# Early childhood educators' and parents' perceptions of bullying in preschool

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Early childhood educators' (ECEs) and parents' perceptions of bullying may contribute to young children's (3-5 years) use of these behaviours. However, there is currently a lack of qualitative research exploring and comparing ECEs' and parents' perceptions of young children's capability to engage in bullying and the types of common bullying behaviours observed in early childhood contexts. Ninety three ECEs and seventy five parents in New Zealand responded to a set of open-ended questions about bullying in early childhood. Caregivers reported that young children are capable of engaging in bullying, however, these behaviours may not always be intentional. Some caregivers indicated that they were hesitant to label children as bullies because of the challenges discriminating between normative patterns of social development in the early years. Results are discussed in terms of practical and educational implications for ECEs and parents.

Keywords: social development, early childhood educators, qualitative study on bullying, parents, bullying

Although bullying among school-age children has become a pervasive international concern, relatively few studies have examined bullying behaviours in preschool-age children (3- to 5-years old). Bullying is typically defined as "aggressive behaviour or intentional 'harm doing,' which is carried out repeatedly and over time in an interpersonal relationship characterised by an imbalance of power" (Olweus, 1993, p. 8-9). This definition includes three main criteria: intentional aggression, repetition of harmful behaviour, and an imbalance of power. There has been controversy around applying this definition to early childhood because it does not take into consideration the fluid nature of younger children's social skills and developmental abilities such as emotional regulation, self-control, social and cognitive abilities, and perspective taking skills (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Kochenderfer & Ladd 1996; Monks, Ortega Ruiz, & Torrado Val, 2002). As a result, researchers and practitioners have been hesitant to label young children as 'bullies' because of the inherent difficulties in applying the traditional definition of bullying consistently (Hanish, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Fabes, Martin, & Dennings, 2004).

A particular dilemma for researchers and practitioners in applying the concept of bullying in early childhood concerns young children's intentional actions (Cameron & Kovac, 2016; Hanish et al, 2004; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Monks et al, 2002; Vaillancourt et al, 2008). Because of the immaturity of young children, they have often been considered too young to have the capacity to intentionally harm others and recognise their power over another. Consequently, preschool-age children's aggression and bullying-like behaviours have often been considered as a developmental stage involving rough and tumble play which is "a normal part of growing up" (Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler, & Wiener, 2011, p. 1797). These challenges have led some researchers to warn against using too narrow a definition of bullying because experiences of the phenomena are different at an individual level and for different age groups (Vaillancourt et al, 2008; Volk, Veenstra, & Espelage, 2017). However, if the definition is too narrow, there is a risk that certain behaviours will go unnoticed and bullying behaviours will not receive the attention and intervention that they require.

## Advantages and disadvantages of using the term "bullying"

There are advantages and disadvantages of labelling young children's behaviours as bullying and labelling children as bullies. Researchers have identified that young children's use of aggression may serve proactive (i.e., deliberate behaviour that is used to obtain an object, outcome, or self-serving goal) and reactive (i.e., hostile behaviour used in response to a perceived threat) functions (Ostrov, Murray-Close, Godleski, & Hart, 2013). Roseth and Pellegrini (2010) identified that bullies generally use proactive aggression to formulate instrumental goals (i.e. to intimidate a peer or dominate a social relationship) and choose aggressive behaviours to achieve these social goals and power. Proactive aggression can be perceived as more serious than reactive aggression because there is evidence of malicious intent and premeditation whereby the bully targets a weaker peer (Vlachou, Andreou, Botsoglou, & Didaskalou, 2011). Thus, an understanding of the function of young children's behaviour allows researchers and practitioners to more accurately distinguish between aggressive and bullying behaviours and label them accordingly.

In contrast, aggression during early childhood is considered more common than any other developmental period (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996) and there is the risk of labelling all aggressive behaviours as bullying when the behaviour may simply be the result of immaturity, poor self-regulation, or reactivity rather than malicious intent. Conceptually the term bullying is subjective (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005) and several findings suggest that preschool bullies exhibit social characteristics that differ to those found in non-bullies (Vlachou et al, 2011). Applying the bully label to behaviour and young children incorrectly can lead to stigmatising effects for some children, however, there is a need to acknowledge that bullying is distinct from general aggression and both these behaviours can be identified during early childhood.

