

“It is everyone’s problem”: Parents’ experiences of bullying

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The social-ecological systems perspective suggests that bullying is best understood when the context is extended beyond the school environment to include families. However, there is currently a lack of qualitative research focusing on the experiences of parents whose children have been bullied. This study examined the experiences of 26 parents whose children had been bullied at primary school in New Zealand. The participants responded to an anonymous, online, qualitative questionnaire and the responses were analysed using directed content analysis. Participants described the significant impact of bullying on themselves, their children, and their families; and their experiences of how schools respond to bullying. School policies acknowledging a shared responsibility for dealing with bullying are recommended, along with greater awareness, support, and education around the effects of bullying on children and their families.

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Bullying has been described as a dangerous, pervasive social problem (Rigby, 2008). Children and young people involved in bullying tend to demonstrate greater evidence of psychosocial issues than those who have not been involved, including conduct problems, emotional disturbances, and difficulties in peer relationships (Nansel et al., 2001; Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor & Chauhan, 2004). Victims of bullying may experience increased depression, stress and hopelessness, decreased self-esteem, and may be more likely to self-harm or attempt to commit suicide (Coggan, Bennett, Hooper & Dickinson, 2003). Bullying perpetration or victimisation in adolescence can predict an increased likelihood of mental health and social adjustment problems in adulthood (e.g., anxiety, personality disorders, substance dependence, aggressive offending) (Gibb, Horwood & Fergusson, 2011).

To be classified as bullying the behaviour must be repeated, have the intention of causing harm, and involve a physical or social power imbalance (Olweus, 1993). This behaviour can take various forms including physical or verbal aggression, relational aggression

(e.g., spreading gossip, socially excluding others), or cyber-bullying, which is bullying through the use of electronic communication devices (Craig, Pepler & Blais, 2007; Wang, Iannotti & Nansel, 2009).

Approximately 10-12% of children worldwide report having experienced bullying (Craig et al., 2009; Cross et al., 2011; Liang, Flisher & Lombard, 2007; Nansel et al., 2001; Ortega et al., 2012) and there is some evidence to suggest that the prevalence of bullying in New Zealand may be higher than in other countries. In a survey of 3,265 New Zealand high school students, 27% reported having experienced ‘chronic’ bullying in the previous six months (i.e., five or more separate incidents) (Coggan et al., 2003). Furthermore, in a recent international study, New Zealand was ranked fourth-highest of 50 countries in terms of bullying prevalence for school students (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Arora, 2012). Nearly one third (31%) of Year Five students indicated that they were bullied ‘about weekly’, significantly higher than the international average of 20% (Mullis et al., 2012). This concerning statistic may be due in part to the structure of New

Zealand’s public school system, where each school is governed by a Board of Trustees, meaning that individual schools may not have an explicit anti-bullying administrative policy (Slee et al., in press).

The social-ecological systems perspective on bullying (Swearer & Espelage, 2011) proposes that bullying is a complex social phenomenon, influenced by the interaction of multiple inter- and intra-individual factors. The perspective suggests that bullying among children and young people must be understood across individual, family, peer, school, and community contexts (Swearer & Espelage, 2011). In New Zealand, the majority of bullying research has involved children as participants (e.g., Coggan et al., 2003; Fenaughty & Harré, 2013; Jose, Kljakovic, Sheib & Notter, 2011; Marsh, McGee, Nada-Raja & Williams, 2010; Raskauskas, 2010; Raskauskas, Gregory, Harvey, Rifshana & Evans, 2010). The relatively few New Zealand studies involving adult participants have focused primarily on the perspectives of school staff. For example, Green, Harcourt, Mattioni, and Prior (2013) and Mattioni (2012) examined the experiences and perceptions of teachers and principals in relation to bullying, while Cushman, Clelland, and Hornby (2011) reported the perspectives of school staff on bullying as part of a wider study focusing on student mental health and wellbeing. These studies appear to have explored bullying within only one context, namely the school.

