

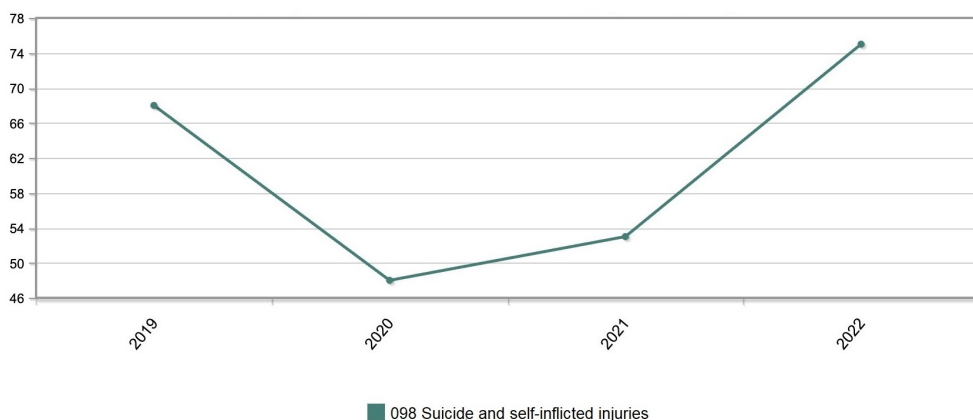
## Mental health, violence, and emotional competencies in adolescents

Adolescence is a time of significant changes at all levels—physical, psychological, and in terms of values. If this period is accompanied by a lack of family, social, and/or educational support, or a lack of resources and/or personal strengths, young people may find themselves vulnerable to stressful situations or aggression, whether physical, verbal, or virtual. This can result in poor mental health and, in more severe cases, lead to suicidal thoughts.

In Spain, the incidence of mental health problems among adolescents is estimated to be between 5% and 20%, as reported in some epidemiological studies in recent years (Ortuño-Sierra et al., 2017).

Perhaps for this reason, raising awareness in society has become necessary, with events such as World Adolescent Mental Wellness Day (March 2) and World Suicide Prevention Day (September 10). These dates gain special significance in light of the devastating statistics provided by the National Institute of Statistics (INE); the number of deaths per year due to causes such as suicide and self-inflicted injuries among young people aged 15 to 19 has risen to levels higher than during the pandemic. Since 2021, suicide has become the leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 29 (Falcó, 2023).

**Figure 1**  
*Deaths according to causes (short list) by sex and age.*



Source. Instituto Nacional de Estadística. Death Statistics by cause of death - Suicide and self-inflicted injuries - Total - Ages 15 to 19.

Moreover, the “Growing Up Healthy(ly)” report on mental health in childhood and adolescence by Save the Children (2022) establishes the relationship between bullying, cyberbullying, and suicide: minors who are victims of bullying are 2.23 times more likely to experience suicidal thoughts and 2.55 times more likely to attempt suicide.

When the violence is sexual, the psychological consequences for girls and adolescent victims include sudden behavioral changes (23.5%), psychological problems (20.8%) such as anxiety, fear, shame, guilt, depression, sleep problems, and self-harm or suicidal ideation (9.1%), among others (II Study of Sexual Aggression in Girls and Adolescents, 2019-2023).

In response to this situation, in February, the Ministry of Health approved the Specific Actions Plan Against Suicide, which proposes improving the assistance provided by the 024 hotline, analyzing the social determinants and causes of suicide, and developing a youth-focused approach. Additionally, the Ministry proposed a State Pact for Mental Health.

The severity of these issues has led the scientific community to investigate protective and preventive factors against mental health threats. Within this context, emotional competencies stand out as personal resources that can be trained and improved in educational settings to ensure personal well-being. Falcó, Marzo, & Piqueras (2020) propose the covitality model, which includes 15 strengths, among which are emotional competence (empathy, self-control, and emotional regulation), life engagement (gratitude, enthusiasm, and optimism), self-belief (self-efficacy, self-knowledge, and persistence), and belief in others (school support, family support, and peer support). These authors consider that if we globally assess the effect of these socio-emotional competencies, we can see the benefits they have as protective factors against stressful events that risk mental health. Furthermore, Falcó (2023) has provided evidence on the influence of the covitality model as a protective factor against suicidal thoughts in young people.

One of the emotional intelligence (EI) models that has received the most attention from researchers is that of Mayer & Salovey (1997); they conceive EI as the ability to accurately perceive and express emotions, use emotions to facilitate thinking, understand emotions, and regulate emotions.

Various studies have focused on analyzing the relationships between emotional competencies and bullying and their impact on adolescent mental health, some of which we summarize below.

## **PERCEPTION AND BULLYING**

Students involved in bullying, whether as victims or perpetrators, report higher scores in the ability to attend to their emotions and lower scores in emotional

regulation strategies compared to those not involved in such acts (Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2017). Contrary to what one might think, high scores in emotional perception are negative; for victims, this may mean that excessive attention to their emotions and how they feel in a bullying situation leads to rumination, continuously thinking about why this is happening to them, blaming themselves for not being able to cope, leading to negative mood states such as anxiety and stress (Pena & Losada, 2017), which may result in suicidal thoughts when they see the situation as unbearable.

For adolescent aggressors, high levels of emotional attention, such as constantly worrying about what others think of them, can lead to rumination that makes them focus on wanting to project an image of strength and dominance, leading them to commit acts of violence and aggression.

Considering these findings, guidance and training in school contexts are necessary to help adolescents achieve appropriate levels of attention to their feelings. This training should ensure that self-reflection does not degenerate into rumination but rather becomes a serene, reflective process that helps them weigh what is said to them, distinguishing between what is true and what is false, resulting in higher levels of well-being and mental health (Pena & Losada, 2017).

