

Cognitive Counseling in Handling Victims of Bullying of Children with Special Needs

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Abstract

Bullying of children with special needs is a serious problem that negatively affects the psychological, social and academic conditions of children. This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of cognitive counseling in helping victims of bullying among children with special needs through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. A total of 17 scientific articles from 2014-2024 were reviewed thematically to identify the role of cognitive counseling in victim recovery. The results of the analysis show that cognitive counseling is effective in changing irrational thoughts, increasing self-confidence and developing emotion regulation skills in children with disabilities who are victims of bullying. The intervention also proved to be adaptive to individual characteristics and more optimal when supported by an inclusive and collaborative school environment. These findings confirm the importance of implementing cognitive counseling in guidance and counseling services in inclusive schools as an appropriate psychological assistance strategy for children with disabilities who are victims of bullying.

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Introduction

Bullying is a social phenomenon that still occurs frequently in various environments, especially in schools, and can have a serious impact on children's psychological well-being. In general, bullying refers to repeated and deliberate aggressive behavior by individuals or groups with the aim of hurting, intimidating or isolating the victim. In this context, children with special needs are particularly vulnerable to being bullied. This is due to the different characteristics of children with special needs, including physical, cognitive and social aspects, which distinguish them from other children (Rose et al., 2009). These differences often cause children with disabilities to become easy targets for aggressive behavior from their peers, who do not understand or even respond negatively to these differences.

Research has shown that victims of bullying, including children with special needs, often experience severe psychological disorders, such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Rigby, 2012). These psychological disorders not only affect the child's emotional state but also impact on their academic and social relationships. Children with disabilities who are victims of bullying tend to find it more difficult to interact with their peers, have difficulty

following lessons at school and feel isolated from the social environment that should support their development. Therefore, it is important to provide appropriate psychological support to help these children overcome the impact of bullying and restore their confidence and ability to interact healthily with others.

One approach that has been proven effective in overcoming psychological disorders due to bullying is cognitive counseling. This approach is based on the theory that thoughts (cognitions) have a major influence on a person's feelings and behavior (Beck, 2020). Cognitive counselling aims to help individuals recognize the irrational or negative thoughts they have, and replace them with more realistic and adaptive thoughts. In this way, cognitive counseling seeks to change the way individuals view themselves and their environment, which in turn can improve their emotional and social conditions. For children who are victims of bullying, this approach is particularly relevant as it can help them to rebuild their self-confidence, overcome fear or anxiety, and develop the social skills needed to interact with their peers.

Cognitive counselling, first developed by Aaron T. Beck in the 1960s and expanded by Albert Ellis through Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), is a psychological intervention technique that focuses on identifying and restructuring irrational or maladaptive thoughts (Ellis & Dryden, 2007). It is grounded in the premise that emotional and behavioral disturbances are largely influenced by cognitive distortions—automatic negative thoughts that often go unquestioned and become deeply ingrained, particularly in individuals who experience repeated psychological stress or trauma. In the context of children who are victims of bullying, cognitive counseling plays a crucial role in helping them to reinterpret negative experiences, challenge self-defeating beliefs, and rebuild a healthier self-image. Victims of bullying often internalize harmful messages from their environment, leading to feelings of inferiority, shame, or helplessness. Cognitive counseling provides tools and techniques—such as journaling, Socratic dialogue, guided discovery, and self-monitoring—that promote critical reflection, enhance self-awareness, and facilitate emotional regulation (Beck, 2020).

These strategies allow children to identify distorted thinking patterns, such as overgeneralization, catastrophizing, personalization, or labeling, and replace them with more rational, constructive, and empowering thoughts that promote psychological resilience. For instance, a child who internalizes bullying and believes, "I'm always bullied because I'm worthless," is often caught in a cycle of negative self-perception and hopelessness. Through cognitive restructuring—a core technique in cognitive counseling—this child can be guided to examine the validity of such beliefs, recognize their irrational nature, and reformulate them into more balanced perspectives, such as, "Some people may mistreat me, but that doesn't define my worth or who I am as a person." This shift in thinking not only contributes to improved

emotional well-being by reducing self-blame and internalized shame, but also supports the development of healthier coping strategies, self-advocacy skills, and more adaptive interpersonal behaviors. As children begin to interpret social experiences more realistically, they are better able to manage peer conflicts, express their needs assertively, and develop meaningful social connections.

Moreover, these improvements in cognition and emotional regulation can have ripple effects across other areas of a child's life, including academic performance, classroom behavior, and relationships with teachers and family members. A study conducted by Sukhodolsky et al. (2004) provides empirical support for this, showing that cognitive counseling significantly helped socially distressed adolescents improve their emotion regulation, reduce aggressive outbursts, and alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety often rooted in chronic peer victimization or trauma. These results suggest that cognitive counseling is not only curative but also preventive, serving as a proactive framework that equips children with lifelong skills for emotional resilience and adaptive functioning. The therapeutic potential of cognitive counseling, therefore, extends beyond individual outcomes and contributes meaningfully to the overall climate of inclusion, safety, and psychological well-being in school environments—particularly when implemented through structured, collaborative interventions that involve educators, parents, and school mental health professionals.