Although bullying research in New Zealand does not appear to have included parents as participants, international research demonstrates the important role played by parents and families in the social-ecological network of influences on bullying. A recent meta-analysis (Lereya, Samara & Wolke, 2013) analysed 70 studies and concluded that parenting behaviour and parent-child relationships correlate significantly with

children's experiences of being bullied. Warm and affectionate relationships, high parental involvement and support, and good family communication and supervision were found to protect children from victimisation, while maladaptive parenting, abuse, and neglect were "the best predictors of victim or bully/victim status at school" (p. 12).

One of the studies analysed in the Lereya et al., (2013) meta-analysis found that children of authoritarian and neglectful parents were more likely to be bullied than children of authoritative parents, while children of permissive and neglectful parents were more likely to perpetrate bullying (Dehue, Bolman, Vollink, and Pouwelse, 2012). Parents have also been found to have an important influence on the success of school-based anti-bullying programmes. In their systematic review, Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found programmes which included parental involvement, meetings, and training were significantly correlated with decreases in bullying behavior and victimisation within the school. The authors recommended that future anti-bullying programmes involve efforts to educate parents about bullying through presentations and teacher-parent meetings.

These examples of quantitative research demonstrate the impact that parents can have on children's experiences of bullying. However, qualitative research also plays an important role in the understanding of social issues, as it allows the voices of otherwise unheard groups to be brought to the forefront of the debates and decisions which affect them (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002). As such, recent research has begun to take a qualitative approach to parents' perspectives on bullying. Harcourt, Jasperse and Green (2014) systematically reviewed 13 such studies conducted between 2000 and 2013. Six themes were identified across these studies: (1) a wide range of strategies used by parents in response to bullying; (2) the significant negative effects of bullying on children and families; (3) issues of awareness, disclosure, and support; (4) concerns around responsibility for bullying; (5) variation in parents' definitions of bullying; and (6) a tendency for some

parents to see bullying as normal, or to blame the victims.

In one study, Sawyer, Mishna, Pepler, and Wiener (2011) interviewed parents of children who had experienced bullying, and found wide variation in how parents identified bullying behaviours, how they had found out about their child's experience, and the strategies they suggested their child use. In a similar study, Humphrey and Crisp (2008) found that parents of bullied preschoolers experienced significant negative effects resulting from bullying. Parents also felt that preschool staff should provide them with support, information, and resources. Another study, Brown (2010), described parents responding to bullying by taking action to protect their child, seeking help from schools, and supporting their child in the 'aftermath' of bullying.

Harcourt et al. (2014) also identified several limitations within the qualitative literature involving parents. The most significant of these limitations was the fact that only four of the 13 studies exclusively involved parents whose children had actually experienced bullying; the remainder of the studies also included parents of bullies or non-involved children, teachers, other school staff, and children and adolescents. Overall, the results of the Harcourt et al. (2014) review suggest that the existing literature presents a limited scope for in-depth analysis of the experiences of parents whose children have been bullied.

In summary, previous New Zealand and international studies have primarily focused on bullying within school contexts, and sought the perspectives and experiences of students, teachers, and principals. Quantitative studies have explored parental influences on children's bullying behaviour and the efficacy of bullying interventions, while qualitative research has focused on the perspectives of children and adolescents, and parents of bullies, non-involved children, teachers and school staff. Recent reviews have identified the need for studies to explicitly explore the experiences and perspectives of parents whose children have experienced bullying, with a focus on parents' personal reactions, decision-making processes, and practical responses to

bullying.

This study seeks to address this gap in the wider research literature by exploring the perspectives and experiences of parents whose children had been bullied while attending a New Zealand primary school. The study builds on previous research (Brown, 2010; Humphrey and Crisp, 2008; Sawyer et al., 2011) and contributes to a greater understanding of the social-ecological systems framework of bullying by exploring parents' experiences with, reactions to, and perceptions of bullying and school responses to bullying.