Although caution is warranted in labelling young children as *bullies* using Olweus' (1993) traditional definition of bullying, evidence is mounting that clearly indicates the existence of bullying-like behaviours in early childhood (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010; Alsaker & Nägele, 2008; Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015). Kirves & Sajaniemi (2012) applied this traditional definition of bullying in their study of three to six year old children and found approximately 13% of children in early childhood settings had been involved in bullying incidents and this rate was similar to levels of bullying among school-age children. Bullying in preschool has also been shown to predict negative short-term and long-term problems such as peer rejection, school avoidance, academic performance, social adjustment, and detrimental mental health outcomes (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Vlachou et al, 2011). This suggests that bullying is an important phenomenon that requires attention in the early years when children are beginning to interact with peers and experiment with different social behaviours. In addition, whilst there is research on individual, environmental, and ecological factors associated with bullying and bullying interventions in primary and secondary educational settings, much less is known about parents' and educators' perspectives of bullying in early childhood and comparisons between these two groups are relatively uncommon.

## Caregiver's perceptions of bullying during early childhood

Caregiver's perceptions towards bullying have been shown to be a significant risk factor for young children's engagement in bullying. Research has shown that some parents and educators view bullying behaviours used by preschool-age children as a normal part of child development (Harcourt, Jasperse, & Green 2014; Sawyer, et al, 2011) which may lead to a lack of awareness and intervention in these behaviours (Humphrey & Crisp, 2008). It has been argued that because of the challenges in discriminating between normative patterns in the development of aggression in the early years and the development of ongoing, intentional bullying behaviours in which power is used aggressively, young children should not be labelled as bullies because of the stigmatising effects and negative connotations associated with the term. For instance, Farrell (2010) found that teachers from three early childhood settings in Australia were reluctant to label young children as bullies or victims, instead opting for terms such as "inappropriate" or "unacceptable" behaviour.

A major challenge in understanding caregiver's perceptions of bullying concerns the question of how to define bullying at such a young age. When asked to define bullying, educators and parents usually report it as physical violence and disobedience and believe these to be the most serious form of bullying (Mishna 2004; Sawyer et al, 2011). More recently, exclusion and conditional threats received higher ratings as bullying behaviours, possibly indicating a societal shift in perspective of what constitutes bullying behaviour in young children (Cameron & Kovac, 2016). Despite the inconsistencies in behaviours identified as bullying, Goryl, Neilsen-Hewett, and Sweller (2013) found that teachers believe that young children are capable of bullying and that incidences of bullying can be identified in early childhood contexts. Indeed, the biggest challenge for researchers exploring this phenomenon is the subjective nature of the term and identifying the nuances of bullying behaviours, particularly in the early childhood context when these behaviours emerge. To date, research exploring ECEs' and parents' perceptions of bullying in early childhood contexts has relied on quantitative methods (e.g. Cameron & Kovac 2017; Goryl et al, 2013). This study aims to refine our understanding of ECEs' and parents' perceptions of bullying by employing a qualitative measure, allowing a more detailed examination of the nuances of bullying behaviours used during this developmental period.

## The current study

Although researchers have started to explore caregiver's perceptions of bullying in early childhood, descriptive, qualitative research comparing the differences between ECEs' and parents' perceptions about whether young children are capable of bullying is largely absent from the research literature. Given that early relationships with caregivers play an important role in guiding young children's social competence and behaviour, it is imperative that research address both ECEs' and parents' perceptions in an attempt to guide them towards a common understanding of the nature and definition of the phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to explore and compare the perceptions of ECEs and parents with respect to (1) whether they believed young children were capable of bullying, and (2) the types of behaviours they believed constituted bullying during this developmental period.

## Method

The current study is part of a larger mixed-methods research project exploring ECEs' and parents' perceptions of young children's social development.

## Participants

Participants were 93 ECEs and 75 parents of children between the ages of three and five years. All early childhood services in New Zealand were invited to participate in the study (*N* = 4638), however, over half of these services shared the same email address and only services with different addresses were contacted (*n* = 2457). The list of services was obtained from the government website (www.educationcounts.gov.nz) and include community and privately owned settings such as casual education and care, Kindergarten, play centre, hospital-based, education-care, home-based, Te Kōhanga Reo, and correspondence settings.