In this study, the authors focus on analyzing the application of cognitive counseling in handling children with disabilities who are victims of bullying. This population often faces multiple challenges, not only from the bullying itself but also from the social stigma, communication barriers, and emotional difficulties that can accompany their disabilities. Cognitive counseling, which targets maladaptive thought patterns, offers an opportunity to intervene effectively by helping these children reframe negative beliefs, develop a more positive self-image, and build resilience. By exploring various intervention models and outcomes from existing literature, the study seeks to highlight how cognitive counseling can be specifically adapted to the unique cognitive, emotional, and communicative characteristics of children with special needs.

The main purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which cognitive counseling can have a positive impact on the psychological condition of children with disabilities who have experienced bullying and how cognitive counseling can play a role in improving the quality of their lives at school and in social interactions. Through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), the authors aim to synthesize empirical findings that demonstrate changes in emotional regulation, self-esteem, and peer relationships among children who received cognitive interventions. By doing so, the study provides evidence that supports the implementation of these techniques not only for

therapeutic purposes but also for preventive interventions in inclusive school environments. These findings are expected to help educators and school counselors recognize the benefits of cognitive-based approaches when addressing the psychological impacts of bullying in children with diverse learning and developmental profiles.

Furthermore, this study aims to provide empirical evidence to support the application of cognitive counseling as an effective and relevant intervention in guidance and counseling services in inclusive schools involving children with disabilities. As inclusive education gains momentum worldwide, the need for school-based mental health practices that are both effective and adaptable becomes increasingly important. Cognitive counseling, with its structured approach and emphasis on individual cognitive processes, is well-suited to meet this need. The study's conclusions are expected to contribute to the development of counseling service models that are more inclusive and responsive to the mental health needs of all students, especially those who have been marginalized or emotionally harmed due to bullying. Ultimately, the research encourages educational institutions to adopt a holistic and empathetic approach to mental health support that prioritizes both the individual experiences of learners and the creation of supportive school climates.

Thus, this research is not only important for understanding the mechanisms of effective psychological interventions in dealing with bullying in children with disabilities, but also for providing evidence-based recommendations on how guidance and counseling services in schools can be tailored to the specific needs of children who have more challenges in adapting to their social and academic environments.

Methods

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, following the guidelines developed by Kitchenham and Charters (2007). The SLR method was chosen because it provides a structured way to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical evidence relevant to specific research questions. In this context, SLR is highly appropriate for applications in education and psychology, particularly in assessing the effectiveness of interventions such as cognitive counseling for children with special needs who experience bullying.

The review process began with the formulation of focused research questions to guide the literature search and ensure the relevance of selected studies. A comprehensive search was then conducted across several reputable databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and DOAJ. To locate relevant studies, carefully selected keywords were used in both English and Indonesian, such as "cognitive counseling" AND "bullying" AND "children with

special needs”, as well as “CBT AND special education”. Boolean operators were applied to refine search results and ensure precision.

To maintain the quality and relevance of the data, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. Studies were included if they were published between 2014 and 2024, written in English or Indonesian, and focused on topics related to cognitive counseling, children with special needs, and/or bullying. Studies were excluded if they were not peer-reviewed, or if they were short reports, editorials, or other forms of non-scholarly literature. After the selection process, the retrieved articles were coded and categorized based on several key dimensions: the form of cognitive counseling intervention (e.g., individual, group, or school-based programs), the types of special needs of the clients (such as autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, or learning disabilities), the outcomes of the counseling (such as reductions in anxiety, improvements in social skills, or decreased aggressive behavior), and any reported limitations within the studies.

The data were then analyzed thematically to identify major patterns, contrasts, and gaps across the reviewed literature. Findings were synthesized and presented in a narrative format, offering a comprehensive overview of how cognitive counseling has been applied to address bullying among children with special needs and highlighting implications for future practice and research.

Results and Discussion

Children with special needs often face multiple layers of vulnerability, one of which is an increased susceptibility to bullying in educational environments. These students—especially those with cognitive, social, or emotional challenges—are frequently perceived as different, making them more likely to become targets of peer victimization. Their difficulties in social communication or behavioral regulation often reduce their ability to defend themselves or seek support effectively, further compounding their risk.

Research has consistently shown that bullying experiences among children with special needs can have long-lasting psychological consequences. These may include heightened anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and even exacerbation of their existing learning or developmental difficulties. The emotional toll of bullying can also interfere with their academic progress and reduce their motivation to engage in school life, ultimately affecting both their educational and social outcomes. Therefore, early and targeted psychological interventions, such as cognitive counseling, are essential to support their emotional resilience and promote inclusive, supportive learning environments.

Cognitive counseling, particularly interventions based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), has increasingly been recognized as an effective method for

addressing the psychological impacts of bullying among children. This therapeutic approach centers on helping individuals identify, challenge, and restructure distorted or maladaptive thought patterns that negatively influence their emotions and behaviors. For children who have experienced bullying, especially those with special needs, CBT can serve as a tool to rebuild self-perception, foster resilience, and improve emotional regulation.

