

Emotion Regulation and Reactive-Proactive Aggression among Generation Alpha Students: Preparing for Board Examinations



Iqra Kiran^a Wizra Saeed^b

Abstract: *Generation Alpha, generally defined as individuals born between 2010 and 2024, represents the first cohort to be raised entirely within a digitally integrated environment. As many members of this generation approach significant academic milestones, including school and board examinations, they encounter unique developmental and educational challenges. In the present study, the aim was to examine the relationship between emotion regulation and reactive-proactive aggression among Generation Alpha, preparing for the board examination, by using a cross-sectional research design. Purposive sampling technique was utilized by targeting 9th Grade 13-15 years old boys/girls (N=150) preparing for the board examination. Self-Report measures include: Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (Gullone & Taffe, 2012) and Reactive Proactive Questionnaire (Raine et al., 2006) were used for data collection. Analysis of Spearman correlation indicated a positive correlation between emotion regulation and reactive-proactive aggression. Cognitive reappraisal showed a positive correlation with reactive aggression but a negligible correlation with proactive aggression. Expressive suppression depicts a positive correlation with proactive aggression, whereas it shows a weak relationship with reactive aggression. However, gender differences for emotion regulation among boys and girls displayed no significant differences, whereas, in reactive-proactive aggression, boys (M=93.86) showed higher scores than girls (M=59.44; U=2610.00, p=.472). This study highlights the importance of promoting emotion regulation skills among students preparing for board examinations. School psychologists, counselors, and mental health professionals may work on emotion regulation skills as part of an intervention designed to reduce aggressive behavior and improve emotional adjustment among Generation Alpha.*

Keywords: Emotion Regulation, Reactive-Proactive Aggression, Board Exams, Generation Alpha

Introduction

The emotional landscape of contemporary educational settings has become increasingly complex, particularly for Generation Alpha, which denotes the demographic cohort comprising individuals born from the year 2010 onwards, positioned as the children of the Millennial generation and frequently the younger siblings of Generation Z (McCrimble & Fell, 2020). As these young learners progress through their formative academic years, the intersection of emotional vulnerability, behavioral challenges, and unprecedented performance expectations has emerged as a critical area of scholarly inquiry (Rohmaniyah et al., 2025). Understanding how this generation regulates emotions and expresses aggression, particularly in high-stakes contexts such as before examination periods, carries profound implications for educational psychology, pedagogical practice, and student wellbeing.

Emotion regulation is a complex but practical explanation, best understood as an individual's ability to recognize, manage, and express emotions in ways that fit the demands of the given situation (Gross, 2002; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Emotion regulation belongs to the proximal risk factors, which are processes that operate close to the occurrence of a behavior. Unlike distal risk factors, such as socioeconomic or biological predispositions, that influence aggression indirectly and from a distance, proximal risk factors are directly and immediately linked to aggressive behavior (Dodge & Pettit, 2003). Consequently, distal factors such as

^a PhD Scholar, Bahria University, Islamabad Campus/Lecturer, Capital University of Science and Technology, Islamabad, Pakistan.

^b Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Effat University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

economic disadvantages do not cause aggression directly; rather, their influence is carried forward through more immediate, proximal mechanisms such as emotion regulation deficits.

Aggression is a common phenomenon that is normally observed during childhood and adolescence (Baker & Jensen, 2024). In contemporary child psychology, aggression is the most widely researched behavior problem and defined as deliberate and directed behavior with an immediate intention to harm another individual, and the other individual is motivated to avoid this behavior (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Recent literature predominantly distinguishes aggression by function/motivation (contemporary classification) rather than solely by form (physical/verbal/relational). The two core functional types are proactive and reactive aggression. It was also concluded that children developed distinct patterns of reactive and proactive aggression by the time they enter primary school (Dijk et al., 2021).

Proactive aggression refers to a conscious and planned act, used for personal gain or egocentric motives, also known as "premeditated", "instrumental," or "cold-blooded" aggression. Whereas, reactive aggression is a form of aggression referred to as impulsive, hostile, angry, retaliatory aggression, affectively "hot" and characterized by strong emotions (Blair et al., 2006).

According to the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998; 2002; Gross & John, 2003), individuals utilize distinct strategies to regulate their emotions at different temporal stages of the emotion-generative process. Within this framework, two specific emotion regulation strategies have been clearly defined and studied. Cognitive Reappraisal is the first one, an antecedent-focused strategy in which an individual reinterprets a potentially emotional situation in a way that changes the emotional impact before the full response occurs. The second is expressive suppression, a response-focused strategy that involves holding back or hiding outward emotional expressions once the emotion is already being experienced (John & Gross, 2004).

