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## Bullying affects us too: Parental responses to bullying at kindergarten

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**PRESCHOOL AGE CHILDREN ARE** often thought of as too young to be able to engage in bullying behaviours. However, when it does occur, there are ramifications not only for the child but also for parents and siblings. This paper explores this issue by reporting on an exploratory study involving interviews with four parents whose child had experienced bullying in a Victorian kindergarten. Parents reported a range of responses, including anger, guilt for not protecting their child, and powerlessness in the face of denial from kindergarten staff that their child had been bullied. Being unable to access information about bullying among preschool children which might validate their experiences, reinforced the sense of isolation these parents experienced. Further research which explores the needs of family members of children bullied in the kindergarten (prior to school) setting is needed.

**ALTHOUGH IT IS WIDELY** acknowledged that bullying is common among older children, preschool children have often been considered too young to have the capacity to form deliberate intentions to harm others, which characterises bullying. Instead, parents, teachers and the wider community have historically reviewed children's negative interpersonal behaviours as a developmental stage involving rough play and squabbling which they will grow out of. Moreover, by denying the potential for bullying to take place between children of kindergarten age, some education authorities have determined that systematic intervention to prevent or stop bullying at preschools is therefore unnecessary (Main, 1999).

Despite widely-held beliefs to the contrary, some kindergarten students do engage in deliberate, repetitive aggressive behaviours directed towards fellow students in a less powerful situation than the instigator (Rigby, 2002). Furthermore, such behaviour is not a rare or isolated event, with studies indicating that as many as one child in six is subjected to bullying and/or displays bullying behaviour at preschool (Alsaker & Valkanover, 2001; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). Thus, in a kindergarten class of 20-25 pupils, one might expect on average that as many as three or four may be affected by bullying.

Bullying has long lasting effects on victims and may last long into the victim's adult life. Recent research has found that the impact of victimisation by peers of very young children is similar to that of older children, and there is no evidence to suggest that young children are more resilient in the face of bullying by other children (Finkelhor, Turner & Ormrod, 2006). Children who have been bullied may be left with a legacy of increased levels of stress, anxiety, illness, depression and suicidal ideas, which may become an obstacle to self-development, learning and effective socialisation (Rigby, 1998). Whether or not children admit they have been bullied, the effects are no less real.

School-age children who are bullied report being unhappy at school (Rigby & Slee, 1991), absenting themselves from school, and having trouble with their school performances (Juvonen, Nishina & Graham, 2000). Moreover, it has been suggested that bullied children have little confidence that teachers will intervene to prevent further bullying, and feel that school is not a safe place to be (Smith & Shu, 2000).

Bullying typically affects not only the individual but also his/her family. It has been proposed that people who have been bullied take on board their frustrations of being victimised and sometimes vent their frustrations on their families (Ambert, 1994). Consequently relationships with

other family members may be affected (Farrington, 1993; Morrison, 2002), although it is unclear how this might occur with preschool-aged children.

Parents are often unaware of the extent of bullying in the lives of their children, and it may take some time for them to become aware of what is going on (Olweus, 1993). First, children do not always talk about being bullied and, second, parents do not necessarily ask children if this is happening to them (Kuczynski, 2004). Parents may consider the potential that their child has been bullied only when they are confronted with a child who has become unhappy at home, moody, withdrawn, verbally lashing out or displaying other uncharacteristic behaviours.

Even when they recognise that their child has been subjected to bullying, parents often have difficulties in advocating for their child. They may feel grief over what has occurred and guilt about not being able to amend it (Solomon et al., 2001). Those parents who approach the kindergarten teacher for insight often find little support, and may even find staff becoming very defensive and denying that bullying was even a possibility (Kuczynski, 2004).

This paper presents findings from a small exploratory study which was undertaken to identify some of the effects on parents of Australian children who have been exposed to bullying at kindergarten.

## Method

This research, conducted in late 2005, sought to interview parents of children who had experienced bullying by other children at a Victorian kindergarten between 2000 and 2005. This approach is consistent with other research which has interviewed parents when seeking to understand the impact of peer-perpetrated violence on preschool-aged children (Finkelhor et al., 2006).

In recruiting participants, snowball sampling was used to ensure that a purposive sample of the population group would be utilised. Royse et al. (2001) have proposed that snowball sampling is essential for data collection when the population of interest may be hard to reach, isolated or suspicious of outsiders. In such situations, the best approach is to start with people known to the researcher, gain their trust and ask for names of other people they knew who have been or are in a similar situation. Thus the sample expands and snowballs by tapping into existing social networks (Royse et al., 2001).

