"We were Sad and We were Angry": A Systematic Review of Parents' Perspectives on Bullying

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"We were Sad and We were Angry": A Systematic Review of Parents' Perspectives on Bullying

Susan Harcourt · Marieke Jasperse · Vanessa A. Green

Abstract

Background   The social-ecological systems perspective describes bullying as a complex social phenomenon, influenced by numerous social variables within a child's school, home, peer, and community environments. As such, it is important to gain the perspective of a wide range of stakeholders within these environments, in order to truly understand bullying and develop effective prevention and intervention programmes.

Objective   Parents' experiences with bullying remain relatively unexplored. Accordingly, this systematic review aimed to summarise qualitative research examining parents' experiences with and perceptions of bullying.

Methods   Electronic searches were conducted in the PsycINFO, Education Resources Information Center, ProQuest, A+ Education, and Academic Search Premier databases; reference lists and specific journals were also searched. Selected studies were read thoroughly, and the main findings were categorised into common themes.

Results   Thirteen studies were identified to be included in the review. Six themes emerged: (1) variation in parents' definitions of bullying, (2) the perception of bullying as normal, and a tendency to blame victims, (3) parents' strategies for coping with bullying, (4) the negative effects of bullying, (5) issues of disclosure, awareness and support, and (6) the question of responsibility for dealing with bullying.

Conclusions   Parents' experiences with bullying are varied and diverse. However, parents consistently expressed the need for targeted information and guidelines on how to deal with bullying. Furthermore, greater awareness and understanding of bullying among

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parents is necessary, along with the acknowledgement of shared responsibility for bullying, and greater collaboration between schools and families.

Keywords Bullying · Parents · Systematic review · Qualitative · Perspectives

Introduction

Bullying and victimisation are, unfortunately, common experiences for children and young people, with some studies reporting that up to 45 % of young people around the world have been involved in bullying (Craig et al. 2009; Harel-Fisch et al. 2011). Broadly defined, bullying is "the systematic abuse of power in interpersonal relationships" (Rigby 2008, p. 22). Olweus states that "a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (1993, p. 9). This definition is the 'gold standard' in the field of bullying research, and incorporates three key characteristics: that the behaviour is intentional, repetitive, and involves a power imbalance (Miller 2006). Bullying can involve physical aggression (e.g., punching, tripping), verbal aggression (e.g., threats, insults), social or relational aggression (e.g., social exclusion, spreading gossip), or cyber-bullying, that is, bullying through the use of electronic communication devices, such as cellphones (Craig et al. 2007; Miller 2006). Not surprisingly, victims of bullying tend to demonstrate greater evidence of psychosocial issues than those who have not been bullied (Smith et al. 2004), including psychological distress (Salmon et al. 2000), somatic symptoms (Due et al. 2005), and difficulties at school (Eisenberg et al. 2003).

The social-ecological systems perspective (Espelage and Swearer 2004) proposes that social behaviour patterns, such as bullying, are influenced by a range of social and environmental conditions, dynamics, and experiences (Espelage and Swearer 2004; Mishna et al. 2006). This perspective, influenced by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977), suggests that bullying is a complex phenomenon involving the interaction of individuals, their families, schools, and wider communities (Mishna et al. 2006). Since Olweus' seminal work in Scandinavia in the 1970s, ever-increasing amounts of research into bullying has been conducted worldwide (Espelage and Swearer 2003; Stockdale et al. 2002). The majority of this research has focussed on students, teachers, and other school staff (e.g., principals, counsellors; Olweus 1993).

However, there is increasing evidence of the significant role played by parents in a child's experience of bullying. For example, a recent meta-analysis of 70 studies (Lereya et al. 2013) examined the correlations between parenting factors and children's involvement as a victim or bully-victim (one who both bullies and is bullied). The meta-analysis revealed that high parental involvement and support, warm and affectionate relationships, and good family communication and supervision were significantly likely to protect children and adolescents against peer victimisation, while "abuse and neglect and maladaptive parenting were the best predictors of victim or bully/victim status at school" (p. 12). Furthermore, the closeness of relationships and levels of punishment and conflict in the home also affect children's involvement in bullying (Stevens et al. 2002), while strong family support predicts positive adjustment and resiliency in bullied children (Bowes et al. 2010). Maternal warmth and a positive home environment predicted fewer emotional and behavioural problems in children who had been bullied, compared to those who had not

been bullied (Bowes et al. 2010). Similarly, bullied students who perceive high levels of support from their parents show fewer and less extreme depressive symptoms (Conners-Burrow et al. 2009).

Parents are also a crucial factor in the success of school-based anti-bullying programmes. Ttofi and Farrington (2011) systematically reviewed the effectiveness of 44 school anti-bullying programmes, and identified that parental involvement, through training, meetings, and support, was one of the "most important elements of a program that were related to a decrease in bullying" (p. 43). They conclude that future anti-bullying programmes should involve efforts to educate parents about bullying, such as educational presentations and teacher-parent meetings.

