

Family Bonding, Deviant Peer Affiliation and Aggression among High School Students in Quang Ninh Province: Directions for School Social Work

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Abstract: Adolescent aggression in school settings is embedded in close social relationships, particularly family and peer contexts. This study examined associations between family bonding, deviant peer affiliation, and aggression-related outcomes among high school students in Quang Ninh Province, Vietnam, and considered directions for school social work practice. A mixed-methods design was employed, with quantitative data from 127 students in Grades 10-12 supplemented by five in-depth interviews and one focus group involving six students. Family bonding was examined through emotional attachment, commitment to family life, involvement in family activities, and belief in family norms, while aggression-related outcomes were organized into aggressive attitudes, aggression-related emotional responses, and aggressive behaviors. Multivariable regression results indicated that stronger emotional attachment was associated with lower aggressive attitudes and emotional responses, whereas stronger family commitment was associated with lower aggressive attitudes and behaviors. Belief in family norms was negatively associated with aggressive behavior. Deviant peer affiliation was the only factor consistently and positively associated with all three aggression-related outcomes. Having a family member with deviant behavior and economic disadvantage were additionally associated with aggressive behavior. The findings suggest that family bonding is multidimensional rather than uniformly protective and that peer contexts should be considered alongside family relationships. School social work responses should therefore combine family-focused assessment, positive peer-network interventions, and coordinated case management for students experiencing multiple risks.

Keywords: family bonding; deviant peer affiliation; adolescent aggression; high school students; school social work.

1. INTRODUCTION

Aggression and violence in school settings are significant concerns for adolescent safety, psychosocial well-being, and educational participation. School-related violence encompasses a range of behaviors, including physical aggression, threats, verbal hostility, bullying, and other actions that may harm peers or disrupt a safe learning environment. UNESCO (2019) reported that approximately one in three students worldwide had experienced bullying by peers during the previous month, illustrating the scale of violence and aggression within educational settings. These experiences can affect not only immediate safety but also students' emotional well-being and engagement with school.

Adolescent aggression cannot be adequately understood as an individual-level problem alone. During adolescence, behavior develops within multiple close social relationships, of which the family and peer group are particularly influential. Families provide early and continuing experiences of emotional attachment, social expectations, behavioral norms, responsibility,

and conflict management. At the same time, peer relationships become increasingly salient as adolescents seek autonomy, social recognition, and belonging. Aggressive responses may therefore be related to both the strength of adolescents' bonds with their families and the behavioral norms circulating within their peer networks.

A substantial body of research supports the importance of family processes. Hoeve et al. (2009), in a meta-analysis of 161 studies, found meaningful associations between parenting dimensions and adolescent delinquency, with parental monitoring, psychological control, rejection, hostility, and support among the most relevant dimensions. A systematic review similarly found that relational family characteristics, including communication, parental involvement, support, maladaptive parenting, abuse, and neglect, were associated with bullying involvement (Nocentini et al., 2019). More recent meta-analytic evidence indicates that positive parenting is negatively associated with bullying perpetration, whereas negative, harsh, and uninvolved parenting are positively associated with bullying involvement (Chu & Chen, 2025).

Within Vietnam, Nguyen et al. (2019), using data from 3,331 students participating in the 2013 Global School-based Student Health Survey, found that parental understanding and monitoring were associated with lower likelihoods of bullying and several mental health problems. These findings suggest that close family relationships remain important during adolescence in the Vietnamese cultural context.

The present study approaches family relationships through Hirschi's (1969) Social Bond Theory. Hirschi proposed that attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief constitute major bonds linking individuals to conventional social relationships and norms. When such bonds are stronger, individuals have more relational and normative stakes that may constrain deviant behavior. Applied to family life, attachment refers to emotional closeness and responsiveness between adolescents and family members; commitment concerns adolescents' investment in family relationships and responsibilities; involvement reflects participation in family activities; and belief refers to acceptance of family norms and values.

These components should not be assumed to operate identically. Emotional closeness may be particularly relevant to affect regulation, whereas commitment or belief may be more closely related to behavioral restraint. Treating family bonding as multidimensional therefore provides greater analytical precision than combining family relationships into a single global score.

