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# Parents' Perspectives on their Child's Involvement in Bullying in Preschool

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore factors associated with parents' reporting that their child had been involved in bullying in preschool. A total of 857 parents responded to a digital survey, of which 14% (119) indicated that their child had been involved in conflicts that they would describe as bullying. Hierarchical logistic regression was performed to predict the probability of bullying involvement. The strongest predictors were children's age, preschool size, and the perceived competence of preschool staff (negatively correlated). In addition, parents who reported that they personally experienced bullying as children were more likely to report that their child had been involved in bullying and significantly less likely to perceive bullying to be an act that must occur over a prolonged period of time. These findings speak to the challenge of assessing preschool children's involvement in bullying given the potential influence of factors such as how the concept is understood and the observer's prior experiences.

## ARTICLE HISTORY



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## KEYWORDS

Bullying; preschool; parents; early childhood

It is well established that exposure to bullying in childhood can have long-term negative effects on an individual's psychological and emotional wellbeing (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007; Hanish & Guerra, 2002; Holt et al., 2015; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). In addition, the immediate negative impact of bullying on social adjustment and relationships has been observed across age groups and stages of development (e.g. Cook et al., 2010; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000). Among preschool children, bullying has been found to be related to behavioral problems, health concerns, and poor relationships with peers (Halpern et al., 2015; Ilola et al., 2016). Given these risks, there is clearly a need for research to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon in early childhood.

The term bullying is sometimes used interchangeably with physical or emotional aggression (Cornell & Limber, 2015; Evans & Smokowski, 2016). However, aggression is just one feature of the behavior. Typically, three additional elements are included in the definition (e.g. Farrington, 1993; Gladden et al., 2014; Olweus, 1997). First, bullying reflects intentional behavior aimed at causing harm. Second, a power imbalance exists

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between those involved, in which the victim is seen as being in a more vulnerable position. Third, the term bullying is often reserved for behaviors that are repeated over an extended period. However, some researchers have argued that harmful behaviors need not be persistent or sustained (e.g. Volk et al., 2014), leading to caveats, such as the perception that the behavior is “highly likely” to be repeated (e.g. Gladden et al., 2014, p. 8).

Although the vast majority of research on the issue of bullying addresses school age children, a number of studies have attempted to assess the extent of the problem in preschool populations. For example, in a Finnish investigation involving a survey of preschool staff, Kirves and Sajaniemi (2012) found that approximately 13% of children in early childhood settings had been directly involved in bullying. Similarly, Cameron and Kovac (2016) surveyed preschool workers in Norway and found that 22% of employees “often” witnessed bullying in their preschool. Complicating this picture, however, is the manner in which the concept is operationalized, as the extent of bullying reported tends to vary depending on the definition used and the person reporting the behavior (Fernández-Alfaraz et al., 2023; Nordhagen et al., 2005; Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015). Thus, it is important for researchers to consider participants’ understanding of the concept when attempting to assess patterns of children’s involvement in bullying.

Most research has examined bullying from the teacher’s or the child’s point of view. In contrast, relatively few studies have considered the manner in which parents understand and interpret bullying (Sawyer et al., 2011). This is somewhat surprising considering the well-documented effect that social processes in family, parents’ perspectives and family characteristics have on children’s involvement in bullying situations (Idsoe et al., 2008; Nocentini et al., 2019; Shetgiri et al., 2012). Indeed, previous research suggest that protective factors in form of parental supervision, connectedness and bonding had positive influence on the relationship between bullying and adolescent mental health (Man et al., 2022). Moreover, research has found that children’s bullying experiences are associated with parental neglect, abuse, inadequate supervision, and experiences of violence in families (Bifulco et al., 2014). In sum, there exists overwhelming evidence that many different types of bullying in childhood are associated with factors that originate in a wider social context, including families, which are channeled through poor relationships with parents, teachers, and peers (Chai et al., 2020).