These studies have demonstrated that parents play an important part in the socio-ecological network of influences on bullying. However, descriptive, qualitative research has the potential to provide additional insight into the social processes of bullying (Mishna et al. 2009; Smith 1997) by enabling those who have lived through the experience to express its complexity in their own words (Bosacki et al. 2006; van Manen 1990). It also allows investigators the opportunity to "view [bullying] from a different perspective and to reflect on the assumptions underlying their research" (Bosacki et al. 2006, p. 233). Finally, a greater understanding of parents' experiences with bullying, and how they work with their child and the school community in response to bullying, can inform the development and implementation of effective anti-bullying programmes (Espelage and Swearer 2004). This systematic review therefore aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are parents' perceptions of bullying?
2. How do parents experience and react to bullying?

Methods

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To be included in this review, articles had to explore parents' perspectives of bullying using a qualitative methodology. Studies involving participants other than parents (e.g., children, teachers) were included, although this review focussed primarily on the data provided by parents. Participants' children could be victims, bullies, or uninvolved peers; these children could be of any age. Studies could either focus on a particular form of bullying (e.g., cyber-bullying), or discuss bullying in general.

All qualitative methodologies (e.g., grounded theory, phenomenology) were included, as were studies using mixed methods research. Studies relying solely on quantitative data were excluded, as were qualitative studies which mentioned parents, but did not include them as participants. Two studies which focussed on the parents of children with specific disabilities were excluded, as bullying was not the primary focus of either study (see "Appendix 2"). A study evaluating a bullying prevention programme was considered for inclusion, but also excluded as it involved minimal input from parents.

Systematic Search Procedures

Systematic searches were conducted in five electronic databases: PsycINFO, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, A+ Education, and Academic Search Premier, between November 2012 and February 2013. The search was restricted to only

include full-length, peer-reviewed, English language articles published since the year 2000. On all five databases a Keyword search was conducted, using combinations of the following keywords: *parent*AND/OR famil**; *bull* AND/OR victim*AND/OR cyber*; *qualitative AND/OR perspective AND/OR perception AND/OR experience AND/OR opinion*.

The ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database was also searched using the above keywords, after the initial database search revealed that several such documents seemed appropriate for inclusion in this review. The reference lists of selected articles were then searched for further relevant studies, as were the journals which published the selected articles.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Using these search procedures, 39 articles were identified for possible inclusion in the review. After following the exclusion criteria outlined above, 13 studies were selected for review (see "Appendix 1"). The database, reference list, and journal searches were conducted by the first author, and data analysis was conducted by the first and second authors. Data analysis involved an independent and thorough reading of each study, where relevant sections of text were highlighted to extract key findings. These interpretations and findings were grouped into thematic categories; these categories were then cross-referenced across the thirteen studies to identify common themes. Comparison of these categories and themes between the first and second authors resulted in 100 % agreement.

Four of the included studies appeared to describe data collected from the same sample, using the same methodology. However, the four studies report on different aspects of the data: Mishna (2004) presents an initial, general discussion of bullying from the viewpoint of children, parents, and school staff; Mishna et al. (2006) describe factors associated with responses to bullying; Mishna et al. (2008) investigate bullying within friendships; and Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler and Wiener (2011) focus exclusively on parental perspectives. It was therefore decided to include these four studies separately in this review.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the 13 studies in terms of the (a) participants, (b) methodology and methods, and (c) main findings of each study.

Participant Characteristics

Six of the reviewed studies involved only parents as participants (Brown 2010; Cassidy et al. 2012; Clarke et al. 2004; Harvey 2009; Humphrey and Crisp 2008; Sawyer et al. 2011), while the remaining seven included parents, children, teachers, or other school staff (Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012; Mark 2009; Mishna 2004; Mishna et al. 2006, 2008; Purcell 2012; Zaklama 2003).

A total of 411 parents participated in 12 of the 13 studies. However, one study (Harvey 2009) did not state the total number of participants, and another (Clarke et al. 2004) reported the total number of parents who participated in interviews (n = 18), but not the total number of parents involved in the television interviews they analysed. Apart from one large scale study (Cassidy et al. 2012; n = 315), the mean number of parent participants for the 12 remaining studies was 12 (range 3–24).

Table 1 Summary of qualitative accounts of parents' experiences with bullying (in chronological order)

Study, country of origin	Participants	Methods	Main findings
Zaklama (2003) *Canada*	8 children (11–12 years) 3 parents 4 teachers	Teachers completed questionnaires to identify bullies, victims, and uninvolved children Semi-structured interviews were conducted with bullies, victims, peers, parents and teachers	Themes included differences in parent–child relationships between bullies, victims and peers; parents' own bullying experiences were similar to their children's. Parents discussed the need for increased teacher involvement with bullying, e.g., larger school staff, teacher training on bullying
Clarke et al. (2004) *England*	18 parents interviewed 11 television documentaries analysed	Excerpts from documentaries about lesbian/gay families were transcribed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with lesbian and gay parents Discourse analysis was conducted on transcripts, about parents' representations of their children's experiences of homophobic bullying	Several parents reported that no homophobic bullying occurred, and challenged the perception that it was common, but demonstrated some uncertainty Those who indicated it did occur normalised homophobic bullying, seeing it as another form of bullying, which was seen as inevitable. However, some parents were unaware of their child's experiences
Mishna (2004) *Canada*	5 children (8–11 years approx.) 5 parents 3 teachers 1 vice-principal 1 principal	Bullied children were identified via the My Life In School Checklist Semi-structured interviews were conducted with bullied children, parents, and school staff	Primary theme of the difficulty of defining and determining bullying, influenced by the adult's perception of an incident Several parents saw bullying as normal; some struggled with the concept of bullying in friendships Parents used strategies of monitoring the situation, and advising their child to retaliate or ignore the bully
Mishna et al. (2006) *Canada*	18 children (8–11 years approx.) 20 parents 13 teachers 2 vice-principals 4 principals	Bullied children were identified via the Safe School Questionnaire Semi-structured interviews were conducted with bullied children, parents, and school staff	Themes emerged around the complexity of defining, disclosing, and responding to bullying Adults discussed the difficulty of identifying bullied children, whether bullying was a normal part of development, and the challenge of responding to an unclear situation