The core strength of CBT lies in its structured and goal-oriented nature, which allows for the systematic targeting of negative thought processes such as overgeneralization, self-blame, or catastrophizing. These patterns are commonly observed in children who are victims of bullying and may be even more prevalent among those with developmental, cognitive, or emotional difficulties. By teaching children to recognize these harmful thoughts and replace them with more balanced and empowering beliefs, cognitive counseling offers a pathway toward psychological healing and improved social functioning.

Despite its promising potential, the application of CBT among children with special needs – particularly in bullying contexts – still requires careful evaluation and adaptation. Each child's cognitive and communicative abilities must be considered to ensure that the intervention is both accessible and effective. There is a pressing need to explore how cognitive counseling techniques can be modified to suit diverse profiles of disability while still achieving therapeutic goals. As such, examining the compatibility of CBT-based approaches with inclusive education settings becomes an important step in enhancing support services for vulnerable student populations.

Given the increasing demand for inclusive counseling strategies and the lack of regionally contextualized research, this study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to synthesize empirical findings from the past decade (2014–2024) regarding the use of cognitive counseling with children with special needs who have experienced bullying. The goal is to map out intervention strategies, highlight their outcomes, and identify gaps in the current body of knowledge that can inform future practices and studies, especially in multicultural and developing country settings.

From the systematic review of 17 peer-reviewed articles, several key themes emerged that reflect the breadth and depth of how cognitive counseling is applied in the context of bullying among children with special needs. These themes include: the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring techniques, enhancement of social-emotional skills, adaptation of counseling methods to specific disabilities, and the supportive role of educators and families in reinforcing counseling outcomes.

A predominant finding across 12 of the 17 studies was the prevalence of cognitive distortions among children who are victims of bullying – particularly those with learning disabilities or mild autism spectrum disorder. These distortions

included overgeneralization, labeling, and personalization, which often contribute to low self-worth and heightened emotional distress. Cognitive interventions were shown to effectively help these children recognize negative automatic thoughts – such as “I’m always shunned because I’m weird” – and replace them with more balanced and constructive alternatives like “Some friends may not yet understand how to interact with me” (Beck, 2020).

Empirical evidence supports the clinical benefits of these interventions. For instance, a study by Al-Yagon (2016) demonstrated that children with ADHD who underwent eight sessions of cognitive counseling experienced a 36% reduction in depression symptoms and a 28% increase in social self-efficacy. These outcomes underscore the potential of cognitive counseling in reshaping self-perception and enhancing social functioning.

Beyond cognitive restructuring, eight studies emphasized the importance of developing emotional literacy through techniques such as self-instruction training, guided discovery, and cognitive rehearsal. These approaches were particularly effective for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who often struggle with interpreting social cues and expressing their feelings. Sofronoff et al. (2007), for example, reported that 70% of autistic children aged 8–12 who participated in a CBT-based program showed significant improvements in verbalizing emotions and demonstrated increased empathy—an essential protective factor against both perpetrating and experiencing bullying.

A further nine studies focused on the importance of tailoring counseling strategies to the individual needs of children with disabilities. For instance, deaf children benefitted from visually rich content and non-verbal modes of interaction, while those with mild intellectual disabilities required repetitive and clearly structured sessions. Lang et al. (2013) successfully implemented a visual cognitive map for non-verbal autistic students, which helped them better understand the link between thoughts and feelings—an insight typically inaccessible through verbal explanation alone. These examples illustrate the necessity of flexibility and innovation in delivering cognitive interventions within inclusive settings.

Another recurring theme was the critical role of collaboration within the school ecosystem. Several studies, such as Mishna et al. (2019), demonstrated that the integration of cognitive counseling into broader anti-bullying initiatives at the classroom or school-wide level resulted in a more significant reduction in bullying incidents compared to isolated interventions. This supports the argument that cognitive counseling should be embedded within a multi-tiered system of support, involving not only counselors but also teachers, peers, and the broader school climate.

Family involvement also proved vital. Studies that engaged parents in the therapeutic process—by teaching them how to apply cognitive strategies at home—

reported improved consistency in children's emotional responses across different environments and increased generalization of coping skills beyond the counseling setting.

While the majority of the reviewed literature confirmed the positive impact of cognitive counseling for this population, several methodological limitations were noted. Many studies did not account for the duration and intensity of the intervention as control variables. Others relied heavily on subjective measures, such as parent or teacher reports, with limited use of direct observational methods or objective behavioral indicators. Moreover, there remains a significant gap in the literature related to the application of cognitive counseling in low- and middle-income countries, including Indonesia. This highlights a pressing need for more culturally grounded and context-specific research to ensure the inclusivity and relevance of intervention strategies for diverse populations.

Conclusion

This *Systematic Literature Review* concludes that cognitive counseling is an effective and adaptive approach to treat children who are victims of bullying. Appropriate application can improve self-esteem, emotion regulation skills and social engagement. Educators and school counselors are expected to understand the basic principles of cognitive counseling and be able to modify techniques to suit the needs and abilities of children. Future research could use quasi-experimental methods to quantitatively measure the effectiveness of further interventions.

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