Consideration of parental perspectives on bullying in early childhood is especially important given findings showing that parents have difficulty identifying bullying and applying the criteria typically used by researchers (e.g. Mishna et al., 2006; Sawyer et al., 2011; Swit, 2018). For example, evidence suggests that parents often fail to include the repetitive nature of bullying (Compton et al., 2014; Sawyer et al., 2011) and rely on other aspects, such as whether the behavior is considered serious (Mishna, 2004) when describing bullying. On the one hand, parents appear to be more consistent with respect to including the idea of a power imbalance in their understanding of the concept (Humphrey & Crisp, 2008; Mishna et al., 2006). On the other hand, Swit (2018) found that parents believed that preschool age children were capable of bullying but did not believe that such young children act intentionally when they harm their peers. Other studies support the finding that parents question the intentionality of young children’s actions in their understanding of bullying (Cameron & Kovac, 2016; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Monks et al., 2002). Debate on this issue has led some to question whether the term “bullying” should be used at all within the preschool context (e.g. Cameron &

Kovac, 2016; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012). While social conflicts clearly occur in early childhood, both preschool staff and parents may be unwilling to refer to these issues as bullying, in part because of resistance to assigning such young child the role of aggressor or “bully”.

Research on the views of parents in this field is further warranted for several other reasons. Perhaps foremost among these is the assumption that parents’ perspectives on bullying will influence their reactions to bullying among preschool children when or if it occurs. Indeed, there exists some evidence to suggest that bully/victim status is predicted by the manner in which bullying is understood and perceived by parents, which is further associated with parenting strategies (e.g. Harcourt et al., 2014). In addition, early research in this field indicates that parents more frequently engage in conversations with their children about their experiences with bullying than do professionals (Genta et al., 1996; Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001). In summary, given the frequent interaction that typically occurs between parents and preschool workers (Sheridan et al., 2004; Vlachou et al., 2011), a greater degree of awareness about parents’ perspectives can contribute to finding ways to facilitate cooperation with respect to the phenomenon of bullying. In particular, research along these lines has the potential to contribute to identifying and preventing children’s exposure to harmful conditions in a vulnerable period of their lives (Nocentini et al., 2019).

## Research questions

As primary caregivers, parents have immeasurable influence on their children’s social development and well-being. Early childhood educational contexts can also have a significant impact on the development of children’s cognitive, social, and emotional traits and skills. Therefore, it is important to investigate young children’s involvement in social conflicts, such as bullying, in relation to the perspectives and beliefs of parents. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore factors associated with parents’ reporting that their child had been involved in bullying in preschool. The following research questions were developed to guide the investigation:

1. To what degree do parents report that their children are involved in conflicts in preschool that they consider to be bullying?
2. Do parents’ definitions of bullying differ on the basis of children’s purported involvement in bullying?
3. Are there identifiable child, preschool, or parent related characteristics that predict the occurrence of bullying as reported by parents?

## Methods

### Participants

Participants comprised 857 parents who responded to a digital survey. The mean age of participants was 35.05 years ( $SD = 5.53$ ,  $range = 21-54$ ), 76% were female, and there were approximately 2 children per family ( $M = 2.04$ ;  $SD = 0.85$ ), including children not attending preschool. Participants’ educational attainment was measured ordinally, across 6

levels: (a) primary school ( $n = 10$ ), (b) lower secondary school ( $n = 12$ ), (c) upper secondary school ( $n = 105$ ), (d) vocational or technical school ( $n = 111$ ), (e) bachelor's degree or equivalent ( $n = 413$ ), or (f) master's degree or higher ( $n = 203$ ). Parents reported the age of their oldest female ( $n = 448$ ) and male ( $n = 538$ ) children attending preschool, which ranged from 1 to 6 years of age for both groups and had a mean of 3.35 ( $SD = 1.31$ ) years for girls and a mean of 3.39 ( $SD = 1.33$ ) years for boys.

### **Preschool in Norway**

The Norwegian preschool system, known as “barnehage” (kindergarten) is available to children from ages one to six years. In Norway, children begin compulsory schooling the year that they turn six. The curriculum is flexible, allowing educators to adapt to the interests and needs of each child, fostering social skills, creativity, and independence (NDET, 2017). Preschools in Norway are characterized by a high staff-to-child ratio, where regulations require a maximum of 6 children per staff, when the children are over three years of age, and an even higher ratio when they are younger than three. In 2021, 93.4% of children ages 1–5 attended preschool (NDET, 2024). While the system is comprised of both private and public preschools, it receives substantial public funding, making it accessible and affordable for most families.