Peer relationships constitute a second major context. Sutherland's (1947) Differential Association Theory proposes that deviant behavior is learned through interaction with close others, including the learning of attitudes, motivations, rationalizations, and behavioral patterns favorable to norm violation. This framework is particularly relevant during adolescence, when peer approval and group membership assume increased importance. Longitudinal evidence has shown that affiliation with deviant peers predicts subsequent adolescent aggression even when family processes are considered simultaneously (Benson & Buehler, 2012).

The family and peer contexts may therefore represent distinct but interconnected sources of protection and risk. A supportive family relationship may strengthen emotional and normative bonds, whereas repeated affiliation with peers who normalize aggressive or deviant behavior may reinforce aggressive attitudes and practices. Importantly, deviant peer affiliation should not be interpreted as a simple one-way causal process. Adolescents with pre-existing aggressive tendencies may also select peers with similar behavioral characteristics.

Existing studies in Vietnam have provided valuable evidence regarding parent-adolescent relationships and school-related adverse experiences, but fewer studies have simultaneously examined multiple dimensions of family bonding and deviant peer affiliation in relation to different forms of aggression. Moreover, aggressive attitudes, emotional responses, and overt aggressive behavior may not have identical correlates.

Accordingly, this study examines the associations of family bonding and deviant peer affiliation with three aggression-related outcomes among high school students in Quang Ninh Province: aggressive attitudes, aggression-related emotional responses, and aggressive behaviors. Family structure, economic disadvantage, and exposure to deviant behavior within the family are considered as contextual variables. Based on the empirical findings, the study also identifies focused directions for school social work practice.

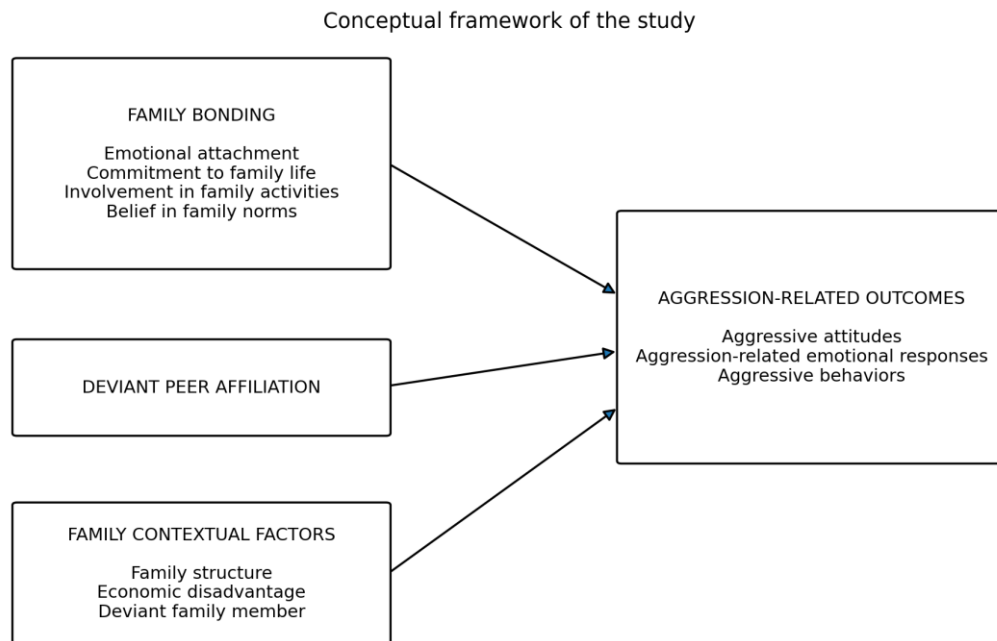


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Note. Arrows represent hypothesized statistical associations rather than causal pathways.

2. METHODS

2.1. Study design and participants

The study employed a mixed-methods design in which quantitative analysis constituted the primary component and qualitative data were used to provide contextual interpretation. Data collection and analysis were conducted between September 2024 and December 2025 among students attending selected high schools in Quang Ninh Province.

A convenience sampling procedure was used. Of 200 questionnaires distributed, 127 valid questionnaires were included in the analysis, corresponding to a valid response rate of 63.5%. The sample consisted of 51 male students, 74 female students, and two students reporting another gender category. There were 60 Grade 10 students, 10 Grade 11 students, and 57 Grade 12 students.