Table 1 continued

Study, country of origin	Participants	Methods	Main findings
Humphrey and Crisp (2008) Australia	4 parents of 4–5 year old children	Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of bullied kindergarteners	Parents had a strong definition and understanding of bullying, and noticed the negative effects of bullying on their children and on themselves. Parents felt that staff needed to take more responsibility, and expressed a need for understanding and support from staff, and the need for information and resources on bullying. Parental strategies included increasing their child's self-esteem and social skills
Mishna et al. (2008) Canada	18 children (8–11 years approx.) 20 parents 13 teachers 2 vice-principals 4 principals	Bullied children were identified via the Safe School Questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with bullied children, parents, and school staff, about bullying in friendships	89 % of children indicated having been bullied by someone they considered to be a friend. Large proportions of adults were unaware of bullying within friendships. Themes included the awareness of bullying within friendships, the impact on friendships, and differentiating bullying from teasing within friendships. Parents expressed concern, and discussed strategies used to assist their child
Harvey (2009) USA	Parents who had posted on weblogs (blogs) about their child being bullied	Thematic analysis was conducted on 63 blog posts about bullying, from five blogs	Content analysis revealed that parents used these blogs to share stories, to give advice, to ask for help, and to share stories to give advice
Mark (2009) USA	12 children (11–14 years approx.) 3 parents 2 school counsellors	Students completed a questionnaire about cyber-bullying. Focus group was conducted with students about experiences of cyber-bullying. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and counsellors about cyber-bullying	Parents expressed concern about cyber-bullying and the difficulty of monitoring children's online activities. They discussed the changing nature of bullying, the need for support, and responsibility issues between families and schools for teaching computer safety and monitoring behaviour. Parents reported strategies they had used to protect their children from cyber-bullying

Table 1 continued

Study, country of origin	Participants	Methods	Main findings
Brown (2010) USA	11 parents of bullied children (11–17 years approx.)	Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, about reporting their child's experience of bullying to the school	Parents' experiences included recognising and learning about the bullying, deciding on a course of action, communication problems, different representations between involved parties, victim blaming, inaction, and drastic measures (e.g., taking legal action)
Sawyer et al. (2011) Canada	20 parents of bullied children (8–11 years approx.)	Bullied children were identified via the Safe School Questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents	Themes emerged of defining and identifying bullying; gender differences, reactions to their child self-identifying as a victim, awareness of their child witnessing bullying, effects of the victimisation, strategies, and complexities around disclosing bullying
Cassidy et al. (2012) Canada	315 parents of 10–15 year old (approx.) children	Parents completed a questionnaire about understanding of, experiences with, and suggestions for preventing cyber-bullying	Parents were not seriously concerned about cyber-bullying, although the majority supervised their child's computer use. Very few parents reported that their child had experienced cyber-bullying; those who did reported a range of responses. Parents' suggestions for preventing cyber-bullying and promoting 'cyber kindness' included education, communication and modelling appropriate behaviour
Kirves and Sajaniemi (2012) Finland	61 children (3–6 years) 24 parents 29 early childhood centre staff	Staff completed a questionnaire on bullying prevalence, and characteristics of bullied children. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with children, parents, and staff about bullying in kindergarten	Staff report that 12.6 % of children were involved in bullying; immigrant children and those with special needs were more likely to be bullied. Elements of parents' definitions of bullying matched those of staff, but they tended to describe bullying as a developmental phase, where children cannot control aggressive behaviour
Purcell (2012) Ireland	8 children (6–7 years) 8 parents 2 teachers	Bullies and victims were identified by teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with children, parents, and teachers	Definitions of bullying varied widely; parents tended to see bullying as victim's problem, not bully's. Parents discussed strategies they had suggested to their child, and the importance of parent teacher collaboration in addressing bullying

The children of the parents involved in these studies ranged in age from approximately 3 years (Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012) to approximately 17 years (Brown 2010). Seven of the studies explicitly stated that the parent participants' children had been bullied. Two studies (Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012; Mark 2009) did not specify whether participants' children had experienced bullying, while Cassidy et al. (2012), Clarke et al. (2004), Purcell (2012), and Zaklama (2003) included parents of victims, bullies, and non-involved peers.

The only study conducted in a non-English-speaking country was conducted by Kirves and Sajaniemi (2012), and originated in Finland; the other studies were conducted in Canada (n = 6), the USA (n = 3), England (n = 1), Australia (n = 1) and Ireland (n = 1). The majority of these studies did not restrict the type of bullying under investigation; only Cassidy et al. (2012) and Mark (2009) focussed exclusively on one type of bullying, cyber-bullying.