### **Data collection**

Participants were drawn from three urban and suburban municipalities in southern Norway. With the support of leadership from each of the municipalities, information about the study was provided via e-mail to the administrative directors of the approximately 150 preschools within the region. A link to the on-line survey was sent via email to these directors, who ensured that it was posted on the password protected platforms that preschools use to communicate with parents. In addition, invitations to participate along with information about how to access the link were sent by email directly to parents. Access to the survey was given from the beginning of October to the end of November. Preschools sent out a reminder notice approximately 2 weeks prior to the close of data collection.

### **Instrumentation**

The survey was designed to cover a range of issues related to bullying in preschool, including attitudes towards bullying and the children involved, and definitional aspects of the concept. It included 25 overarching questions and 90 individual items. Questions incorporated primarily a seven-point Likert scale in which participants were asked to rate their level of agreement (i.e. strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 7) in response to each item.

Development of the instrument included a review of the research literature on bullying in early childhood; assessment of content validity by groups of researchers in this field, preschool employees, and parents of children in this age group; and piloting with students in their second year of preschool teacher education. Several items were adapted from previous investigations that applied similar approaches (e.g. Boulton,

1997; Cameron & Kovac, 2016). Procedures were in accordance with the ethical guidelines provided by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), the national agency responsible for overseeing social science research, and the study is registered with this agency. Parents were informed that the survey was anonymous and that they could choose not to participate at any time prior to submitting the survey.

## Analysis

Hierarchical logistic regression was used to predict the probability that a participant would report that their child had been involved in bullying and to assess whether three sets of variables demonstrate significant improvement in the proportion of explained variance in each stage of analysis. The analytic plan was to enter predictors in order of their modifiability from least to most, with demographic characteristics first (i.e. child's age and gender), environmental and contextual factors entered second (e.g. preschool size, parents' education), and in the last stage, parental attitudes and perceptions (e.g. views of preschool competency, definition of bullying). The following measures were used to assess parents' perceptions:

*Exposure to bullying.* Children's exposure to bullying was measured by a single item in which parents were asked, "Has your child been involved in conflicts in preschool that you would describe as bullying?" Response options were mutually exclusive and limited to: (a) yes, (b) no, or (c) unsure/do not know. Participants who indicated that they were unsure or did not know whether their child had been involved in bullying were not included in the analysis.

*Definition of bullying.* Participants were asked to report their views on the following 5 definitional aspects of bullying: (a) intentionality, (b) repetition, (c) subjectivity, (d) power distinction, and (e) collective action. Respectively, the following items were used to represent these concepts: (1) "It is only bullying if the child does it on purpose", (2) "If it happens just once, it is still bullying", (3) "It is bullying as long as the victim perceives it to be bullying", (4) "When bullying occurs, the bully is also a victim", and (5) "A bully never acts alone". The intercorrelation between these 6 items was low, never exceeding  $r = .24$ .

*Preschool competence.* The variable was assessed by asking parents to indicate their level of agreement with 4 items using the same introductory text for each item "Employees in my preschool are competent when it comes to ...", followed by the following four phrases: (a) dealing with bullying, (b) identifying bullying, (c) intervening in bullying, and (d) preventing bullying (Cronbach's alpha = 0.97).

*Personal experience with bullying.* The parent completing the survey was asked to indicate his or her level of agreement with two items pertaining to their own experiences with bullying: (a) "I myself was bullied as a child," and (b) "I myself bullied others as a child." The correlation between the two items was low ( $r = .20$ ). Therefore, these measures were treated separately in the regression analysis.

*Information to parents.* The degree to which parents perceived that information was provided about how preschools addressed the issue of bullying was assessed using a single item: "Parents are informed about how bullying is handled in my preschool."