The qualitative component comprised five in-depth interviews with students who had experiences related to aggression or school violence and one focus group discussion with six students. Interviews explored family relationships, emotional experiences, peer interactions, conflicts, and responses to interpersonal disagreements. Qualitative material was used to contextualize quantitative patterns rather than to estimate prevalence.

Because participants were recruited through convenience sampling, the study was designed to identify patterns of association within the surveyed sample rather than to generate population estimates for all high school students in Quang Ninh Province.

2.2. Measures

The questionnaire used in the original study was developed within a NAFOSTED research project and included indicators informed partly by the Aggression Scale developed by Orpinas and Frankowski (2001). The original Aggression Scale comprises 11 self-report items assessing aggressive behavior among young adolescents. The instrument used in the present dataset, however, contained 16 aggression-related indicators and was therefore not identical to the original scale.

In the original analysis, these indicators were organized into three empirical groups: aggressive attitudes, aggression-related emotional responses, and aggressive behaviors. These three categories are treated in this article as study-specific analytical outcomes and should not be interpreted as the established factor structure of the original Orpinas and Frankowski scale.

Aggressive attitudes had an internal consistency coefficient of $\alpha = .701$. Aggression-related emotional responses, principally reflecting anger-related reactions, had $\alpha = .693$. Aggressive behaviors, including threats, pushing, fighting, bullying, and related overt behaviors, had high internal consistency ($\alpha = .916$). Higher scores indicated greater levels of the corresponding aggression-related outcome.

Family bonding was operationalized using the four dimensions derived from Hirschi's (1969) framework. Emotional attachment was measured using eight indicators reflecting emotional closeness, parental support, perceived parental love, comfort in being with parents, and openness in parent-adolescent communication ($\alpha = .877$). Involvement in family activities reflected participation in household tasks, family decision making, interaction with relatives, spending time with family members, and caring for family members ($\alpha = .713$). Belief in family norms and values assessed endorsement of respect for parents, family unity, relational closeness, and mutual sharing ($\alpha = .771$). Commitment to family life reflected concern for family members, willingness to support relatives, responsibility toward parents, and investment in future family relationships ($\alpha = .744$). Higher scores represented stronger bonding on the respective dimension.

Deviant peer affiliation represented students' relationships with peers exhibiting deviant behavior and constituted the primary social-context predictor outside the family. Additional contextual variables included family structure, economic disadvantage, and whether a family member exhibited deviant behavior. These variables were treated as contextual correlates rather than components of family bonding.

2.3. Data analysis

Quantitative analyses included descriptive statistics, group comparisons, and multivariable linear regression. Separate regression models were estimated for aggressive attitudes, aggression-related emotional responses, and aggressive behaviors. The original analysis used backward elimination to identify predictors retained in the final models.

Because the study was cross-sectional, all findings are interpreted as associations, not causal effects. In addition, some small family-structure subgroups were not used to support substantive conclusions.

The archived regression results contained inconsistencies in the reporting of standardized coefficients for several variables. Accordingly, this article gives priority to unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, and reported p values where these were internally interpretable. Sex-related coefficients are not interpreted substantively because the direction of the regression coefficients could not be reconciled with descriptive group comparisons in the archived results.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Descriptive characteristics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the three aggression-related outcomes. Mean scores were relatively low, although variation was substantial, particularly for aggressive behavior.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for aggression-related outcomes

Outcome	Min	Max	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Aggressive attitudes	0	11	1.84	3.41	.701
Aggression-related emotional responses	0	9	2.78	2.67	.693
Aggressive behaviors	0	17	2.30	5.39	.916

The relatively large standard deviation for aggressive behavior suggests considerable heterogeneity within the sample. Most students reported relatively low levels of overt aggression, while a smaller subgroup reported substantially higher levels.

Qualitative accounts indicated that aggressive reactions were commonly situated within interpersonal conflicts, including peer-group disputes, arguments originating on social media, perceived insults, threats, pushing, and arrangements to fight following interpersonal disagreements. These qualitative accounts were used to clarify the contexts in which aggression occurred rather than as evidence of prevalence.

3.2. Family bonding, peer affiliation, and aggressive attitudes and emotional responses

Table 2 summarizes the final regression results for the focal predictors.

