demonstrating how friendship circles function as both social support systems and potential risk factors, this study contributes to the literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of bullying in elementary schools. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of addressing not only individual behavior but also the underlying social dynamics within peer groups to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

E. Implication

Building on the findings that bullying is shaped by peer-group dynamics and mitigated through structured teacher interventions, this study offers both theoretical and practical implications for primary education. Theoretically, it reinforces and extends prior research by demonstrating that bullying among elementary students is not solely driven by individual traits but is significantly constructed through social interactions, particularly exclusive friendship circles that create boundaries, normalize exclusion, and facilitate collective aggression. This perspective contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of bullying as a dynamic social process rather than isolated behavior. Practically, the study highlights the central role of teachers in addressing bullying through the integrated application of preventive, repressive, and curative strategies, which together function to disrupt harmful peer dynamics, control ongoing incidents, and support students' emotional recovery. These findings also underline the importance of early detection, continuous monitoring, and collaborative efforts among teachers, schools, and parents to identify and address bullying at its initial stages. By focusing not only on behavior but also on the underlying peer-group structures, this study emphasizes the need to create inclusive classroom environments that promote positive interactions and support students' mental well-being ([Minsih, Lawton, et al., 2024](#)).

F. Limitation and Suggestion for Further Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was conducted using a qualitative case study design in a single elementary school, which limits the generalizability of the results to

broader educational contexts. The findings are therefore context-specific and reflect the particular social dynamics and school environment of SD Negeri 2 Giritontro. Second, the data sources were primarily limited to teachers and students, without incorporating perspectives from parents, school counselors, or policymakers, which may provide a more comprehensive understanding of bullying dynamics and intervention strategies. Additionally, as the study relies on qualitative data, the interpretation of findings is subject to researcher perspective, although efforts were made to ensure validity through triangulation.

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to expand the scope by involving multiple schools with diverse characteristics to enhance the generalizability and comparative value of the findings. Further studies should also include a wider range of stakeholders, such as parents, school counselors, and school leaders, to explore bullying from a more holistic perspective. Moreover, future research could adopt mixed-method or quantitative approaches to measure the effectiveness of preventive, repressive, and curative strategies more systematically. It is also important to investigate intervention models that specifically target peer-group dynamics, particularly friendship circles, in order to develop more structured and scalable programs for preventing bullying and strengthening students' mental health in elementary education.

G. Conclusion

This study concludes that bullying among elementary school students is not merely an individual behavioral issue but a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by the dynamics of exclusive friendship circles. These peer-group structures create in-group and out-group boundaries that facilitate the emergence of bullying in verbal, social, and physical forms, often developing progressively from subtle ridicule to more overt aggression. Such conditions have significant implications for students' mental health, as victims experience emotional distress, social withdrawal, and decreased engagement in learning, indicating that bullying disrupts both psychological well-being and academic participation.

In addressing these challenges, teachers play a pivotal role through the integrated implementation of preventive, repressive, and curative strategies. Preventive efforts help reduce the formation of exclusive groups, repressive actions control ongoing bullying behavior, and curative approaches support recovery and behavioral change among students. These findings highlight that effective bullying intervention requires not only immediate responses to incidents but also sustained efforts to reshape peer interactions and create inclusive classroom environments. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of addressing both individual behavior and underlying social dynamics as a comprehensive approach to preventing bullying and strengthening students' mental health in primary education.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to express her deepest gratitude to her parents, supervisors, and friends for their direct and indirect support, which enabled this research to be completed successfully. The author also extends sincere thanks to the principal, teachers, and students of SDN 2 Giritontro, Wonogiri, Central Java, for their assistance and contributions throughout the research process.

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Author's Biography



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