The first author had been on the committee of management of a kindergarten in his local area, and through this had become aware of incidents of bullying in local kindergartens and used these contacts to invite potential respondents to participate in this study. As he was known to be a parent of children attending kindergarten, he had credibility with potential respondents. He also had contact with staff in a number

of local kindergartens who could pass on an invitation to participate in the study to any parents they knew whose child had been bullied at kindergarten. Participants in the study were also asked if they knew other parents whose child had been bullied at kindergarten, and if so, were provided with an invitation regarding this study which they could give to these persons.

A total of four parents, comprising three mothers and one father, agreed to participate. The participants were aged from 32 to 36 years. Three of the respondents were married and one a single parent. Three of the children exposed to bullying were the first born (two from only-child families) and one was a middle child. The children were all aged four to five years when the bullying occurred.

Parents who agreed to participate in the project were interviewed by the first author in a semi-structured interview of 20 to 30 minutes duration. Five core questions asked of all respondents were:

1. How would you define bullying?
2. How did you come to learn that your child was involved in bullying?
3. How did your child's experience of bullying come to affect you as a parent/guardian?
4. How did you support your child and other family members?
5. What support or help is needed by parents/guardians when their child is involved in bullying?

Interviews took place at a location that best suited the needs of the participants, such as a private room in a library or community agency, or in a coffee shop.

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Naturalistic data analysis was employed whereby emerging themes were identified and labelled, and exemplars of both were utilised (DePoy & Gilson, 2003). This analysis provided the researchers the opportunity to look for ideas in the data being examined. Thematic analysis was then undertaken as this allows for a gradual move from identifying key issues and common themes, to creating links between them to provide a sense of context and to discuss any contradictions. This approach also overcomes the problem of viewing all items as having equal power (Kellehear, 1993).

## Findings

At the outset, participants were asked to provide a definition of bullying. The participants' definitions were similar to those provided in current literature surrounding the issues of school-based bullying. The majority of participants reflected that bullying is the use of power over others in conjunction with physical and/or verbal manipulation. Bullies were viewed as being more powerful than their victim. This power was noted

as being physically stronger, having enhanced verbal expression and the ability to frighten and intimidate, being psychologically manipulative and having the ability to exclude and include. As one parent commented:

*Bullying is a horrible and destructive means of disempowering people. It is a negative power that is too common in our society ... Bullying is when anyone deliberately means to hurt another person on a regular basis. It may be name-calling, hitting, teasing or threatening another person.*

The parents had noticed their children being scared and lacking in self-esteem as a result of having been subjected to constant teasing, name-calling or rejection by other children.

Parental fears that their child was being bullied were in most cases confirmed when the children had told their parents about what was happening to them. Some children were able to do this by questioning their parents about name-calling and being hit. Irrespective of whether children were able to articulate experiences of bullying, all of the children informed their parents of something being wrong in other ways. Three children had expressed their experiences by refusing to go to kindergarten and crying before kindergarten. The parents of some children also reported behavioural changes such as bed-wetting and difficulties in bowel motion management.

Most of the participants reported that the kindergarten teachers should be concerned about stopping bullying, and said the kindergarten system needs to acknowledge that young children can and do bully. Participants suggested that staff need to target bullying in more productive ways, such as talking more openly to children about violence and its effects, and never using issues of developmental stages as an excuse for denying the issue of bullying in the kindergarten context.

It was also recommended that kindergartens develop anti-bullying policies and that the teachers themselves should endeavour to stop bullying before and when it happens. Participants also strongly expressed the need for teachers to be trained to identify teasing and bullying and to act to prevent incidents escalating into distressing cases of bullying.

At no stage were any of the participants advised by the kindergartens of any problems their child was experiencing. Rather, parents were left to raise their concerns with the kindergartens, and all of these parents had in fact done so. However, while parents were concerned that the bullying may get worse, they also feared being labelled as over-protective for suggesting that it was affecting their child. In particular, parents were concerned about making no change or making an awful situation worse and causing additional negative consequences.

Participants reported the need for authorities to acknowledge and act on all parental concerns regarding the safety and welfare of their children in relation to bullying. They said one of the greatest supports was for parents to be believed and the issue not denied by the kindergarten system. Parents needed to feel that they could approach the staff in confidence and be provided with support and recognition of the possibility of bullying.