Among ECEs, 98% of participants were female, ranging in age from 19 to 68 years (*M* = 42.6; *SD* = 10.9). Participants held a range of positions within their services including registered teachers (38%), head teachers (36%), and centre managers (20%), with the remainder consisting of three nannies, two students, and one unqualified teacher. The majority of parents who completed the survey were also female (99%), ranging in age from 20 to 50 years (*M* = 34.9; *SD* = 6.42). Additional information pertaining to participant's age, gender, ethnicity, and educational background is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Age, gender, ethnicity, and educational background of parents and ECEs

| | Age | Gender (%) | | Ethnicity (%) | | | | | Education | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean (SD) | Female | Male | European | Māori | Pacific Peoples | Asian | Other | Bachelor | ≥Masters | Dip./Cert. | Completing Dip./Cert. | Other |
| ECEs | 42.6 (10.9) | 98 | 2 | 81 | 11 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 80 | 3 | 16 | 1 | 0 |
| Parents | 34.9 (6.4) | 99 | 1 | 92 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 60 | 13 | 20 | 4 | 3 |

*Measure*

Participants responded to a series of closed and open-ended questions about (a) their demographics (see Table 1), (b) observed frequency of aggression and prosocial behaviours used by young children, (c) their normative beliefs about aggression, (d) their perceptions of, and confidence levels in identifying and managing bullying behaviours used by young children, and (e) whether they believe young children are capable of bullying and if so, to describe common bullying behaviours observed in the early childhood centre, home or other social settings. This paper will focus on participant's responses to open-ended questions related to section e of the survey.

*Procedure*

Approval from the University Human Ethics Review Committee was obtained prior to the commencement of the study. An email invitation with the Qualtrics survey web link embedded was sent out to all listed early childhood services in New Zealand. Early childhood services were asked to distribute the invitation to ECEs and parents of children between the ages of three and five years. Parents were also invited to participate through advertisements posted on online media platforms such as Plunket NZ.

The survey instrument contained a combination of closed- and open-ended questions covering a wide range of aspects of aggression and bullying. The first section of the survey included a cover letter explaining the purpose and procedures for completion of each section of the survey and a statement of informed consent. Informed consent was obtained via the participant's submission of their responses. The online format of the survey ensured that no personal identifying information was collected from participants and that the anonymity of participants was protected. Personal information was limited to gender, age, ethnicity, ECE or parent status, and educational background.

*Data analysis*

Participant's qualitative responses were analysed using content analysis and by categorising the data according to frequency and major themes. ECE's and parent's qualitative responses were read and reread and initial categories were developed to identify common recurring themes related to perceptions of young children's bullying capability and common bullying behaviours observed in early childhood contexts. These categories were influenced by the research and survey items as well as previous research (e.g. Goryl et al, 2013; Mishna 2004; Sawyer et al, 2011). All major themes and categories were compared and discussed between two coders,

and constant comparisons led to the grouping of common concepts related to ECEs' and parents' perceptions of young children's bullying behaviours. This process continued until consensus was achieved and no additional new information was being provided from the data. Participant's responses were coded a final time to ensure full agreement was reached between the two coders. In the case where the participant's responses contained more than one theme, all relevant codes were applied.

**Results**

The results are organised into four sections. The first section describes findings relating to ECEs' and parents' beliefs about young children's capability to engage in bullying and the second section describes examples of bullying behaviours that are commonly observed by ECEs and parents in young children's social settings. The third section explores in more detail a subgroup of ECEs and parents who were unsure about using the term bullying to describe behaviours used by young children, while the final section reports the associations between ECEs' and parents' perceptions of bullying and the demographic variables age, educational background, and ECE's position within the service. Associations with gender and ethnicity were not examined because of uneven group sizes.

*Bullying capability in the early years*

Participants' perceptions of young children's bullying capabilities were categorised as either supporting or opposing young children's ability to use bullying behaviours, with the majority of ECEs (76%) and parents (72%) indicating that young children are capable of bullying. Participants were given the opportunity to explain their response and sub-categories related to the definition of bullying, age, social maturity, and environmental factors were identified. These sub-categories are supported by participants' responses and response frequencies are also reported to indicate the significance of each theme in the data.