The classification of emotion regulation strategies as inherently adaptive or maladaptive has been subject to debate. Aldao and his colleagues in 2015 argued that the effectiveness of any given strategy depends largely on the situational context and personal factors rather than on any fixed property of the strategy itself. Nevertheless, when specifically examining anger and aggression, researchers have identified consistent differential outcomes. For instance, suppression has been associated with adverse long-term consequences, including the maintenance of the hostile cognitions and heightened angry arousal (Robertson et al., 2012).

Emerging research has challenged the rigidity of a dichotomous classification of reactive and proactive aggression, suggesting that such a distinction may be overly simplistic (Allen et al., 2018). Notwithstanding this conceptual nuance, both aggression subtypes have been consistently associated with dysfunctional emotion regulation processes (Garofalo et al., 2020). Findings demonstrated that the use of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, specifically expressive suppression, along with general difficulties in emotion regulation, were independently associated with elevated levels of aggression (Smith et al., 2026).

Despite the growing body of research examining emotion regulation and aggression, a notable gap persists in the literature, where the differential association of adaptive and maladaptive strategies of emotion regulation with distinct aggression subtypes remains entirely unexplored. The salience of this research gap is amplified when considering Generation Alpha, in the Pakistani context, before the anticipatory period preceding high-stakes assessments (board examination) is characterized by elevated worry, emotionality, and perceived threat, which tax self-regulatory resources precisely when effective regulation is most needed.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the present study were to

- To find out the relationship between emotion regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression) and aggression (reactive and proactive aggression) among Generation Alpha preparing for the Board Examination.

- To examine the gender differences in emotion regulation and aggression among Generation Alpha preparing for the Board Examination.

Hypotheses

- There will be a negative association of cognitive reappraisal with reactive aggression, whereas a positive correlation with proactive aggression among Generation Alpha preparing for the Board Examination.
- There will be a positive correlation of expressive suppression with reactive and proactive aggression among Generation Alpha preparing for the Board Examination.
- Significant gender differences exist in emotion regulation and aggression among Generation Alpha preparing for the Board Examination.

Methodology

The present study utilizes a cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between emotion regulation and aggression among Generation Alpha preparing for the Board Examination. Purposive sampling technique was employed with a sample size of (N=150) boys and girls from different schools of Rawalpindi, Pakistan. In the current study, the targeted population was Generation Alpha (born from 2010 onwards), currently aged 13-15 years old (boys/girls), studying in 9th Grade, preparing for the board examination. Data has been collected at the beginning of March, 2026, and board exams start from 1st April, 2026.

Instruments

In the present study, the following instruments were used for data collection. Demographic variables include: age, gender, Grade, academic performance, history of grade repetition, digital media usage, mother's education, father's education, monthly income, and residence.

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (ERQ-CA; Gullone & Taffe, 2012)

The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (ERQ-CA) is an adapted version of the adult Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) specifically designed for younger population. This scale assesses individual differences in the habitual use of two cognitive and emotional processes involved in emotion regulation: Cognitive Reappraisal (items 1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10) and Expressive Suppression (2, 4, 6, 9). It contains 10 items. ERQ-CA is validated for use with children and adolescents aged 10-18 years. It is a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Half and Half), 4 (Agree), 5 (Strongly Agree). ERQ-CA uses sum scoring. Items belonging to each subscale are summed to produce a separate score for Expressive Suppression and Cognitive Reappraisal. The highest scores on each scale indicates greater use of that specific emotion regulation strategy. ERQ-CA subscales Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0.75 - 0.82.

Reactive-Proactive Questionnaire (RPQ; Raine et al., 2006)

The Reactive-Proactive Questionnaire (RPQ) was developed by Raine and his colleagues in 2006. It is a standardized instrument designed to assess two distinct forms of aggression, which are reactive aggression and proactive aggression, in children (as young as 9), adolescents, and adults. It contains 23 items and is scored on a 3-point Likert Scale, "0" (never), "1" (sometimes), or "2" (often). It usually takes 2-3 minutes to complete. This scale composed of two sub-scales, a) Reactive Aggression (defensive, anger-driven responses to perceived provocation or threat) consists of 11 items ((1, 3, 5,7,8,11, 13,14, 16,19,22) and Cronbach's alpha is 0.81, indicating good internal consistency; b) Proactive Aggression (goal-directed, instrumental, cold-blooded aggressive behavior) contains 12 items (2,4,6,9,10,12,15, 17,18,20,21,23) and Cronbach's alpha is 0.87. Higher scores on each subscale indicate a greater aggression level on a particular subtype, i.e., proactive or reactive aggression. The two subscales can be scored separately to identify distinct aggression or summed to obtain a total aggression score.