Additionally, one of the most effective emotional regulation measures is response modulation. This means that once an emotion is experienced, individuals should learn to detect the physical, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms accompanying it. Victims experiencing anxiety should recognize physical symptoms like sweating, rapid heartbeat, gastrointestinal discomfort, and trembling legs, along with negative thoughts (e.g., “I won’t be able to face this,” “What will they say about me,” “I’m worthless”) and compulsive behaviors (e.g., smoking, eating). At this moment, they can apply relaxation techniques, breath control, or other methods to calm down and make the right decision (e.g., seeking help). For aggressors, they must learn to detect anger symptoms (muscle tension, rapid and strong heartbeat, rapid breathing), cognitive symptoms (thought confusion, exaggerating the importance of an event, devaluing the other person), and behavioral symptoms (threatening, shouting, clenching fists). Once aware of these symptoms, they can use the “time-out” technique, leaving the situation until they calm down, preventing aggressive behaviors.

## UNDERSTANDING AND BULLYING

The ability to understand others’ emotions or empathy is a crucial competency for victims. Conversely, scientific literature has highlighted that this is a significant deficit among aggressors, who have great difficulty being affected by others’ emotions (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2011; Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012).

This phenomenon can be explained by what Gómez-Ortiz, Romera, & Ortega-Ruiz (2017) describe as a mechanism of moral disengagement. Adolescents who engage in violent behaviors express feelings like pride or indifference when committing such acts, whereas other students report feelings of shame or guilt when asked how they think they would feel if they committed violent actions against others: “The explanation for this result is based on the mechanism of moral disengagement, which refers to the justifications or arguments used by individuals to free themselves from personal responsibility and discomfort that arise when acting against reference values.”

Educational guidance and training should aim to make adolescents aware of how the other person feels when being physically or verbally attacked, whether in person or virtually. They should consider how they themselves would feel if they were the target of such actions. Emotional understanding also involves knowing why we and others feel a certain way; in other words, understanding the reasons behind emotional states. Making explicit the motives behind bullies’ actions can help them realize the maladaptive nature of their behavior and its negative effects on others and themselves.

## EMOTIONAL REGULATION

What process or variable influences the moment when an adolescent experiences aggressive thought and the act of putting them into practice? Research indicates that there is a moderating variable that mediates and explains the relationship between thoughts and violent behaviors: the degree of control/regulation of the thoughts and emotions that determine aggression (Roos et al., 2016). Students who can generate positive emotions and minimize negative ones in adverse circumstances will exhibit more adaptive behaviors and fewer violent behaviors, benefiting themselves and others in terms of well-being, social acceptance, and mental health.

Gender differences in emotional regulation show that girls with fewer emotional regulation strategies report higher levels of cybervictimization (Rey et al., 2018).

Therefore, acquiring emotional regulation strategies is crucial for good mental health. Developing and enhancing appropriate emotional competencies, particularly emotional regulation, allows adolescents to cope with complex and high-stress situations, reducing anxiety and violent behaviors. This, in turn, reduces the likelihood of students engaging in violent or cyberbullying behaviors (Chamizo-Nieto & Rey, 2022).

What emotional regulation strategies should be emphasized in an educational training and guidance program for adolescents? Key strategies include those highlighted by Gong et al. (2013): response modulation, situation selection, situation modification, attention focus, and cognitive restructuring. Additionally, strategies

involving positive reinterpretation of the situation (problem-solving, emotional regulation, emotional expression, positive thinking, cognitive restructuring, distraction, and acceptance) have proven effective in adolescents by reducing anxiety, increasing self-satisfaction, and improving personal relationships (Pascual, Conejero & Etxebarria, 2016). These same authors identify less adaptive strategies that are less effective (avoidance, denial, rumination, inaction).

## **CURRENT NUMBER OF EDUCACIÓN XX1**

This issue of Educación XX1 includes two articles related to the themes discussed in this editorial. Specifically, Ros-Morente et al. (2024) investigates the relationship and intervention between emotional competencies and school violence, while Ojeda et al. (2024) focus on validating an emotional competency questionnaire for early primary education.

Ros-Morente et al. (2024) conducted an intervention with a sample of children aged 8 to 12 to study the influence of emotional competencies on personal well-being and violence in educational contexts. They highlight the link between violence and a negative classroom climate, lower student well-being, and poor academic performance. These authors explore the role of emotional variables as a factor in preventing violence in educational contexts, concluding that higher acquisition of emotional skills results in fewer violent behaviors in school, less anxiety symptoms, and improved mental health.

Ojeda et al. (2024) provide significant contributions by validating an Emotional Development Scale for children aged 5 to 8 in primary education. This scale allows teachers to assess children's emotional competencies, focusing on four competencies: emotional awareness, emotional regulation, emotional autonomy, and social competence, as well as evaluating overall emotional competence. This study increases knowledge about the benefits of emotional skills at an early age, showing improvements in academic performance and reduced anxiety levels.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, based on the above discussion, it is important to implement emotional training programs among adolescents to enhance emotional competencies, thereby reducing the relationship between victimization, loneliness, and suicidal thoughts in young people who have experienced violence in school contexts (Quintana-Orts et al., 2021). Furthermore, students' mental health should be a priority in education, with policies designed to promote mental health plans and prevent bullying to avoid resulting in suicidal thoughts and behaviors. This

should also involve training and equipping teachers for educational intervention in mental health, as it has been shown that teachers' emotional instruction and regulation improve students' mental well-being (Gong, Chai et al., 2013).

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