The study aims to develop a better understanding of the factors and contexts that shape parents' decision-making in responding to bullying, to inform the development of parent education and support. This was achieved by examining parents' experiences within the micro-systemic environment of their home and family, as well as their meso-systemic interactions with their child's school in the process of responding to the bullying. The study was guided by three specific research questions:

- 1) What actions do parents take in response to their child being bullied?
- 2) What are the effects of bullying on parents and their children and families?
- 3) What are parents' experiences and perceptions of how schools respond to bullying?

Method

Ethical clearance and informed consent

Ethical clearance was gained for this study from the Human Ethics Committee at Victoria University of Wellington. Participants were required to complete an informed consent form and indicate that they had read an information sheet before they could participate.

Questionnaire development

An online, anonymous, descriptive questionnaire was developed to collect comprehensive responses about participants' experiences as parents of children who have been bullied. The questionnaire first asked participants

to provide demographic details about themselves, their child, and the school where the bullying occurred, and basic information about their child's experience of bullying (e.g., type of bullying experienced). The main body of the questionnaire consisted of twelve open-ended questions (see Appendix) based on questions used in previous, related studies (e.g., Brown, 2010; Humphrey and Crisp, 2008; Sawyer et al., 2011), and focused on the aims of this study (e.g., school responses to bullying, effects on family, responsibility for bullying).

The content, format and accessibility of the questionnaire were pilot-tested by three individuals known to the authors. Several minor changes were made in response to these pilot tests, including clarifying instructions, detailing confidentiality processes, and refining the wording and intention of several questions.

Procedure

A webpage was created to facilitate participant recruitment and questionnaire distribution (www.parental-responses-to-bullying.com). The webpage described the study, gave the contact details of the researchers, and listed links to online bullying resources and support services for parents and children. The webpage also provided the URL link to the questionnaire including details about ethical approval and consent. Definitions of the four types of bullying (physical, verbal, social/relational, and cyber) were provided. Before beginning the questionnaire, participants were required to confirm that they were the parent or primary caregiver of a child who had experienced bullying; that this bullying had occurred at a New Zealand primary school in the last ten years; and that the bullying matched the given definitions.

Advertisements were placed in the monthly newsletters of several national counselling and mental health organisations, directing potential participants to the webpage for further information. The study was also advertised through the social networks of the authors, who sent emails to colleagues and contacts, and shared the webpage link on Facebook. Finally, a randomly selected sample of New

Zealand primary schools were sent an email requesting that they advertise the study in their school newsletter. Given the time constraints of the study being a university Masters level project, and the labour and time-intensive nature of emailing individual schools, only 5% of the 1,979 eligible schools ($n = 98$) were individually contacted. The set deadlines also prohibited the possibility of follow-up procedures being implemented. In all of the above procedures, respondent-driven sampling was used, where participants are expressly asked to recruit peers to participate in research (Wejnert & Heckathorn, 2008). The questionnaire link was live for three months.

Results

Demographics of Participants

The questionnaire link was accessed 51 times during the three month data collection period, and 31 questionnaires were begun. Of these, four were incomplete (i.e., respondents had only answered the initial demographic questions) and one was completed with reference to a child whose experience of bullying did not occur at primary school. Data analysis was therefore based on the 26 usable questionnaires. All 26 participants were female, aged between 28 and 57 years (mean age 42). Twenty-five participants indicated they were the mother of the child who had been bullied; one indicated she was the child's step-mother. The majority of participants ($n = 23$) indicated that they were Pākehā, New Zealand European or European; two were New Zealand Māori/New Zealand European; and one self-identified as Asian. In response to an open question asking how they had heard about the research study, the majority of participants (81%, $n = 21$) stated that they had heard about it from a friend or work colleague, often via email or Facebook.

Fourteen participants indicated that their child who had been bullied was male, and 12 that their child was female. These children were aged between 5 and 11 years old when the bullying began. Most participants indicated that their child had experienced more than one type of bullying: 24 children had experienced verbal bullying; 19

had experienced social bullying; and 16 had experienced physical bullying. Only three participants indicated that their child had experienced cyber-bullying. Thirteen participants indicated that the school where their child had experienced bullying was located in a major city; twelve were in a smaller city or town; and one was in a rural center (i.e., population 1000-5000). To ascertain the socio-economic standing of these schools, participants were asked to indicate the decile ranking of the school (1 = low decile, low SES standing; 10 = high decile, high SES standing). The results indicated that 17 of the schools were high decile (i.e., deciles 8-10), six were mid-decile (4-7), and two were low decile (1-3). One participant was unsure of the school's decile.

