



The missing voice: Parents' perspectives of bullying

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is a complex phenomenon that is reported to be pervasive in many countries around the world (Harel-Fisch, et al., 2010; Hazler, Miller, Carney & Green, 2001; Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2006). Although there is a considerable body of research on bullying, very little has been devoted to studying the perspectives of the parents of children involved. An ecological framework, whereby bullying dynamics are seen to extend beyond the children who are bullied, and include peers, teachers, the school, community, and parents (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2008), is essential to address the complexities involved in bullying. This study provides one of the first qualitative assessments of bullying based solely on the perceptions of parents of victimized children. In-depth interviews were conducted with parents whose children disclosed being victimized by their peers as identified by The Safe School Questionnaire (Pepler, Connolly, & Craig, 1993, adapted from Olweus, 1989). Interviews were conducted with 20 parents (2 fathers, 14 mothers, and 2 mother-father dyads). Themes that emerged included: 1) participants' definition of bullying and how they identify bullying behaviors; 2) parents' reactions to their child self-identifying as bullied; 3) parents' awareness of their child witnessing bullying incidents; 4) parents' descriptions of the effects being victimized has had on their child; 5) gender differences; 6) strategies parents suggested to respond to bullying; and 7) complexities regarding disclosure of bullying. The results of this exploratory research highlight that understanding parents' perceptions and conceptualizations is crucial to bullying research and intervention efforts, as parents' understanding of bullying undoubtedly impacts their recognition of bullying incidents and subsequent interventions.

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1. Introduction

A sad reality for many school-age children is victimization at the hands of their peers, since childhood bullying is a pervasive problem in many countries around the world (Harel-Fisch et al., 2010; Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001). Bullying can take many forms, including physical (e.g., hitting, spitting), verbal (e.g., threats, insults), social (e.g., social exclusion, gossip), and cyber-bullying (e.g., malicious messages spread through the Internet or cell phone) (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007). Bullying can be direct (e.g., face-to-face) or indirect (e.g., malicious acts without confrontation such as social exclusion). All children must be protected from victimization, as the detrimental effects of bullying may pose a serious threat to children's healthy development (Nansel et al., 2001), and may have lasting effects that persist into adulthood (Olweus, 1993). Bullying is recognized as a relationship problem (Pepler et al., 2006), whereby

power is asserted through aggression (Pepler & Craig, 2000). Power may be obtained by the child who bullies as a result of: individual characteristics such as size, strength, or age (Olweus, 1993); from knowledge of others' vulnerabilities (Sutton, Smith, & Swettenahm, 1999); or as a result of social advantages including strength in numbers or higher social status among peers (Craig et al., 2007). With repeated bullying, the power differential between the child who bullies and the child who is victimized becomes further entrenched (Craig & Pepler, 2003). As the power differential increases, children who are bullied are less able to defend themselves, and thus require the protection of adults.

According to a systemic ecological framework, bullying dynamics extend beyond the children who bully or are bullied, and include peers, teachers, the school, parents/family, and community (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Barboza et al., 2009; Cairns & Cairns, 1991; Germain & Bloom, 1999; Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2008). There is a lack of research on the perceptions and understandings of parents of children who are bullied, with most research focusing on the children who are involved, including those who bully, are victimized, or who are bystanders. Of the little research that has centered on the adults involved in the child's life, much of the emphasis has been on the

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perspectives of teachers (Bernstein & Watson, 1997; Borg, 1998; Boulton, 1997; Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009; Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005). The research that includes parents tends to focus on family characteristics such as attachment styles or parenting styles that may contribute to a child's victimization (Baldry & Farrington, 2000; Kaufmann et al., 2000; Ladd & Kochenderfer Ladd, 1998; Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998; Troy & Sroufe, 1987). Parents have also been included in research as informants, whereby they are asked to complete questionnaires about victimization on their child's behalf (Nordhagen, Nielsen, Stigum, & Kohler, 2005). Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009) recently conducted a study examining four forms of school bullying (physical, verbal, relational, and cyber) and how each was associated with parental support. Findings revealed that positive parental behaviors protect adolescents from involvement in bullying others and in experiencing bullying victimization. Overall however, there is a considerable gap in bullying research with respect to understanding perspectives of parents regarding bullying. Thus, a qualitative design is necessary to create an opportunity for the voices of parents to be heard (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002). Qualitative methodology helps to capture the unique experiences and perspectives of the participants, and can provide information on the factors that influence how parents perceive bullying incidents (Mishna et al., 2008).