Methodologies and Methods

Eight of the reviewed studies used a phenomenological methodology (Brown 2010; Harvey 2009; Humphrey and Crisp 2008; Mishna 2004; Mishna et al. 2006, 2008; Sawyer et al. 2011; Zaklama 2003). Two studies used mixed methods (Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012; Mark 2009), combining phenomenology with quantitative methods. Cassidy et al. (2012) and Purcell (2012) used grounded theory, and Clarke et al. (2004) used discourse analysis.

The most common method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, used by 11 studies (Brown 2010; Clarke et al. 2004; Humphrey and Crisp 2008; Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012; Mark 2009; Mishna 2004; Mishna et al. 2006, 2008; Purcell 2012; Sawyer et al. 2011; Zaklama 2003). To supplement their interviews, Kirves and Sajaniemi (2012) and Mark (2009) conducted quantitative surveys; Mark (2009) also held focus groups. Clarke et al. (2004) incorporated pre-existing television documentaries into their discourse analysis. The two remaining studies used qualitative questionnaires (Cassidy et al. 2012) and parents' posts on online forums and blogs (Harvey 2009).

Main Findings

Six major themes were identified: (1) variation in parents' definitions of bullying, (2) the perception of bullying as normal, and a tendency to blame victims, (3) parents' strategies for coping with bullying, (4) the negative effects of bullying, (5) issues of awareness, disclosure, and support, and (6) the question of responsibility for dealing with bullying.

1. Variation in parents' definitions

Parents' definitions of bullying varied widely across the reviewed studies. For example, Sawyer et al. (2011) noted that although definitions provided by parents were generally consistent with literature, they tended not to mention the repetitive nature of bullying behaviour. Several studies (Humphrey and Crisp 2008; Mishna et al. 2006; Zaklama 2003) mentioned that parents focussed their definitions on the power imbalance inherent in bullying. A common theme throughout parents' definitions was the difficulty of identifying which actions actually constituted bullying (Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012; Mishna et al. 2006; Purcell 2012). For example, Mishna et al. (2006) note that until they were provided with the Olweus definition, several parents had not considered indirect relational aggression as bullying. These parents expressed concern about the difficulty identifying the "thin line between bullying and teasing" (p. 264). Similarly, parents of kindergarten children expressed uncertainty as to whether negative behaviour at preschool age could be

considered bullying (Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012). Parents instead described early childhood as a developmental phase during which "young children are not supposed to be able to control their aggressive behaviour" (p. 393).

2. Perceiving bullying as normal and victim blaming

In a number of studies, parents depicted bullying as "a normal part of growing up" (Sawyer et al. 2011, p. 1797). For example, Clarke et al. (2004) found that although a number of gay and lesbian parents acknowledged that their children had experienced homophobic bullying, these parents tended to minimise and 'normalise' the severity of such bullying. For these parents, childhood bullying was an inevitable experience. Similarly, a number of parents in Cassidy et al. (2012), when asked for ideas on preventing cyber-bullying, expressed cynicism that bullying could ever be eliminated, e.g.: "what do you think the chances of that happening are???" (p. 426).

Furthermore, parents interviewed by Mishna et al. (2006, 2008) tended to normalise verbal and relational bullying, perceiving these forms as less serious than physical bullying. For example, one mother felt relieved that her daughter had experienced relational instead of physical bullying, because social exclusion "is what kids do" (Mishna et al. 2008, p. 560). Another mother explained: "I mean obviously if it was a physical altercation or severe risk to my daughter, of course I would [say something]. But it is so subtle and it is just normal girl stuff" (Sawyer et al. 2011, p. 1797).

Related to this theme was parents' tendency not only to normalise bullying, but to place the problem of bullying, and the responsibility for fixing it, back on the victim (Brown 2010; Zaklama 2003). As Purcell (2012) notes, "adults tended to identify bullying and exclusion as a victim's issue rather than the bully's problem" (p. 277). One parent reported telling her victimised daughter that "you need to figure out how to make it work" (Brown 2010, p. 120).

3. Strategies for coping with bullying

Parents described a wide range of strategies they had used in response to their child being bullied, which primarily focused on relieving and reducing the stress their child was experiencing. These strategies primarily involved the victim or the victim's family, rather than the bully or their family (Brown 2010; Purcell 2012).

A number of parents took direct action by involving their child's school in dealing with the bullying. For example, several studies (Brown 2010; Cassidy et al. 2012; Humphrey and Crisp 2008; Mishna et al. 2006, 2008) found that parents had approached their child's school, in an attempt to "make school officials aware of [the bullying] and intercede on behalf of their child" (Brown 2010, p. 124). A similarly direct strategy, reported by a parent in Brown (2010), was to contact the bully's parents in the hope of making them aware of the situation.