In addition to the measures above, predictor variables comprised the age and gender of the oldest child attending preschool, size of the preschool, and parental education. In order

to improve the response rate and ensure anonymity, preschool size was based on participants' estimates on a scale partitioned into intervals of 10 children (i.e. 0-10, 11-20, etc.). We chose to treat this item as a continuous variable in the regression analysis. Parent education was dichotomized as either having completed ( $n = 616$ ) or not completed ( $n = 238$ ) a bachelor's degree or higher, as data collected on this variable were nominal in nature.

## Results

### Reported involvement in bullying

Of the 857 parents who responded to the survey, 119 (13.9%) indicated that their child had been involved in conflicts that they would describe as bullying. In contrast, 591 (69.0%) reported that their child had not been involved in bullying, while 142 (17.2%) responded by indicating "I don't know/unsure".

### Definitional aspects of bullying

Using independent t-tests, we compared the ratings of parents who reported that their child had been involved in bullying ( $n = 119$ ) to those who reported that their child had not been involved in bullying ( $n = 591$ ) on five definitional components. Means, standard deviations and results of comparisons are presented in Table 1. A significant difference was found on the repetition variable, measured by the statement, "If it happens just once, it is still bullying." In this case, participants in the bullying group were more likely to agree with this statement.

While the two groups did not differ significantly from one another on the other four items, ratings were somewhat inconsistent with the way that bullying is typically defined in the literature. For example, a low overall mean for intentionality ( $M = 2.37$ ;  $SD = 1.7$ ) indicates disagreement with the idea that purposeful action is a necessary component of bullying in this context. Similarly, general agreement with statements referring to bullying as being conditioned on the subjective experience of the victim ( $M = 5.24$ ;  $SD = 2.0$ ) and primarily an individual act ( $M = 2.52$ ;  $SD = 1.65$ , *reversed item*) are somewhat inconsistent with the manner in which the phenomenon of bullying is typically described in the literature.

### Predictors of reported bullying

Bivariate correlations (Pearson) between the investigated variables indicate low correlation between virtually all measures (Table 2). The exception is a low to moderate

**Table 1.** Means for definitional aspects of bullying and results of group comparisons.

	Bullying <i>M (SD)</i>	No bullying <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
intentionality	2.31 (1.7)	2.38 (1.7)	-0.41	.682
repetition	5.64 (1.9)	5.03 (2.2)	-2.95	.004**
objectivity	5.21 (2.1)	5.25 (2.0)	0.19	.853
power distinction	4.39 (2.0)	4.18 (2.0)	-.991	.322
collective action	2.52 (1.7)	2.52 (1.6)	0.00	.997



**Table 2.** Correlation matrix between measures ( $n = 323$ ).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Child age		.02	.03	.05	.01	.08	.07	.04	.06
2. Child gender			.04	.01	.03	.04	.12*	.03	.01
3. Preschool size				.04	.08	.02	.09	.04	.04
4. Parent education					.14*	.01	.01	.01	.06
5. Parent was bullied						.20*	.05	.07	
6. Parent bullied others							.01	.00	.04
7. Repetition definition								.03	.04
8. Parents informed									.37**
9. Preschool competence									

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

relationship between parents reporting that they are informed about bullying and their perception of preschool competence ( $r = .37$ ).

Table 3 shows the regression coefficient ( $B$ ), standard error ( $SE$ ), Wald test, level of significance ( $p$ ), odds ratio ( $OR$ ), and confidence interval ( $CI$ ) for each of the predictors. The correct classification rate for the null model was 21.4%. The first model, including only age and gender, was statistically significant, ( $\chi^2 = 15.27(2)$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and explained 7.2% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variance in reported bullying. There was a significant increase in the odds of reported bullying as children grew older ( $OR = 1.59$ ), indicating an increase by 59% for each additional year of age. Gender was not found to be a significant predictor.