Table 2. Family and peer factors associated with aggression-related outcomes

Outcome and predictor	B	SE	p
Aggressive attitudes			
Commitment to family life	−0.34	0.10	.002
Emotional attachment	−0.14	0.06	.021
Deviant peer affiliation	0.96	0.28	.001
Single-parent family	1.74	0.75	.026
Belief in family norms	0.25	0.13	.066
Aggression-related emotional responses			
Emotional attachment	−0.17	0.04	.001
Deviant peer affiliation	0.87	0.27	.002
Economic disadvantage	1.53	0.88	.091
Aggressive behaviors			
Commitment to family life	−0.66	0.10	.001
Belief in family norms	−0.36	0.15	.020
Deviant peer affiliation	1.66	0.34	.001
Deviant family member	7.54	2.18	.001
Economic disadvantage	7.75	1.19	.001

Note. *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient. Sex was included in the original emotional-response and behavioral models but is not interpreted here because inconsistencies between the original descriptive and regression results prevented reliable reconstruction of its coding.

For aggressive attitudes, two dimensions of family bonding were negatively associated with the outcome. Stronger commitment to family life was associated with lower aggressive attitudes ($B = -0.34$, $p = .002$), as was stronger emotional attachment ($B = -0.14$, $p = .021$). In contrast, deviant peer affiliation showed a positive association ($B = 0.96$, $p = .001$). Single-parent family status was also positively associated with aggressive attitudes, although this result requires caution because of the relatively small subgroup. Belief in family norms did not reach the conventional .05 significance threshold.

For aggression-related emotional responses, emotional attachment was negatively associated with the outcome ($B = -0.17$, $p = .001$), whereas deviant peer affiliation was positively associated ($B = 0.87$, $p = .002$). Economic disadvantage did not reach conventional statistical significance ($p = .091$). These results suggest that emotional attachment to family was relevant to both aggressive attitudes and anger-related emotional responses, whereas deviant peer affiliation was associated with higher scores on both outcomes.

3.3. Family bonding, peer affiliation, and aggressive behavior

A somewhat broader pattern was observed for overt aggressive behavior. Commitment to family life was negatively associated with aggressive behavior ($B = -0.66$, $p = .001$), and belief in family norms was also negatively associated with aggressive behavior ($B = -0.36$, $p = .020$). By contrast, deviant peer affiliation was positively associated with aggressive behavior ($B = 1.66$, $p = .001$).

Two contextual family variables were additionally associated with aggressive behavior. Having a family member exhibiting deviant behavior was associated with higher aggressive behavior scores ($B = 7.54$, $p = .001$), as was economic disadvantage ($B = 7.75$, $p = .001$).

Across all three models, deviant peer affiliation was the only predictor that demonstrated a statistically significant association in the same direction with every aggression-related outcome. Family bonding showed a more differentiated pattern: emotional attachment was associated with attitudes and emotional responses, commitment was associated with attitudes and behavior, and belief in family norms was associated with behavior. Involvement in family activities did not remain a statistically significant predictor in the final models.

4. DISCUSSION

The study examined how multiple dimensions of family bonding and deviant peer affiliation were associated with aggression-related outcomes among high school students in Quang Ninh Province. Three findings are particularly important. First, family bonding was not uniformly associated with aggression; different bonding dimensions corresponded to different outcomes. Second, deviant peer affiliation was the most consistent correlate across aggressive attitudes, emotional responses, and behavior. Third, overt aggressive behavior was associated not only with weaker aspects of family bonding and peer deviance but also with broader contextual vulnerabilities, including exposure to deviant behavior within the family and economic disadvantage.

4.1. Family bonding is multidimensional

The findings broadly support the relevance of Hirschi's (1969) social bond framework but also suggest that the four components should not be treated as interchangeable.

Emotional attachment was negatively associated with aggressive attitudes and aggression-related emotional responses. Adolescents who experience greater emotional closeness, support, and openness in family relationships may have more relational resources available when managing interpersonal tension. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that supportive parent-adolescent relationships are associated with better behavioral outcomes. Hoeve et al. (2009) identified parental support, rejection, hostility, and monitoring as important correlates of delinquency, while Nocentini et al. (2019) found relatively consistent links between relational family processes and bullying behavior. Recent meta-analytic findings similarly suggest that positive parenting is associated with less bullying perpetration (Chu & Chen, 2025).