*Definition of bullying*

ECEs ($n$ = 3) and parents ($n$ = 6) who indicated that young children are capable of bullying placed importance on understanding the intentions of young children's behaviours and acknowledged the role of power in bullying. Participants mentioned for example that "yes [young children] bully but it is mostly unintentional bullying" and stressed that young children do not understand what they are doing and the impact their behaviour may have on others. As participants mentioned:

*Yes but I don't think they intentionally 'bully' others but only act in a way that they think is ordinary.*

*Yes [young children are capable of bullying] but I don't believe they realise what they are doing. They know they are upsetting the child but don't understand the impact this has on the other child.*

*Yes, they bully at this age, however, they may not have the ability to understand what they are doing and how to manage their feelings.*

*Yes, they are capable of these behaviours, but I don't believe that children of this age have a full understanding of what bullying is exactly as they are still developing an understanding of social behaviour and of what is appropriate and what is not.*

Some behaviours could be considered bullying, but in my view, they are not delivered with the real intent to hurt another child.

Power imbalance and control were also acknowledged in a few ECE's (*n* = 4) responses in recognising young children's bullying capability. For example, participants said "I see some children gain a sense of control from being able to upset another child" and "bullying is often children trying to control and assert autonomy" suggesting that these behaviours are proactive and used by children to assert their power and dominance over other peers.

Of those participants who indicated that young children are not capable of bullying, four ECEs and three parents believed this was because young children did not have the social and emotional capacity to intentionally harm another child or that the behaviour was not ongoing. For example, one ECE stated "No [young children are not capable of bullying], I believe that bullying is a thought out reaction, the child wants to hurt another and sets out to do so" and "children of this age tend to act in the moment, in one-off situations. I see bullying as an ongoing behaviour that happens on a regular basis." Another ECE stated "I feel that bullying is too strong of a word to use with this age group... they are unable to process logic yet so I feel it is usually just an automatic response that causes their behaviour – such as fight or flight." One participant included reference to the repetition of behaviour in their response.

## Age and social maturity

In many of the responses, ECEs and parents indicated that bullying behaviours differed for younger and older children. A number of participants mentioned:

Yes [young children are capable of bullying] but possibly more inadvertently for the younger ones.

Yes [they are capable of bullying] but I don't think they can bully in the same way as an older child does.

I see the bigger older children deliberately hurting the younger children.

Yes, young children can act as bullies but not comparable to the way a tween or teen or adult may bully.

Closer to five they can seem to bully in a more sophisticated fashion.

Other participants were reluctant to identify young

children's behaviour as bullying because of their lack of social and emotional maturity. For instance, a parent said, "they don't quite have the social maturity to handle situations properly so they may act out to get attention." This notion of social maturity also included social cognitive aspects and functions of children's behaviour as a number of participants mentioned:

*I don't believe that children of this age are capable of malicious behaviour and thinking.*

*Lots of bullying behaviour is just impulsive and emotionally driven, without actually trying to hurt others.*

*Children at this age are still struggling with emotional impulses and their egocentrism.*

*Children in this age bracket are still somewhat impulsive, they are still learning and require guidance to support them to develop appropriate behaviours in social settings.*

Some of these statements suggest that while ECEs and parents perceive young children as capable of bullying, these behaviours may be considered a part of a typical developmental phase during which "majority of children this age are simply testing out different social skills and behaviours." These responses also indicate that some ECEs and parents recognise the function of young children's behaviour.

## Environmental factors

The strongest view adopted by ECEs (*n* = 12) and parents (*n* = 10) who indicated that young children are capable of bullying was the influence of environmental factors on children's behaviours. Participants, for example, rationalised young children's behaviour stating that they were simply modelling or "copying what they have seen or heard." More specifically, some ECEs and parents suggested that older siblings play an important role in young children's use of bullying behaviours whereby they "are mimicking behaviour that they have seen or have experienced from their siblings or in the media." Other participants stated:

*I believe a lot of bullying behaviour is picked up from adults or interactions with older children.*

*In my experience [the bullies] are younger siblings who have learned this behaviour from others.*