In the second block, preschool size, parental education, and parents' personal experience with bullying (either as victim or bully) were added. These additions significantly improved the predictability of the model ( $\chi^2 = 24.90(4)$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which explained 18.1% of the variance in the dependent variable (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ). As indicated in Table 3, preschool size and the two types of experience with bullying reported by parents were significant contributors to the model. However, the association between

**Table 3.** Logistic regression predicting involvement with bullying as reported by parents.

Variable	$B$	$SE$	$p$	$OR$	95% $CI$
Block 1					
Child age	.465	.133	.000**	1.59	1.23–2.07
Child gender	.359	.281	.202	.70	.40–1.21
Block 2					
Child age	.505	.142	.000**	1.66	1.25–2.19
Child gender	.349	.294	.236	0.71	.40–1.26
Preschool size	.451	.148	.002**	1.57	1.18–2.10
Parent education	.252	.330	.445	1.29	.67–2.46
Parent was bullied	.225	.077	.004**	1.25	1.08–1.46
Parent bullied others	.243	.111	.028*	1.28	1.03–1.58
Block 3					
Child age	.588	.158	.000**	1.80	1.32–2.45
Child gender	.347	.322	.282	0.71	.37–1.33
Preschool size	.530	.166	.001**	1.70	1.23–2.35
Parent education	.120	.357	.737	1.13	.56–2.27
Parent was bullied	.218	.085	.011*	1.24	1.05–1.47
Parent bullied others	.253	.123	.041*	1.29	1.01–1.64
Repetition definition	.164	.083	.048*	1.18	1.00–1.39
Parents informed	.243	.096	.011*	1.28	1.06–1.54
Preschool competence	-.798	.148	.000**	0.45	.34–.60

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .



parental education and reported bullying was not significant. The significant *OR* for preschool size suggests that for an increase of one-unit on the response scale (i.e. 10 children), the chance of a parent reporting that their child had been involved in bullying increased by a factor of 1.57. Stated in another manner, this is more than a 50% increase in the odds of a parent reporting that their child had been involved in bullying for every 10 additional children attending a preschool.

The final model explained 33.1% of variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) in reported bullying and was able to correctly classify 91% of positive responses and 63% of those who reported no involvement, with an overall success rate of 69%. Youden's index was used to set a cut-off (0.15) to improve discrimination accuracy. The difference between—2 log likelihood at block 2 and block 3 was significant ( $\chi^2 = 77.69(3)$ ,  $p < .001$ ). All three of the additional variables were significant, with perceptions of preschool competence having the largest contribution ( $B = -0.798$ ,  $p < .000$ ). The negative value of  $B$  for perceptions of preschool competence indicates lower ratings among parents who reported that their child had been involved in bullying. Overall, the contribution of predictors from the previous steps remained largely unchanged, with preschool size ( $B = .530$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the child's age ( $B = .588$ ,  $p < .000$ ) continuing to explain the largest proportion of variance among those variables.

## Discussion

With respect to the first research question, we found that 14% of participants reported that their child had been involved in conflicts that they would consider bullying. This finding is largely consistent with previous studies in the Nordic countries that have examined preschoolers' overall exposure to bullying (Cameron & Kovac, 2016; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012). At the same time, 17% of participants in the current study responded that they did not know whether this was the case, reflecting a considerable lack of awareness among parents surrounding the issue. In part, this may be due to the fact that parents often have few opportunities to observe their children in groups comprising more than 3 or 4 children. Further complicating interpretations is the degree to which different types of behaviors were perceived to fall within the definition of bullying.

### *Understandings of bullying*

The second research question sought to address whether perceptions of bullying differed between parents who reported that their child was exposed to bullying and those who did not. Significant differences between the two groups were found on ratings of the item "if it happens just once, it is still bullying," where parents who reported bullying were more likely to agree with this statement. Thus, a possible interpretation of (apparent) higher exposure to bullying may be tied to children's involvement in a single incident or a small number of isolated conflicts. In other words, it is possible that some of the parents who reported that their child was not involved in bullying simply applied a stricter definition of the concept. Nonetheless, ratings for both groups on this item suggest an overall tendency to deemphasize the importance of repetition in the definition of bullying.

In addition, both groups of parents tended to agree that intentionality should not be considered a prerequisite for bullying in preschool and that the subjective experience of the victim is a key factor in identifying bullying behavior. Previous research has also found that parents rarely mention repetition in descriptions of bullying and often fail to differentiate it from fighting (Ey & Campbell, 2020; Sawyer et al., 2011).