Parents also used indirect strategies to enhance their child's ability to handle the bullying on their own. Parents report providing emotional support to their child (Cassidy et al. 2012; Mishna et al. 2008), promoting prosocial behaviour (Sawyer et al. 2011), and attempting to increase their child's self-esteem and help them overcome fear (Humphrey and Crisp 2008). A number of parents suggested to their child that they ignore the bullying (Brown 2010; Mishna et al. 2006), tell another adult (Sawyer et al. 2011), or try to feel compassion for the bully (Brown 2010). Alternatively, some parents advised their child to retaliate (Purcell 2012; Sawyer et al. 2011), or enrolled their child in self-defence related activities, such as martial arts classes (Sawyer et al. 2011; Zaklama 2003). In two studies (Brown 2010; Zaklama 2003), parents reported taking the drastic action of transferring

their child to another school, because the bullying at the previous school had become too difficult to manage.

Several studies mentioned specific strategies used by parents in response to the particular type of bullying under consideration. For example, parents interviewed by Mishna et al. (2008), who focussed on bullying within friendships, reported working with the parents of their child's friends to address the bullying. Mark (2009) and Cassidy et al. (2012) report a number of specific strategies parents used to prevent cyber-bullying, such as closely monitoring or limiting their child's online activity, educating their child about cyber-safety, and encouraging open communication with their child about the use of technology.

4. Negative effects of bullying

An understandably common theme was the upsetting and negative emotional responses described by parents in relation to their child being bullied. Parents across several studies reported feeling angry, helpless, frustrated, guilty, worried, and stressed (Harvey 2009; Humphrey and Crisp 2008; Sawyer et al. 2011). Parents in Mishna et al. (2008) and Brown (2010) also expressed doubt about whether they had done the right thing in response to their child's experience of bullying. As Brown (2010) notes, "parents express that the aftermath of the [bullying] ordeal leaves them with emotional fallout" (p. 163).

Parents expressed particular frustration and helplessness in relation to their children's vulnerability to cyber-bullying in a modern, technology-focussed world (Mark 2009). As one father commented, "The Internet has eliminated that [parental] boundary, where it is not possible for parents to control, in any way, what their kids are doing…I have lots of things I can do to have some influence on [traditional bullying]. With cyber-bullying, I don't have the same options" (p. 46).

The study which most comprehensively explored parents' feelings and emotional reactions was Brown (2010), who interviewed parents on their experiences of discovering, reporting, and living with the aftermath of bullying. Brown presents these experiences using the metaphor of protecting a child from a severe storm: as the 'storm clouds' gather, and signs of bullying start to show, parents generally felt surprised and upset; some found it difficult to accept that their child was being bullied. In the second stage, parents' experiences of seeking help by reporting the bullying to the school are likened to putting faith in the weather forecast, hoping that the storm will pass. However, parents describe a sense of disappointment at the school's response; they felt confused, angry, frustrated, and vulnerable; and they felt unable to protect their child from what they were going through. In the final stage, Brown describes the "reports of damage within individual households" (2010, p. 157), where parents reflected on their experiences. One mother described the process as a living hell; a mother and father expressed their sense of failed responsibility, having told their son that things would get better, when in fact they became worse. Several parents expressed regret that they had not taken action earlier.

Parents across the reviewed studies also described their children's reactions to being bullied, from a loss of self-esteem, being scared, and wetting the bed (Humphrey and Crisp 2008), to refusing to go to school and showing physical and psychological signs of anxiety and depression (Brown 2010; Sawyer et al. 2011), to running away from home or expressing suicidal tendencies (Harvey 2009).

5. Awareness, disclosure, and support

Several studies which involved both parents and children as participants report that parents were often not fully aware of the extent of their child's bullying experience. For

example, Mishna and colleagues (Mishna et al. 2006, 2008; Sawyer et al. 2011) report that approximately half of the parents in their sample were not aware that their child was being bullied; this fact was only revealed to these parents when they were invited to participate in the study. Similarly, Cassidy et al. (2012) found that while parents in their study did not express serious concerns about cyber-bullying, their children told quite a different story. For example, although 32 % of the child participants reported having experienced cyber-bullying, only 11 % of their parents indicated that their child had been cyber-bullied.

Furthermore, Zaklama (2003) suggested that parents' awareness of their child's involvement in bullying depended on the role played by that child. While the mother of a bully was directly told of her son's involvement in bullying by his school, the mother of a victim reported it was only due to her high level of involvement in her child's school life that she became aware he was being bullied.

Similarly, several studies noted that parents rarely learnt of their child's bullying experience from the child's school. Humphrey and Crisp (2008) report that not one of their four participants were told about the bullying by teachers at their child's early childhood centre; these parents had to raise their concerns themselves (p. 47). Similarly, Brown (2010) found that in only one of ten cases did the school take the first step in addressing the bullying, by reporting it to the family. The remaining parents learnt about their child's experience of bullying in a range of ways (e.g., the child told their parents, the parents guessed after a change in their child's behaviour).

Given this lack of contact between schools and parents, several studies report that parents were often surprised to learn that their child reported having been bullied. For example, one mother commented that her daughter had displayed no obvious external signs of having been bullied: "[she is] so upbeat…she has a really large circle of friends" (Sawyer et al. 2011, p. 1798). Similarly, one mother interviewed by Brown (2010) reported surprise at learning that her son had been victimised. Given her description of him as a "big, athletic seventh grader who played hockey and football" (p. 110), she had more expected him to be a bully, rather than a victim.