The Vietnamese evidence is also relevant. Nguyen et al. (2019) found that parental understanding and monitoring were associated with lower likelihoods of bullying and several mental health difficulties among Vietnamese adolescents. The present results extend this general pattern by suggesting that emotional attachment may be related not only to overt behavior but also to aggression-related attitudes and emotional reactions.

Commitment to family life was associated with lower aggressive attitudes and aggressive behavior. In Hirschi's framework, commitment reflects an individual's investment in conventional relationships and goals. Adolescents who place greater value on family responsibility and their future relationships may perceive more relational costs associated with engaging in aggressive behavior.

Belief in family norms was negatively associated with overt aggressive behavior but did not show a statistically significant protective association with aggressive attitudes. One possible interpretation is that acceptance of family norms may be more directly related to behavioral restraint than to eliminating anger or aggressive cognitions. This interpretation remains tentative, however, because the cross-sectional design does not permit examination of the psychological processes linking norms to behavior.

Importantly, involvement in family activities was not retained in any of the final regression models. The results therefore do not support the assumption that all four dimensions of family bonding are equally protective. Simply participating in family activities may not be equivalent to experiencing emotional closeness or developing a meaningful commitment to family relationships. This distinction is useful for both research and practice. Family-based approaches should focus not merely on the amount of time adolescents spend with relatives but on the relational quality of that time, including emotional availability, communication, trust, and reciprocal responsibility.

4.2. Deviant peer affiliation is the most consistent correlate

Deviant peer affiliation was positively associated with all three aggression-related outcomes. This was the most consistent empirical pattern in the study.

The finding is compatible with Sutherland's (1947) Differential Association Theory, which emphasizes that individuals learn not only deviant behaviors but also motivations, definitions, and justifications through close social interaction. In adolescent peer networks, aggressive responses can become socially reinforced when retaliation, intimidation, or physical dominance are viewed as acceptable ways of handling conflict.

The result is also consistent with longitudinal evidence. Benson and Buehler (2012), using four waves of data from 416 adolescents and their families, found that deviant peer affiliation predicted subsequent aggression even when family processes were considered. Their findings demonstrate that peer relationships represent a distinct developmental context rather than merely a reflection of family experiences.

However, the present findings should not be interpreted as showing that deviant friends cause aggression. Cross-sectional data cannot distinguish peer socialization from peer selection. Adolescents already inclined toward aggression may actively associate with similar peers, while repeated interaction within such networks may subsequently reinforce aggressive responses. These processes can operate simultaneously.

The association with all three outcomes is particularly noteworthy. Peer contexts may be relevant not only once aggression becomes overt but also at the level of attitudes and emotional reactions. This suggests that prevention strategies focused solely on students who have already engaged in serious physical aggression may intervene too late.

4.3. Contextual family vulnerability and aggression

The behavioral model also identified two contextual factors: exposure to a family member with deviant behavior and economic disadvantage.

The association between a deviant family member and aggressive behavior suggests that families may simultaneously provide protective bonds and expose adolescents to problematic behavioral models. Strong family relationships should therefore not be considered automatically protective regardless of the behavioral environment within the household. Assessment needs to address both relationship quality and the behaviors and norms to which adolescents are exposed.

Economic disadvantage was also positively associated with aggressive behavior. This finding is consistent with the broader literature. Piotrowska et al. (2015), in a systematic review and meta-analysis of 133 studies involving 339,868 participants, found that lower family socioeconomic status was associated with higher levels of broadly defined antisocial behavior.

Yet poverty itself should not be treated as an individual or family deficit. Economic disadvantage may be associated with multiple unmeasured processes, such as parental stress, resource constraints, family conflict, social exclusion, reduced access to support, or neighborhood-level adversity. Because these mechanisms were not directly assessed, the current study cannot determine why economic disadvantage was associated with aggressive behavior.

The same caution applies to family structure. Although descriptive analyses indicated higher aggression scores among some students not living with both biological parents, several subgroups were very small. Family structure should therefore not be used as a proxy for family dysfunction or as an independent risk label.

4.4. Directions for school social work

The findings support a school social work approach that moves beyond responding to isolated incidents and instead assesses adolescents within their relational environments.