### ***Child and contextual factors***

To answer the third research question, we examined the relationship between parents' reports of bullying and a range of measures, including age, gender of the child, preschool size, and parental perceptions and reported experiences. Findings indicate that older children were more likely to be involved in bullying than were younger children, yet, neither gender nor parental education were significant predictors. With respect to age, this finding is not unexpected for two primary reasons. First, older children have logically had more time and exposure to negative social interactions that parents might describe as bullying. Second, as children grow older, their relationships become more complex and the types of behaviors that are typically associated with bullying increase (Monks et al., 2002; Monks et al., 2005; Vlachou et al., 2011).

Boys are often overrepresented in reports of bullying among this age group (Barker et al., 2008; Ilola et al., 2016; LaFreniere et al., 2002), yet this trend is not always consistent (Swit & McMaugh, 2012; Vlachou et al., 2011). Boys have also been found to engage in more physical forms of bullying, whereas relational bullying is more common among girls (LaFreniere et al., 2002; McNeilly-Choque et al., 1996; Nelson et al., 2010; Perren, 2000). Cameron and Kovac (2016) found that parents and preschool workers placed emphasis on relational behaviors (e.g. being excluded from play) in their understanding of bullying. Thus, the fact that types of bullying (e.g. physical, social) were not considered in the survey may account for the apparent lack of variation between boys and girls in the number of reported cases. In other words, it is possible that gender differences exist primarily with respect to form, rather than the extent of bullying behavior.

Similarly, parental education was not a significant predictor of reported bullying. This finding is inconsistent with previous research indicating that children of parents with lower educational attainment are more likely to engage in bullying (e.g. Barker et al., 2008; Jansen et al., 2011). This may be due to the dichotomous treatment of the variable, where parents were categorized as either having completed a bachelor's degree or higher (72%) or completion of vocational school or lower (28%). A more nuanced scale (e.g. total years of education) may have revealed a different picture. However, given that such a large percentage of participants held higher level degrees, we suspect that the lack of variability within the sample likely reduced the predictive value of this measure. This factor should be considered when generalizing our findings to other contexts.

In addition, we found that preschool size was associated with higher child involvement in bullying. While there is limited research on the relationship between preschool size and bullying in this context, there is some evidence that bullying is more prevalent in large groups. For example, Perren and Alsaker (2006) found that bullies in preschool tend to be a part of large social clusters, which corresponds with early research suggesting that young children who engage in bullying often have large social networks (e.g.

Boulton, 1999). Perren and Alsaker speculated that bullying behavior may help children establish dominance in groups where aggressive behavior has become a group norm. It has also been suggested that a lack of adult supervision in large groups may result in higher rates of bullying (Tanrikulu, 2018). Research among school age children has found associations between being a victim of bullying and increasing school size (Barnes et al., 2006; Bowes et al., 2009). However, the picture is less clear with regard to early childhood settings.

### ***Parents' perceptions & experiences***

Parents' perceptions of preschool worker competence and the degree that they felt informed about their preschool's approaches to dealing with bullying were both negatively correlated with their child having been involved in bullying. In a qualitative study of parents' views on bullying in early childhood settings, Humphrey and Crisp (2008) found that participants experienced feelings of anger, guilt, and a sense of powerlessness when their child was bullied. Parents felt strongly that teachers need to be trained in how to identify bullying and act to prevent it (Humphrey & Crisp, 2008). Similarly, Cameron and Kovac (2017) reported that increased exposure to bullying was directly related to parents' negative views of the quality of collaboration between parents and preschools.

It is unclear whether parents in the current study were more critical of preschool workers' competence as a result of their own children's negative experiences or whether preschools that lack this competence are actually less successful in preventing bullying. Results pertaining to parents' perceptions of having adequate information may suggest the latter. The mean for this variable was close to the midpoint on the seven-point scale ( $M = 4.14$ ;  $SD = 2.1$ ). From the perspective of preschools, this is not a particularly positive sign. While there is a large degree of variability on this measure, it is clear that a higher rating would indicate a stronger than average degree of preparedness for dealing with bullying. Moreover, one would expect preschools to increase their communication with parents and clarify how they address these issues when they find out that a child has been involved in bullying. We suggest that preschools take a proactive approach on this issue by: (a) establishing anti-bullying policies and routines, (b) training staff in how to prevent and follow-up on social conflicts and bullying when it is found, and (c) making an active effort to inform parents about the work that they do in this regard.