The way parents define and conceptualize bullying can influence whether and how they respond or intervene. Indeed, the victimized child's inability to defend him or herself during bullying interactions is integral to the bullying dynamic, and thus requires adult intervention (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Olweus, 1991). A study that examined the degree to which parent and teacher support buffered the level of depression in children involved in bullying revealed that children reported fewer symptoms of depression when support from their parents was high (Connors-Burrow, Johnson, Whiteside-Mansell, McKelvey, & Gargus, 2009). Furthermore, when the children received a high level of parental support, the impact of support from the teacher was not significant (Connors-Burrow et al., 2009). Such findings underscore the importance of parents in protecting their children with respect to bullying.

Many children do not disclose bullying to adults (Atlas & Pepler, 1998) for a number of reasons, including feeling too ashamed to speak about their experiences and lacking confidence in the adult's ability to help them (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005). The definition or conceptualization that parents have regarding bullying is one factor that influences whether children feel comfortable disclosing their victimization, as children's expectations about adult interventions are influential in disclosure (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000). Parents' understanding of bullying may affect whether they respond effectively and appropriately to their child who has disclosed victimization and whether they are attuned to signs indicating their child might be experiencing bullying even if their child does not disclose. It is imperative to conduct research on parents' perceptions of bullying to increase understanding of the factors that affect how parents understand, recognize and respond to bullying incidents and to inform education and intervention with the aim of increasing parents' knowledge and ability to respond effectively.

This study adds to research in the field of bullying by focusing on how parents perceive and understand bullying and on the factors that may influence whether or not they respond to bullying incidents. Using in-depth interviews, we report parents' views regarding: how bullying is defined, awareness of their child's involvement in bullying, disclosure of their child's bullying experiences, reactions to their child reporting being victimized, and strategies they suggested to respond to bullying. The findings address an important gap as they highlight the complexity of bullying and the need to expand the bullying literature to capture the perspectives of parents. In doing so, this research embodies an ecological approach that highlights the key role of adults in protecting children, which includes recognizing and responding to bullying incidents.

2. Method

This study used basic qualitative methods (Merriam, 2002) to examine the views of parents of children who self-identified as experiencing bullying. Students were drawn from 14 grade four and five classes in four urban public schools. The schools were selected to ensure that they varied substantially in order to represent variables that might influence bullying behavior, such as income and education (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999). More specifically, one school was categorized in the lowest income range and another was in the second lowest. These schools have a high percentage of single parent families, a low proportion of parents with higher education, with many families living in subsidized housing, and high numbers of immigrants. Conversely, the other two schools in the study represented the highest and second highest income levels. These schools have a moderate to low percentage of single parent families, mixed to high parent education levels with most families living in single detached housing, and low to moderate numbers of recent immigrants (Schools Like Us Project Description, 2001–2002). The 20 parents, who were interviewed for the study because their children had reported victimization, classified themselves as Caucasian (11), Asian (6), Latin American (1), Jewish (1), and the classification of one parent is unknown.

To obtain students' self-reports of bullying, the Safe School Questionnaire (Pepler et al., 1993, adapted from Olweus, 1989) was administered to 157 students (63 boys and 94 girls) in six grade 4 classes and eight grade 5 classes. An introductory letter was sent by each principal to the parents of all grade 4 and 5 students, with an attached letter from the researchers. A consent form was sent home to obtain parental consent of those interested in participating. Of 349 students invited to participate, 159 received consent. This study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with the parents of selected children who self-identified as having been frequently bullied by their peers as they reported in their questionnaire. Interviews focused on parents' perceptions and reactions to bullying in general, and also in relation to their own child reporting victimization. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board and by the participating School Board.

In the parent consent form, it was explained that a risk of this study would be that parents may find out for the first time that their child was being bullied. If parents had concerns, they were asked to talk to a research assistant or the principal investigator, in order to receive support and assistance. Furthermore, follow-up occurred with the parents who expressed concern after finding out their child had reported being bullied.

Research assistants administered the questionnaire after receiving children's assent. This questionnaire was adapted from Olweus (1989) original questionnaire, and the aim was to assess children's perceptions of their experiences of being bullied, and of bullying others. Two items on the Safe School Questionnaire were used to assess involvement in bullying: "How often have you been bullied in the current term?" and "How often have you been bullied in the last five days?" Prior to the children completing the questionnaire, graduate student research assistants led a class discussion on the definition of bullying. A definition of bullying, adapted from Olweus (1989) was also provided at the beginning of the student questionnaire. The reliability of the Safe School Questionnaire was .78 according to Cronbach's alpha, thereby indicating a good internal consistency for the scale. Children responded to items with "it hasn't happened in the current term," "once or twice," "more than once or twice," "about once a week," or "several times a week." On the basis of the Safe School Questionnaire results from all four schools, nine boys and nine girls in grades 4 and 5 who identified as having been frequently bullied were selected. Consent and assent were attained by the parents and children for the child's parents to participate in an interview and also to inform the children's teacher(s) that the child reported being bullied. Teachers were told the name(s) of the child(ren) in their classes who had reported being a victim of bullying

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