*We see children modelling what they see from older siblings and peers.*

*I believe bullying at this age is a learned behaviour that had been witnessed and not dealt with appropriately.*
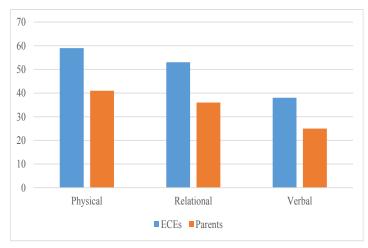
*Most bullying behaviours are learnt. A child could be copying this behaviour from elsewhere, it could be their social norm culturally...without an awareness that it isn't ok behaviour because it's their norm.*

## Common bullying behaviours observed in the early years

ECEs and parents provided examples of common bullying behaviours that they had observed in young children's social settings and these were categorised as physical, relational, and verbal aggression. Of the 93 ECEs, eight described behaviours that were only relational, one provided examples that only included physical behaviours, and the remaining 84 responses

described examples of common bullying behaviours that included more than one form of aggression. In contrast, of the 75 parents, 13 described examples of common bullying behaviours that were only physical. Nine described only relational behaviours, three described only verbal behaviours, and the remaining 50 responses described commonly bullying behaviours that included more than one form of aggression. Figure 1 shows that the most common examples of bullying described by ECEs and parents were physical aggression, followed by relational and verbal aggression.

Figure 1. Examples of Common Bullying Behaviours Described by ECEs and Parents



ECE's and parent's description of common relational bullying observed in young children highlight the exclusive nature of these behaviours. For example, relational bullying was described as excluding others from play or "rejecting another child because of the way he looks," using 'I'm not your friend' and 'you can't come to my birthday party' type comments and telling other children not to be friends with a child. One ECE described relational bullying as "emotional blackmail by sulking until another child does what they want," while a parent depicted this form of bullying as "inconsistent socialisation – holding all the power of when I say I'll play with you and when I won't – so being unpredictable and controlling the situation" indicating a level of proactive malicious intent. Descriptions of common physical and verbal bullying behaviours appeared to be less sophisticated and manipulative. Examples of physical bullying included hitting, snatching toys, shoving, pushing, pinching, breaking or ruining another child's creation, and using "standover tactics" to show dominance. Verbal bullying included name-calling, swearing, teasing, screaming and shouting, "saying others are naughty," saying hurtful things like "he's a baby" or "saying a boy is wearing girls clothes." Despite the differences in the forms of bullying behaviour described by ECEs and parents, all these behaviours were examples of bullying behaviours observed in the early childhood setting, home, or other social settings such as playgrounds.

When describing examples of bullying observed in young children, some ECEs ($n = 13$) and parents ($n = 4$) also commented on the function of children's bullying, highlighting the developmental (in)appropriateness of the behaviour. For instance, an ECE and parent stated that physical behaviours

are a common example of bullying "because they [children] don't know how to deal with their frustration" and the "typical push and shove behaviour is common in this age and stage of development." Moreover, ECEs' and parents' perception of the function of the child's behaviour seems to influence how serious they perceive the behaviour. A parent mentioned: "hitting/pushing is often an impulsive decision and due to children learning conflict management/impulse control whereas the exclusion/friendship plays are more hurtful and more serious because it is premeditated."

*Labelling young children as bullies*

A major theme that was identified from the caregiver's responses was the (in) appropriateness of using the term bullying when describing behaviours used in early childhood. Although the majority of ECEs and parents indicated that young children are capable of engaging in bullying behaviours during early childhood, many raised concern about labelling young children as *bullies*. One ECE stated, "I believe that children are capable of demonstrating bullying behaviour, however, I don't believe that at this age they can be labelled as bullies." Those caregivers who were concerned about using the label suggested that it was difficult to discriminate between normative patterns of behavioural development and intentional aggressive behaviour. For example, an ECE stated that "I don't believe children of this age have a full understanding of what bullying is exactly... to make a conscious decision to be 'bullies'." The challenge discriminating between age appropriate and inappropriate social behaviours was also raised by an ECE who stated that "I don't think I would label them as that [bullies] but I guess I would consider the same behaviour in older children to be bullying" suggesting caregiver's expectations and interpretation of common inappropriate social behaviours during this developmental period may influence their perceptions of whether young children are capable of being bullies and whether the bully label can be appropriately applied.