Finally, findings from the current study indicate that parents who had prior experience with bullying themselves were more likely to report that their children had been involved in bullying. We have not found previous research that has considered the relationship between parents' personal history with bullying and the experiences of their children. However, several studies have shown that parental attitudes and mental health concerns are strongly related to their children's emotional regulation, internalizing problems, and aggressive behavior (Campbell et al., 2009; Jaffee et al., 2002; Luby et al., 2006). Other studies indicate that children's engagement in bullying is tied to poor parenting, such as being too permissive (Underwood, 2011) or encouraging children to physically defend themselves (Ross et al., 2017).

It can be assumed that parents' attitudes towards their children's involvement in bullying are related to parents' own experiences as children. For example, some parents may see bullying as an aspect of social development that "every child goes through" if they themselves had experienced bullying. Cooper and Nickerson (2013) found that parents' previous experiences with bullying predicted their current attitudes towards bullying and the strategies that they use to help their children cope with bullying. The researchers suggest that parents' previous experiences may function as a "driving force" to adopt strategies for dealing with bullying. By the same token, parents in this study may have reacted more readily to labelling social conflicts as bullying due to a heightened sense of awareness about the need to address these issues because they had been involved in bullying as children.

## Limitations

There are several limitations to the present study that warrant attention. As discussed above, parents' reports of their children's bullying are subjective. While there are advantages to asking participants to apply their own definition of bullying, reports based on assumptions about the concept of bullying clearly add an element of uncertainty. In the current study, we tried to balance this concern by including measures to assess how perceptions of bullying differ from the dominant definition. For example, for many parents neither repetition nor intentionality were seen as essential components of the definition of bullying. As previously noted, there is a degree of debate about these issues in the literature (e.g. Blad, 2014; Boulton, 1997; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012). Another challenge related to focusing on parental reports of bullying, is that parents' knowledge about their children's involvement in bullying may be limited given that parents do not often have the opportunity to see their children interact in large groups on a regular basis. Indeed, the fact that almost a fifth of parents indicated that they did not know whether their child had been involved in bullying is a telling sign.

Secondly, participants in the present study consisted of 76% women and most reported having a high level of education (72% held bachelor's degrees). In 2020, approximately 35% of the Norwegian population over the age of 16 had completed some level of higher education (Statistics Norway, 2020). As the Norwegian population continues to accrue higher educational attainment, one would expect the percentage of college educated young adults with children in preschool to be rather high. Nonetheless, the sample for this study cannot be considered representative of the Norwegian population of preschool parents as a whole. Therefore, as pointed out above, caution is recommended in generalizing our findings to other countries and contexts.

Thirdly, several of the measures used in this study could be improved upon. For example, a multifactorial measure of socioeconomic status, including an interval scale of parent education (i.e. years of higher education), income, and employment may more accurately predict parents' perceptions and reports of bullying. In addition, several of the attitudinal variables examined in the current study are based on individual items. While there is disagreement about the importance of having multiple items to construct attitudinal variables (see Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007), it is generally recommended. Similarly, we did not consider different types of bullying or the roles that children might

take (e.g. victim, aggressor, bystander) in our assessment of children's bullying involvement. We recommend that future research in this field include a wider range of measures at the individual, family, and preschool levels, as well as assessments of the specific types of bullying behaviors that children may engage in.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the current study contributes to the research base on bullying in preschool. The perspectives of parents with respect to bullying in early childhood education have received little attention in the research literature (Sawyer et al., 2011; Swit, 2018). Nonetheless, we are slowly gaining a more detailed picture of bullying in this context, including factors that contribute to its occurrence, how it is interpreted, awareness about bullying among parents and preschool workers, and the pervasiveness of this challenge in different regions of the world. This study adds to a growing body of research showing that bullying in early childhood settings is a genuine concern, while at the same time highlighting the danger that parents do not have a clear understanding of the concept and are largely uninformed about the actions taken by preschools to prevent or address it.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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