A particularly common theme was parents' representations of their need for support and information regarding bullying. For example, Sawyer et al. (2011) note that "most parents…expressed a strong desire to learn ways to help their child open up to them about their experiences" (p. 1799). Harvey (2009), in her content analysis of blog posts, concluded that parents used this medium primarily to access support and advice from other parents, through sharing their stories and asking for help. Parents interviewed by Humphrey and Crisp (2008) expressed a need for information on the different forms of bullying, its effects, and effective strategies, and highlighted the importance of staff being approachable for support in relation to bullying. Brown (2010) notes that school social workers could potentially be an effective means through which parents could access support, as parents often felt alone in their struggle with reporting school bullying. As one parent noted, "I did all the research on my own. I did quite a bit of research on bullying to see if, as parents, we were doing the right things, but no-one ever gave us any kind of resources to look into" (p. 167).

6. Responsibility for dealing with bullying

A final important theme across the studies was the question of responsibility for dealing with bullying. A large number of studies reported that although parents agree that schools currently play an important role, there was a general perception that schools should be doing more to prevent, respond to, and manage bullying (Brown 2010; Harvey 2009; Humphrey and Crisp 2008; Mishna et al. 2006; Purcell 2012; Zaklama 2003). As Mishna

et al. (2006) note, "some parents expressed disappointment in what they perceived as some teachers' lack of willingness or ability to help the children, which they believed aggravated the situation" (p. 266).

The two studies which focussed exclusively on cyber-bullying report contrasting findings regarding parents' views on responsibility for this particular type of bullying. Mark (2009) found that the three parents interviewed all agreed that schools were primarily responsible for monitoring online activity at school, encouraging positive relationships to prevent cyber-bullying, and educating students around cyber-safety and "appropriate digital behaviour" (p. 48). However, Cassidy et al. (2012) found that a significant number of parents felt that the responsibility for encouraging respectful online behaviour rested with parents. Although several parents expressed the need for school-based curriculum development and cyber-safety instruction, parents' overall perceptions were summarised by this comment: "You're asking teachers to teach moral values, kindness, etc. [This] must be modeled at home long before a child reaches school. Teachers can only reinforce [these practices]" (Cassidy et al. 2012, p. 429).

Overall, however, parents felt that schools needed to take greater responsibility. Once again, Brown (2010) described this theme extensively, using thematic headings such as 'They did not deal with it', 'They didn't even care' and 'Broken and abandoned' to describe parents' frustration in working with their child's school to address the bullying. As he notes, "the social contract from school to parent that a safe, caring, educational environment be provided was repeatedly violated" (p. 153).

Discussion

This systematic review has identified 13 studies which qualitatively explored bullying from parents' perspectives. These 13 studies contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-ecological influences on bullying, and the six key themes (variable definitions; perceiving bullying as normal; strategies; negative effects; awareness, disclosure and support; and responsibility) represent a range of insights into parents' experiences with, perceptions of, and reactions to bullying.

A number of parents, across several studies, struggled to clearly define and identify bullying, a finding which has been reflected among other populations. For example, Lee (2006) reports that establishing a common definition of bullying among a group of teachers was a complex task, influenced by the experiences and cultural contexts of the individual teachers. Like the parents in the reviewed studies, children are highly unlikely to include any of the three key characteristics of Olweus' definition of bullying—intentionality, repetition, and imbalance of power—in their definitions of bullying (Vaillancourt et al. 2008). Furthermore, Mills and Carwile (2009) note that as bullying and teasing are frequently represented as synonymous in the media, it can be difficult for parents and educators to distinguish between these two interrelated acts. It is therefore unsurprising that the parents in the reviewed studies struggled with defining and identifying bullying.

This confusion around defining and identifying bullying may contribute to the perceptions held by several parents that bullying is a normal, almost inevitable part of childhood. Given that parents' and teachers' perceptions can significantly influence their responses to bullying (Hurd and Gettinger 2011; Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier 2008; Werner et al. 2006), these perceptions may result in significant negative consequences for the child involved. In fact, Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier (2008) found that teachers who held normative beliefs about bullying were the least likely to intervene in bullying

situations, in comparison with those who held assertive beliefs (i.e., that children should stand up for themselves) or avoidant beliefs (i.e., that children should physically avoid bullies). Furthermore, several of the reviewed studies suggested that parents may express 'victim-blaming' opinions and attitudes towards bullying. This concerning finding aligns with other studies (e.g., Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003; Thornberg 2013; Varjas et al. 2008) which found that children also tend to identify personal characteristics of individual victims as reasons for why bullying occurs thereby normalizing bullying and justifying the behaviour (Thornberg 2013). In order to to change this type of attitude it is critical to increase awareness concerning the potential negative impact of bullying behavior on children and young people.

A parent's response to bullying may also be impacted if they underestimate the extent of bullying in their child's environment, or are simply unaware that their child is experiencing bullying. Given that children's reports of the prevalence of bullying may differ significantly from those of adults (Dehue et al. 2008; Holt et al. 2009), it is unsurprising that several of the reviewed studies found discrepancies between children's and adults' accounts of bullying. Parents' awareness and understanding of bullying therefore represent crucial factors in understanding the socio-ecological influences on a child's experience of bullying.