*ECEs and parents who are "unsure" about bullying*

Given the considerable number of ECEs ($n = 12$) and parents ($n = 9$) who indicated that they were unsure whether young children were capable of bullying, further exploration of this subgroup seemed necessary. A common theme in these responses was related to some of the challenges in ascertaining whether young children's aggression is intentional and/or whether their behaviours are influenced by factors outside of their control such as environment and modelling. That is when a child lacks the understanding about why they are engaging in bullying-like behaviours or the behaviours are learned through modelling or exposure to adverse environments, there is some reluctance to label these behaviours as bullying. For instance, participants stated:

I believe that children aged between three and five years are capable of demonstrating bullying like behaviour, however, I don't believe they can be labelled as bullies. I don't believe that children of this age have a full understanding of what bullying is... they are still developing an understanding of social behaviour.

I believe that children of this age exhibit behaviours that

are often strongly linked to their environment and experiences that they have had. Often it is around the ability to self-regulate their behaviours which needs to be learnt and if this hasn't been modelled, children resort to hurting others and bullying.

These statements suggest that some caregivers may feel it is inappropriate to identify young children's aggressive behaviour as bullying because their environment and experiences have not provided them with the opportunity to learn appropriate behaviour and this is of no fault of the child. This is reinforced by another ECE's response that children "need to learn and be taught acceptable behaviour as opposed to being labelled naughty or a bully and it is the adults place to encourage these [acceptable] skills." These statements reflect the hesitancy that ECEs and parents experience in deciding whether young children are capable of engaging in bullying behaviours and labelling young children as *bullies*. This challenge may be due to the difficulties in understanding the motives that underlie young children's behaviour during this developmental period and the reasons why they choose to engage in these behaviours.

### Perceptions of bullying and demographic variables

Bivariate correlations were used to explore the relationship between ECEs' and parents' perceptions of bullying and age. Fisher Exact Test was used to explore the association between ECEs' and parents' perceptions of bullying and the demographic variables level of education and ECE role in the service. A significant correlation was found between ECEs' perceptions of bullying capability and their age ($r$ = -.21, $p$ = .04), indicating that older ECEs were more likely to suggest that children were not capable of bullying compared to younger ECEs. No significant correlations were found between parents' perceptions about bullying capability and their age ($r$ = -.14, $p$ = .23). For both ECEs and parents, no significant differences were found between perceptions of bullying capability and level of education and the ECE's role in the service (all $ps$ > .05).

### Discussion

Findings from this study contribute to a small but growing body of evidence that examines ECEs' and parents' perceptions of young children's bullying capability and the types of behaviours that constitute bullying during this developmental period. Findings suggest that the majority of ECEs and parents believe that preschool-age children are capable of engaging in bullying behaviours and these behaviours are primarily in the form of physical, relational, and verbal aggression. However, it is also important to note that approximately 13% of caregivers indicated that they were unsure about whether young children are capable of bullying, revealing a potential lack of understanding and knowledge about the phenomenon. Of particular interest was the finding that bullying behaviours were viewed differently depending on the age of the child, leading to a reluctance to label behaviours as 'bullying' in younger children.

Caregiver's awareness of bullying represents a crucial factor in understanding the socio-ecological influence on young children's bullying behaviours. Although 74% of caregivers indicated that children between the ages of three

and five are capable of engaging in bullying behaviours, responses differed considerably in terms of what constitutes bullying behaviours. Caregiver's responses indicated that their definition of bullying, the child's age, social maturity, and environmental factors influence how they characterise bullying behaviours and whether the label *bully* can be appropriately applied to this developmental period. It is important for caregivers to recognise that their views and perceptions of bullying can have an impact on the way they respond to these behaviours (Mishna et al, 2005). This study builds on previous research (e.g. Goryl et al, 2013) by identifying an additional subgroup of caregivers who were unsure about whether young children were capable of bullying. There were some similarities between caregivers who indicated that young children were not capable of bullying and those who were unsure as to whether young children could bully. Consistent with other literature, caregivers' responses suggest that some behaviours related to bullying can be considered normative rough and tumble play during this developmental period (Cameron & Kovac, 2016; Harcourt et al, 2014; Sawyer et al, 2011) and may be a result of lack of self-regulation and social skills rather than malicious, intentional behaviour. This was particularly evident in older ECEs who were more likely to indicate that young children were not capable of engaging in bullying. This finding may correspond to these ECEs having a greater understanding of the traditional definition of bullying (Olweus, 1993) and applying this definition to young children's aggressive behaviours. More experienced ECEs may be more aware of discriminating between normative and non-normative patterns in the development of aggression in the early years, thus influencing their perceptions of bullying-like behaviours. In contrast, caregivers who perceive young children as not capable of bullying may downplay the significance of these behaviours and believe that attention towards bullying behaviours is unwarranted (Cameron & Kovac, 2016; Craig & Pepler, 1997; Sawyer et al, 2011), potentially leading to a lack of intervention and response to bullying (Hurd & Gettinger, 2011; Mishna et al, 2005; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). These findings underlie the value of addressing caregiver's uncertainty and negative perceptions about young children's capability to engage in bullying to ensure ECEs and parents are aware of the existence of bullying and the short and long-term consequences associated with these behaviours (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Vlachou et al, 2011).