Results

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Demographic Variables (N=150)

Variables	F	%
Age		
13-15	150	100
Gender		
Boy	70	46.7
Girl	80	53.3
Grade		
9 th Grade	150	100
Academic Performance		
Average	31	20.7
Above Average	119	79.3
History of Grade Repetition		
Yes	10	6.7
No	140	93.3
Digital Media Usage		
1-5 Hours (Per Day)	56	37.3
6-10 Hours (Per Day)	57	38.0
11-15 Hours (Per Day)	37	24.7
Mother Education		
Matric	36	24.0
Intermediate	38	25.3
Bachelor	58	38.7
Maters	18	12.0
Father Education		
Illiterate	10	6.7
Matric	28	18.7
Intermediate	38	25.3
Bachelor	55	36.7
Maters	19	12.6
Monthly Income		
Below 50,000	52	34.7
60,000-100000	75	50.0
More than 100000	23	15.3
Residence		
Owned	74	49.3
Rental	76	50.7

Note: % = Percentage; F=Frequency

Table 1 indicates that, in the current study, the sample consists of more Girls (53.3%) than boys (46.7%) from a total sample of (N=150). The targeted population was taken from the 9th Grade, preparing for the board examination, with an age category of 13-15 years. In terms of academic performance, the majority belong to above-average performing students (79.3%), followed by average (20.7%) performers. Of the history of grade repetition, only (6.7%) of participants provided their details. The majority of Generation Alpha use digital media for 6-10 hours per day (38.0%), whereas (37.3%) use digital media for 1-5 hours per day. However, a substantial minority (24.7%) reports heavy usage of 11-15 hours per day. The majority of mothers (38.7%) and fathers (36.7) hold at least a bachelor's degree, indicating relatively educated parenting. The monthly household income of most of the participants falls under the Rs. 60,000-100000 (50.0%) category, and the majority of them reside on a rental basis (50.7%).

Table 2*Test of Normality (N=150)*

Variables	Median	Mode	Skewness	Kurtosis	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	P
ERQ-CA	33.00	33.00	.65	.65	.137	<.001
RPQ	14.00	16.00	.99	.08	.205	<.001

Note: ERQ-CA = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents; RPQ = Reactive-Proactive Questionnaire

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests indicated significant deviation for both emotion regulation (KS = 0.137, $p < .001$) and aggression (KS = 0.205, $P < .001$), supported by skewness and kurtosis values. Emotion regulation depicted moderate positive skewness (0.65) and mild leptokurtosis, whereas aggression exhibited a more pronounced positive skew (0.99) with near normal kurtosis (0.08). median and mode for emotion regulation were identical (33.00), while on aggression, the median (14.00) was slightly lower than its mode (16.00), consistent with its positive skew. Results showed that non-parametric testing methods are recommended for further analysis.

Table 3*Spearman Correlation among Study Variables (N=150)*

Variables	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6
ERQ-CA			.64	-	.776**	.722**	.273**	.314**	.216**
CR	33.01	5.20	.62	-	-	.200*	.188*	.392**	.043
ES			.55	-	-	-	.269**	.139	.337**
RPQ			.82	-	-	-	-	.836**	.857**
RA	15.76	6.29	.78	-	-	-	-	-	.493**
PA			.67	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: ERQ-CA = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents; CR=Cognitive Reappraisal; ES= Expressive Suppression; RPQ = Reactive-Proactive Questionnaire; RA=Reactive Aggression; PA=Proactive Aggression; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation

In this table, Spearman's rank-order correlation revealed distinct patterns of association between emotion regulation strategies and aggression subtypes. Emotion regulation indicated a positive correlation with aggression (reactive aggression and proactive aggression). Notably, cognitive reappraisal (emotion regulation strategy) was moderately and positively associated with reactive aggression, but exhibited a negligible, non-significant correlation with proactive aggression. In contrast, expressive suppression (emotion regulation strategy) was moderately and positively correlated with proactive aggression, while showing no significant relationship with reactive aggression.

Table 4*Mean, Standard Deviation, and 2-Independent sample Mann-Whitney-test values for gender differences (N=150)*

	Boys (70)	Girls (80)	U	P
	M	M		
ERQ-CA	78.21	73.13	2610.00	.472
RPA	93.86	59.44	1515.00	<.001

Note: ERQ-CA = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents; RPQ = Reactive-Proactive Questionnaire

As presented in Table 4, a series of two independent-sample Mann-Whitney U tests was conducted to examine gender differences in emotion regulation and reactive-proactive aggression among 150 participants (Boys=70, Girls=80), showing no significant gender differences. Emotion regulation with boys ($M=78.21$) and girls ($M=73.13$) showed comparable scores ($U=2610.00$, $p=.472$). In contrast, a significant and large magnitude gender difference was observed on reactive-proactive aggression, with boys ($M=93.86$) scoring subsequently higher than girls ($M=59.44$; $U=2610.00$, $p=.472$). Findings indicate that emotion regulation abilities do not differ by gender, whereas boys report significantly higher levels of reactive and proactive aggression as compared to girls.