Parents of children who are bullied feel angry, powerless and guilty about their inability to protect their child. As a consequence, some parents had questioned their adequacy to perform the parental role. All of the parents reported higher levels of stress and anxiety. As one parent explained:

*I was sad, angry, hurt and felt I had failed my son. Literally I was broken hearted and felt guilty. Why? I don't really know, but I felt it was my fault. I'm meant to protect, nurture and love my son, yet I put him in a situation that caused him distress, harm and exposure to bullying.*

The participants in this study were not the only family members affected by their child's experience of bullying, with siblings and the participants' partners also experiencing stress. Siblings, on becoming exposed to the bullied child's changed behaviour, began to fear and not want to engage with that child.

The parents in this study reported a range of ways they had sought to support their child. Apart from notifying the kindergarten of their concerns, parents had sought to increase self-esteem, overcome fear and build stronger social skills in their children. The importance of spending time with the child, discussing people's behaviours and feelings and how to respond in different ways was also suggested.

The majority of participants supported the notion of talking about bullying, including having parents talk to children and other parents about the problem, and getting the issue recognised. It was also reported that parents need to actively provide support to kindergartens and each other in complex situations, and work closely to monitor children and their progress. This may necessitate parents being able to access information about bullying so they can be proactive in their child's welfare. Information about the types of bullying, ways to work through bullying and the effects of bullying were viewed as vital in understanding the issues.

## **Discussion**

This study explored the issues associated with bullying within the Victorian kindergarten system from the perspective of parents whose child had been bullied at kindergarten. While the small sample of just four

parents is an obvious limitation of this research, this paper has highlighted an area that clearly warrants further examination. Future research needs to establish the prevalence of bullying among children attending kindergarten and the impacts of bullying on both the children and other family members. More research is also warranted to further explore each of the five key issues identified by the current study:

- Kindergarten staff being unaware that children are bullied
- A lack of information available regarding bullying
- Parents feeling isolated
- Parents lacking the ability to advocate for their children
- A need for greater family support.

Although parents may expect teachers to know how best to deal with bullying situations, the findings from this study suggest that it may not be the case. In particular, it is of concern that kindergarten staff appeared to be unaware of the bullying until informed by parents, and in some cases actively denied such a proposition. Furthermore, preliminary research by Farrell (1999) indicated that early childhood teachers tend to be hesitant about the labels of 'bully' and 'victim' and prefer to talk about 'inappropriate' or 'unacceptable' behaviour.

The isolation of parents who are affected by bullying is exacerbated by the lack of awareness about the issue, the shame attached and the lack of information available. It is suggested that by working collaboratively, kindergartens and families could help each other to acknowledge and disclose bullying without feeling ashamed and responsible for it, and assure parents that they are not alone in the experience. The societal understanding of bullying and its effects is important in promoting prevention and awareness, strengthening social interaction and problem-solving skills, assisting young children to handle conflict, and recognising when someone is resorting to bullying.

Rigby and Johnson (2003) have proposed that a whole kindergarten community approach, one which is proactive and systematic, is needed for kindergartens to deal with bullying behaviours. It should include extensive research into bullying and detailed step-by-step implementation guidelines. Also required are teacher and staff training materials, multimedia programs designed for young children, and parent learning sessions. A whole kindergarten community approach is a program that utilises and supports all members of the kindergarten community—the children, the teachers and the families.

The findings of this research highlight the importance of developing and establishing firm policies in kindergartens to adequately and fairly deal with the

bullying problem. It is important to establish an anti-bullying policy that is clearly communicated to all within the kindergarten community. The governing body of Victorian kindergartens ensures that teachers are exposed to documents dealing with social relationships within kindergartens (e.g. Carbone et al., 2004; Department of Human Services, 2007). However, there is little or no mention of bullying intervention programs within these documents. Hence, the Department of Human Services, as the funding body for Victorian kindergartens, should also be urged to develop a widely-supported anti-bullying policy and ensure all kindergartens operate with anti-bullying policies in place, as part of their funding agreements.

Placing a greater emphasis on public discussion of kindergarten bullying, offering support to those affected and exploring the issue of young children who are bullying is clearly an urgent task. This is a challenge for researchers and kindergartens, and also an opportunity to develop more effective ways of decreasing and ultimately eliminating bullying and its negative effects. It is currently unclear which approaches to reducing bullying are likely to be the most effective with kindergarten children, and further research is needed.

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