Parents' descriptions of the strategies and support they offered their children in response to their experience of bullying reflect two broad aims: to comfort the child's distress (i.e., emotion-focused coping) and to take action to address the problem situation (i.e., problem-focused coping). These strategies and coping frameworks reflect those described by bullied children and young people themselves. For example, Tenenbaum et al. (2011) found that children who had been bullied reported using emotion-focused coping strategies such as seeking social support and 'focusing on the positive', and problem-focused strategies such as self-defence and distancing themselves from the situation. This emphasis on re-framing the situation by teaching children to change the way they think about bullying behaviour was also highlighted by Terranova et al. (2011) where they suggested that changing children's attitudes toward aggressive behaviour would be particularly beneficial. Similarly, Bellmore et al. (2013) discuss the 'approach-avoidance' coping framework in relation to bullying, and describe a wide range of strategies used by students including ignoring the bullying behaviour, retaliating against the bully, and 'rising above' the bullying.

Another important factor within the socio-ecological environment is a parent's perception of who should take responsibility for managing bullying. Parents clearly believe that school staff have an important role to play in dealing with bullying, but the majority of parents across the reviewed studies felt that schools need to take greater responsibility for preventing and responding to bullying. This finding directly contrasts those of Green et al. (2013), who found that school staff—teachers, principals, and senior management— strongly believed that it was families who needed to be taking greater action in the fight against bullying. The disagreement around this crucial issue between key adult stakeholders must be addressed, in order to facilitate effective communication and collaboration.

The above discussion suggests that certain aspects of parents' experiences with bullying align with those of teachers, school staff, and children and young people, reflected in the wider bullying literature. However, several aspects of parents' experiences as found in this review do not appear to have been examined in the literature. These include the negative impact of bullying on parents, the fact that parents rarely learnt of their child's experience of bullying directly from the school, and their need for support and information in relation to bullying. The fact that such themes do not appear to have yet been examined in the

literature suggests that further research in this area is needed to gain a comprehensive picture of the experiences of parents in relation to bullying.

Implications

One of the key findings from a recent systematic review and meta-analysis of what contributes to the success of bullying prevention and intervention programmes (Ttofi and Farrington 2011) is the importance of parent involvement and a stronger emphasis on home-school communication. This includes regular parent school meetings and the provision of information and training. The results from the current review support these findings in a number of ways. First, a clearer understanding of what is meant by the term 'bullying' may greatly assist teachers and parents in working together to combat it. However, given that individual interpretations of bullying may depend on background, culture, and personal experience, a single definition of bullying which remains appropriate and consistent across multiple individuals in multiple communities may be difficult to agree upon. Instead, schools may wish to facilitate a closer home-school connection so that they can create a definition in consultation with parents and children, to guide their collective response to incidences of bullying in their community. Second, there is a need for school, community, and family initiatives to raise awareness around bullying to ensure that those who may have the most influence in preventing bullying understand the significant negative effects of bullying, and do not perceive it as a normal, acceptable part of a child's life. Finally, along with a clearer understanding of what bullying means and a better awareness of its effects, this review reinforcers the theme found in Ttofi and Farrington (2011) meta-analysis that parents want to see schools taking the issue seriously and most importantly they themselves want to be more involved and receive support in learning how to deal with and respond to bullying. A lack of understanding about bullying and how to deal with it has been expressed by both pre-service (Cross et al. 2011) and in-service teachers (Green et al. 2013; Smith 2011). Therefore it is perhaps not surprising that parents also feel ill-equipped to deal with bullying issues. In this respect the resources, information and training must be clear, comprehensive, and easily accessible, and could include suggestions and strategies for parents on responding to bullying and supporting their child. Resources could also include information on accessing emotional support for both parents and children, to help them to cope with the wider negative effects of bullying.

Limitations of the Literature

This review demonstrates that the literature on this topic is severely limited. Firstly, the fact that only 13 articles in the last 10 years have explored parents' perspectives on bullying highlights a significant paucity of research in this area. Furthermore, four of the 13 reviewed articles reported on findings drawn from only one sample (Mishna 2004; Mishna et al. 2006, 2008; Sawyer et al. 2011), while a further four studies were published as research theses, rather than in scholarly journals, which may limit the accessibility of their findings.

Another restriction in this body of research is that several studies involved only minimal input from parent participants. Only six of the 13 reviewed studies focussed exclusively on parents, while the remaining seven studies involved an average of just 12 parents. Furthermore, nine of the 13 studies were conducted in North America, and only one was conducted in a non-English speaking country (Kirves and Sajaniemi 2012). Given the importance of social contexts in bullying, cultural factors may have a significant influence

on the experience and understanding of bullying across countries and cultures (Hilton et al. 2010). It is therefore likely that parents' experiences of bullying may also differ between cultures.

A further limitation of the reviewed studies was the focus on the parents of victimised children, in comparison with parents of bullies or bully-victims. Of the 411 parents who participated across the 13 studies, only five were explicitly described as the parents of bullies (Purcell 2012, n = 4; Zaklama 2003, n = 1). No studies explicitly involved the parents of bully-victims. However, given that bullying behaviour also has negative effects on the children who carry it out, and that bully-victims may experience significantly more negative outcomes than either bullies or victims alone (Conners-Burrow et al. 2009; Nansel et al. 2001), gaining the perspective of the parents of these children is important.