Majority of ECEs and parents made few references to key criteria traditionally used to define bullying. This finding puts into question the traditional definition of bullying as applied to the early childhood context, particularly if caregivers do not apply it when judging young children's bullying-like behaviours. Those caregivers who did make reference to traditional criteria emphasised that bullying behaviours indicate power over another and while intentionality was raised, it was with reference to unintentional bullying behaviours because of children's lack of cognitive awareness during this developmental period. Some caregivers mentioned that proactive aggressive behaviours were considered bullying because they were premeditated and thought through, whereas bullying behaviours that young children learnt through modelling were considered normative and

less concerning. Only one participant referred to repetition in her interpretation of bullying and this lack of attention to frequency is consistent with previous studies of parents (Mishna, 2004; Mishna et al, 2005; Sawyer et al, 2011). These findings suggest that understanding the functions and motives of young children's behaviours may help caregivers distinguish between typical developmentally appropriate behaviours and acts of bullying, particularly in terms of the intentionality of the behaviours. That is, not all aggressive behaviours are delivered with the intention to cause harm and this was particularly evident in this study where caregivers interpreted bullying capability based on the different stages of development and age of the child. Aggressive behaviours identified in five year olds were perceived as bullying whereas similar behaviours used by three year olds were more likely to be dismissed as a normal part of young children's social development because children are still learning about acceptable and unacceptable social behaviours during this developmental period. In this case, bullying-like behaviours used by older children may be perceived as more serious because they have the cognitive capacity to engage in behaviour with intent to cause harm and have had more opportunities to learn appropriate social skills. The complexity in determining whether a behaviour is malicious or developmentally appropriate has led some researchers to use terms such as unjustified aggression (Monks et al, 2002) and precursory bullying (Levine & Tamburrino, 2014) when distinguishing between bullying and bullying-like behaviours used in early childhood.

The difficulty in classifying young children's negative behaviours as bullying may also relate to the caregiver's hesitancy to label young children as bullies. A common theme in ECEs' and parents' responses was that while they acknowledged that young children are capable of engaging in bullying behaviours, they were reluctant to label children as bullies because of the challenges in determining whether these behaviours are developmentally appropriate learning experiences or used to intentionally cause malicious harm. This is consistent with previous research which found that ECEs prefer to classify bullying-like behaviours as negative, inappropriate, or unacceptable because of the negative connotation associated with the term that may stick with the children beyond the early years and the intentionality implied (Goryl et al, 2013). Those caregivers who indicated that they were unsure as to whether young children were capable of engaging in bullying were hesitant to use this term because they believed that children were modelling similar behaviours that they had seen in their environment. These findings suggest that caregiver's conceptualisation of bullying progresses and changes as a function of children's age, social cognitive skills, and experiences. Additional research is needed to understand how preschool bullying differs from bullying used by older children to determine when these behaviours become developmentally inappropriate and unacceptable.