Discussion

Generation Alpha constitutes the emergent leading edge of societal change and offers a critical analytical lens through which to forecast the trajectory of the coming decade and beyond (McCordle & Fell, 2020). From the earliest stages of cognitive development, Generation Alpha's interaction with digital platforms and immersive educational technologies has been fundamentally interwoven with Artificial Intelligence. The native digital literacy and embeddedness within the globally networked technological infrastructure make Generation Alpha the most internationally interconnected cohort in history. Manifesting as a premature sophistication across social, psychological, educational, and commercial domains, it simultaneously exposes Generation Alpha to a spectrum of developmentally premature psychosocial risks and vulnerabilities.

The present study investigated the association between emotion regulation strategies (cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression) and distinct subtypes of aggression (reactive and proactive aggression) among Generation Alpha preparing for board examinations.

The first hypothesis stated that, "There will be a negative association of cognitive reappraisal with reactive aggression, whereas a positive correlation with proactive aggression among Generation Alpha preparing for the Board Examination." The present study indicated a positive correlation between emotion regulation and aggression, whereas the observed pattern of results provides partial support for this hypothesis. Specifically, cognitive reappraisal demonstrated a moderate positive association with reactive aggression, a finding that directly contradicts the present study's findings. However, the negligible, non-significant correlation with proactive aggression aligns with the hypothesized direction. The findings that cognitive reappraisal is positively associated with reactive aggression are unexpected, given the prevailing literature positioning reappraisal as an adaptive, protective factor against aggression. Recent meta-analytic evidence by Smith and his colleagues (2025) indicates that adaptive strategy use is generally associated with lower aggression. Similarly, another study (Gutierrez-Cobo et al., 2023) found that higher cognitive reappraisal use correlated with lower aggression.

The second hypothesis proposed that "There will be a positive correlation of expressive suppression with reactive and proactive aggression among Generation Alpha preparing for the Board Examination". The results obtained in the current study partially supported this hypothesis; expressive suppression was moderately and positively associated with proactive aggression but showed no significant relationship with reactive aggression. Prior literature reported that expressive suppression correlated positively with aggression and hostility, and was fully mediated by negative affect (Gutierrez-Cobo et al., 2023). Likewise, a systematic review conducted by Navas-Casado et al. (2023) concluded that maladaptive strategies, including suppression, are consistently positively associated with aggression across ages and populations. Unlike reactive aggression, which emerges from acute provocation, suppression-related aggression may represent a slower, more deliberate process, whereby suppressed emotional material is strategically deployed to achieve interpersonal goals.

Hypothesis 3 indicated that "Significant gender differences exist in emotion regulation and aggression among Generation Alpha preparing for Board Examination". The findings of the current study reported that there's no significant gender difference in the use of emotion regulation strategies; however, reactive-

proactive aggression shows significant differences. The convergence may reflect changing socialization patterns where both male and female adolescents are increasingly exposed to similar emotional demands in high-pressure academic environments. A longitudinal study examining reactive and proactive aggression found that sex predicted both aggression subtypes; the effects were moderated by individual differences (Kjærviik et al., 2025). This finding is robustly supported by a recent Pakistani study conducted, which found that male adolescents exhibit significantly higher mean aggression scores than their female counterparts (Haq et al., 2025).

In the cultural context of Pakistan, while emotion regulation strategies may be similarly employed, the expression of aggression remains socially differentiated. Boys often receive reinforcement for dominance-oriented behaviors, whereas girls are socially pressured towards internalizing distress (Raza & Saleem, 2024). Within the high-stakes board examination environment, this suggests that although both genders manage stress using similar cognitive tools, the behavioral outlet, i.e., aggression, remains a distinctly male pattern, potentially linked to differential thresholds.

Implications of the study

The findings carry several implications for intervention by school administration, particularly, clinical psychologists, school counselors, and mental health practitioners working with Generation Alpha students, preparing for board examinations, to improve their emotion regulation and reduce aggression. The findings underscore the importance of aggression-subtype specific assessment and intervention by identifying the distinct pattern of associations linked to emotion regulation (cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression) and aggression (reactive and proactive aggression).

Conclusion

The present study reveals a more complex picture of the relationship between emotion regulation and aggression. Overall, there was a positive correlation between emotion regulation and aggression, whereas cognitive appraisal depicted a weak correlation with proactive aggression and a positive correlation with reactive aggression. On the other hand, expressive suppression showed a positive correlation with proactive aggression and a weak correlation with reactive aggression. There are no significant gender differences found in emotion regulation; however, boys show a higher level of aggression than girls. These findings suggest that there is a need for aggression subtype-specific models of emotion regulation and intervention tailored to the distinct mechanisms underlying reactive and proactive aggression.

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