Directions for Future Research

This systematic review has highlighted a number of areas where future research is necessary. Future studies could aim to fill the gaps in the existing literature, by conducting research which focuses exclusively on parents, rather than also including children and school staff. It would be beneficial to widen the range of cultures represented by the current literature by investigating the perspectives of parents from a range of different countries, and perhaps comparing and contrasting these perspectives across cultures. Future research could also explore the perspectives and experiences of parents whose children bully others, to gain a greater insight into the backgrounds of such children, and perhaps cast light on their behaviour. Although this population may be significantly more difficult to access than parents of victimised children, a comprehensive, socio-ecological understanding of the multiple influences on bullying would not be complete without such perspectives.

A particularly important area for consideration by future research is the issue of responsibility. Although this issue came up as a common theme across several of the reviewed studies, none of the studies explicitly set out to focus on responsibility, nor was it included as a question to parents. However, this issue is of particular importance when considering the social-ecological systems perspective on bullying, which suggests we must consider not only the individual factors in a child's environment, but the *interaction* between these factors (Espelage and Swearer 2004). If families and schools consistently disagree about who should be the ones to prevent, intervene in, and deal with the after-effects of bullying, it may be difficult to encourage them to work together effectively. However, given that a community approach may be most effective in tackling bullying, collaboration is vitally important. Future research could therefore investigate the factors influencing parents' and schools' perceptions of responsibility for bullying.

This systematic review has highlighted the wide range of experiences and perceptions that parents may have in relation to bullying. However, a particularly common, concerning constant across the reviewed studies was the frequent miscommunication, misunderstanding, and misjudgement of bullying situations between parents and schools, leading to tension and unresolved problems between the school and the home. Families and schools must engage in collaborative communication and acknowledge a shared community of responsibility, in order to combat the negative effects of bullying and ensure positive outcomes for parents, educators, and all children and young people.

Appendix 1

Included Studies

1. Brown, J. R. (2010). *Trajectories of parents' experiences in discovering, reporting, and living with the aftermath of middle school bullying.* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI No. 3409133)

2. Cassidy, W., Brown, K., & Jackson, M. (2012). "Making kind cool": Parents' suggestions for preventing cyber bullying and fostering cyber kindness. *Journal of Educational Computing Research, 46,* 415–436. doi: 10.2190/EC.46.4.f

3. Clarke, V., Kitzinger, C., & Potter, J. (2004). 'Kids are just cruel anyway': Lesbian and gay parents' talk about homophobic bullying. *The British Journal of Social Psychology, 43*(4), 531–550.

4. Harvey, K. L. (2009). *A content analysis: Exploring parents' discourse about bullying as posted on blogs.* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI No. 3367234)

5. Humphrey, G., & Crisp, B. R. (2008). Bullying affects us too: Parental responses to bullying at kindergarten. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 33*(1), 45–49.

6. Kirves, L., & Sajaniemi, N. (2012). Bullying in early educational settings. *Early Child Development and Care, 182,* 383–400. doi: 10.1080/03004430.2011.646724

7. Mark, L. K. (2009). *Student, educator and parent perceptions of cyberbullying in three Hawai'i middle schools.* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI No. 1468496)

8. Mishna, F. (2004). A qualitative study of bullying from multiple perspectives. *Children & Schools, 26*(4), 234–247.

9. Mishna, F., Pepler, D., & Wiener, J. (2006). Factors associated with perceptions and responses to bullying situations by children, parents, teachers, and principals. *Victims and Offenders: An International Journal of Evidence-based Research, Policy, and Practice, 1,* 255–288. doi: 10.1080/15564880600626163

10. Mishna, F., Wiener, J., & Pepler, D. (2008). Some of my best friends: Experiences of bullying within friendships. *School Psychology International, 29,* 549–573. doi: 10.1177/0143034308099201

11. Purcell, A. (2012). A qualitative study of perceptions of bullying in Irish primary schools. *Educational Psychology in Practice: Theory, Research and Practice in Educational Psychology, 28,* 273–285. doi: 10.1080/02667363.2012.684343

12. Sawyer, J-L., Mishna, F., Pepler, D., & Wiener, J. (2011). The missing voice: Parents' perspectives of bullying. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33,* 1795–1803. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.05.010

13. Zaklama, C. (2003). *The bullying spectrum in grade schools: Parents, teachers, child bullies and their victims.* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI No. MQ98846)

Appendix 2

Excluded Studies [and Reasons for Exclusion]

1. Rawana, J. S., Norwood, S. J., & Whitley, J. (2011). A mixed-method evaluation of a strength-based bullying prevention program. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology, 26*, 283–300. doi: 10.1177/0829573511423741 [minimal data from parents; focus on programme evaluation]
2. Sciutto, M., Richwine, S., Mentrikoski, J., & Niedzwiecki, K. (2012). A qualitative analysis of the school experiences of students with Asperger syndrome. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 27*, 177–188. doi: 10.1177/1088357612450511 [bullying not a primary focus]
3. Yildiz, M., Yildirim, K., Ates, S., & Rasinski, T. (2012). Perceptions of Turkish parents with children identified as dyslexic about the problems that they and their children experience. *Reading Psychology*, *33*, 399–422. doi:10.1080/02702711.2010.515907 [bullying not a primary focus]

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