While bullying is likely to differ among younger and older children, ECEs and parents suggest that preschool-age children engage in both direct and indirect forms of bullying. Majority of ECEs described bullying behaviours as a combination of physical, relational, and verbal aggression. In contrast, a greater proportion of parents described bullying as only physical or relational. Other researchers have found that ECEs and parents were more likely to label physical aggression as bullying and considered this form of bullying more serious and worthy of intervention than relational and verbal aggression (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfiner, 2010; Sawyer et al, 2011). The observed differences in ECE and parent responses may relate to the different social environments they observe children. One would expect that the types of aggressive behaviours young children use in early childhood settings versus the home environment differ and the thresholds for what is perceived as acceptable and unacceptable in each of these contexts also differs. Indeed, some parents did highlight the influence of siblings on young children's use of bullying-like behaviours and this form of modelling was considered typical in the home context.

*Implications*

The results of this study hold important implications for understanding bullying, specifically with regard to the early childhood developmental period. The varying ECE and parent responses about what constitutes bullying behaviour in preschool-age children reinforces the subjective nature of the term which may influence the way in which bullying-like behaviours receive attention and intervention (Humphrey & Crisp, 2008; Hurd & Gettinger, 2011; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). ECEs' and parents' responses also indicated the ways in which their perceptions are inconsistent with traditional definitions of bullying as they are presented in the literature. Consistent with other research (e.g. Mishna, 2004; Mishna et al, 2005; Sawyer et al, 2011) ECEs and parents did not acknowledge the repetitive nature of bullying behaviours in their responses, suggesting that there is a need to educate caregivers about the potential negative impact of repetitive bullying-like behaviours (Mishna et al, 2005).

It is crucial to guide ECEs and parents towards a common understanding of the nature of bullying as it is used by preschool-age children. ECEs and parents described physical aggression as the most common form of bullying observed during early childhood. Of particular importance is the number of responses that suggested that relational aggression was a common behaviour observed in preschool-age children, however, did not constitute bullying. It is necessary to emphasise the different forms of bullying-like behaviours that young children use during early childhood and the negative consequences associated with these. In order to do this, ECEs and parents should be given the opportunity to discuss bullying-like behaviours that they have observed and may be uncertain about. This may help ECEs and parents recognise discrepancies in their perceptions and the varying ways in which they respond to these behaviours.

A considerable number of caregivers were concerned about labelling young children as bullies because of the negative connotation associated with the term. While it is important not to stigmatise children from a young age, it is important that caregivers recognise bullying behaviours as they emerge in early childhood. Early childhood is a critical time when young children learn prosocial and non-social behaviours, thus, ECEs and parents should use children's display of negative behaviours as an opportunity to teach

them alternative, more appropriate ways, to respond to social conflict before it escalates to more serious bullying-like behaviours. Therefore, it is imperative to equip ECEs and parents with the knowledge and strategies to guide young children's social behaviours.

### Strengths, limitations and suggestions for future research

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of ECEs' and parents' perceptions of bullying, contributing to growing literature examining the nature of bullying within multiple contexts. A real strength of this study was the substantial sample size and use of qualitative methods to understand and compare ECEs' and parents' perceptions of bullying and their beliefs about young children's capability to engage in bullying.

However, there are a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration. Firstly, ECEs and parents were not given a definition of bullying and this may explain the variability in their responses. Given the challenges associated with defining bullying in early childhood, it is recommended that future research explore the point at which aggressive behaviour turns into bullying and whether this differs according to age, gender, and the social contexts in which young children spend most of their time. To do this, researchers will need to engage young children in conversations about the motives behind their behaviour rather than relying on an observer's subjective judgement.

Although consistent with previous studies (e.g. Cameron & Kovac, 2016) and typical of the gender distribution in this profession (Richardson & Watt, 2006), males were not well represented in this study and most participants were NZ European. It is recommended that future research recruit more participants from other ethnic groups such as Māori because cultural factors have been shown to have a significant influence on perceptions of bullying (Harcourt et al, 2014; Hilton et al, 2010). Similarly, it is important to explore factors that have influenced caregivers' perceptions of bullying to determine where these beliefs come from and when they become entrenched. A recommendation for future research is to identify whether caregivers differentiate between aggression and bullying by presenting them with the same behaviours labelled as bullying. A better understanding of caregivers' perceptions will help inform professional development and education to ensure a common understanding of bullying in the early years is formed.

### Declaration
This manuscript is an original work that has not been submitted to nor published anywhere else.

## Compliance with ethical standards

### Disclosure of potential conflict of interest
The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

### Funding

### Ethical approval
All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

### Informed consent
Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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