Family-focused assessment and intervention should prioritize the quality of attachment, communication, and commitment rather than relying on family structure as a risk marker. For students displaying aggression-related emotional or behavioral difficulties, school social workers can assess whether adolescents have emotionally accessible caregivers, whether family communication allows discussion of conflict, and whether family relationships provide meaningful expectations and responsibilities. Depending on need, intervention may involve adolescent counseling, parent consultation, joint family sessions, or referral to more specialized family services.

Peer-network assessment should become a central component of aggression prevention. Because deviant peer affiliation was associated with all three outcomes, interventions limited to individual behavior management may overlook an important social context. School social workers can help students identify supportive and risky relationships, strengthen access to prosocial peer groups, and develop skills for managing group pressure and interpersonal conflict. Group interventions require careful design, however. Dishion et al. (1999) demonstrated that aggregating high-risk adolescents may inadvertently reinforce problem behavior through deviancy training. Peer-based interventions should therefore promote prosocial norms rather than simply group together students identified as problematic.

Students exposed to multiple concurrent vulnerabilities may require coordinated case management. A student experiencing poor family relationships, deviant peer affiliation, economic hardship, and recurrent aggressive behavior is unlikely to

benefit from a disciplinary response alone. School social work can coordinate assessment and support across the student, family, teachers, psychological services, and community resources. This person-in-environment orientation is consistent with the development of contemporary school social work practice models emphasizing evidence-informed intervention across home, school, and community systems (Frey et al., 2012).

A tiered approach may also be useful. Universal prevention can address emotional regulation, conflict resolution, nonviolent norms, and help-seeking. Selective interventions can support students showing emerging risks, while students with recurrent aggression or multiple vulnerabilities may require individualized case management and specialist referral. These practice directions should nevertheless be regarded as applications informed by the study findings, not interventions whose effectiveness was tested in the present research.

4.5. Limitations and future research

Several limitations qualify the findings. First, the study used a convenience sample of 127 students. The results cannot therefore be generalized statistically to all high school students in Quang Ninh Province. Second, subgroup sizes were uneven, particularly for some family structures. Results for these categories should be interpreted cautiously. Third, the study was cross-sectional; temporal ordering and causal relationships cannot be established.

Fourth, the 16-item aggression-related instrument used in the study was not identical to the original 11-item Aggression Scale developed by Orpinas and Frankowski (2001). Although the original study organized the indicators into three analytical categories, the original item-level dataset and detailed factor-analysis output were unavailable for independent re-examination. The three outcomes should consequently be regarded as study-specific constructs requiring further validation.

Fifth, the social context measured in this study was primarily deviant peer affiliation. School climate, teacher relationships, online peer networks, neighborhood conditions, and broader community influences were not comprehensively assessed.

Future research should employ larger and more representative samples, validated measurement models, and longitudinal designs. Confirmatory factor analysis would be particularly valuable for establishing whether aggressive attitudes, emotional responses, and behaviors constitute empirically distinct dimensions in this population. Longitudinal studies could also examine reciprocal processes between family bonding, peer selection, peer socialization, and aggression.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that family and peer relationships are associated with aggression among high school students in Quang Ninh Province, but the pattern is more differentiated than a simple distinction between protective families and risky peers.

Family bonding emerged as a multidimensional construct. Emotional attachment was associated with lower aggressive attitudes and aggression-related emotional responses, commitment to family life was associated with lower aggressive attitudes and behaviors, and belief in family norms was associated with lower aggressive behavior. Involvement in family activities did not independently remain in the final models.

Deviant peer affiliation showed the most consistent pattern, being positively associated with all three aggression-related outcomes. Overt aggressive behavior was additionally associated with exposure to deviant behavior within the family and economic disadvantage.

These findings support a relational and ecological orientation to school social work. Prevention should combine attention to family relationships, peer networks, and broader vulnerabilities rather than focusing exclusively on individual misconduct. Family-focused support, development of positive peer contexts, early identification of emerging aggression-related difficulties, and coordinated case management for students facing multiple risks represent the most directly supported directions for practice.

Given the modest, convenience-based, cross-sectional sample, these findings should be understood as evidence of association within the surveyed group rather than causal or province-wide estimates. Further research with larger samples and longitudinal designs is needed to establish the mechanisms linking family bonding, peer affiliation, and adolescent aggression.

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