Data Analysis

Participants' qualitative responses were analysed using directed or deductive content analysis, where concepts from previous research findings or theory guide the categorisation and interpretation of text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In conventional or inductive content analysis, researchers begin data analysis with no predetermined themes or categories, allowing codes to emerge from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2000). By contrast, directed content analysis aims to use existing theory or research to "provide predictions about the variables of interest or about the relationships among variables, thus helping to determine the initial coding scheme or relationships between codes" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). Accordingly, four themes identified in the Harcourt et al. (2014) systematic review were selected as relevant to the current study, and used to structure the directed content analysis process: (1) strategies used by parents; (2) the negative effects of bullying; (3) issues of awareness, disclosure, and support; and (4) responsibility for bullying. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) state that in the process of directed content analysis, responses that do not fit into the initial coding scheme may be used to develop a new theme. Accordingly, a new theme which was not described in the Harcourt et al. (2014) review, namely schools' responses to bullying, was identified

through an inductive process, resulting in a total of five overall themes.

The first author analysed the text of participants' descriptive responses to identify 'meaning units', defined as specific words, sentences, or paragraphs related to a theme (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). As the context of the information was important, thematic units were used rather than line by line coding in which the context would have been lost.

A first version of the coding scheme was discussed by the research team including clarification of the five overall themes, the coding scheme, definitions, examples and classification rules, with the goal of establishing a common understanding of the codes. Next, based on the refined and revised coding scheme, participants' responses were coded independently by the first and third authors. Each meaning unit was underlined and given a one- or two-word code to represent the essence of the meaning unit (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Codes were then thematically grouped into the five overall themes, divided into categories and sub-categories, and entered into a matrix of analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The codings were compared and discrepancies between the two coders discussed. These consensus sessions led to final modifications of the coding scheme. The text was then independently coded a second time, and a final consensus session consolidated an understanding of the codes between the two coders resulting in 100% agreement. According to Elo et al., (2014) the trustworthiness of qualitative deductive content analysis can be improved by double coding, while Schreier (2012) suggests that if the code definitions are clear and subcategories do not overlap, two rounds of independent coding should produce similar results. This was the case in the current study.

Main Findings

The categories of findings, which arose during the directed content analysis process are displayed in Table 1, followed by detailed descriptions of each category.

Table 1
Categories of findings identified in the content analysis of participants' descriptive responses

Thematic categories	Sub-categories
Actions taken by parents	a) Supporting their child (e.g., comforting, giving advice) b) Approaching the school (e.g., child's teacher, senior management) c) Approaching the bully and their family d) Seeking support and advice (e.g., counselling, advice from friends) e) Serious actions (e.g., transferring child to another school)
Effects of bullying	a) Effects on parents (e.g., emotional distress, dilemmas) b) Negative effects on children and families (e.g., increased conflict) c) Positive effects on children and families (e.g., resiliency, closer relationships)
Experiences with and perceptions of schools	a) How schools responded to bullying (e.g., active vs. inactive) b) What schools should have done (e.g., follow clear response process) c) Schools' attitudes towards bullying (e.g., normalising, making excuses) d) Who is responsible? (e.g. different responsibilities for schools and families)

Actions taken by parents

Participants were asked to indicate, by selecting corresponding tick-boxes, who of a range of people they had spoken to in response to their child's experience of bullying (see Table 2). They were then asked to describe this action in further detail. Their responses were organised into five sub-categories.

them understand why the bullying could be happening. As one parent commented, "you do your best to take away the hurt." Participants also provided their children with suggestions for strategies to combat the bullying, such as telling the bully to stop, telling a teacher, or ignoring the bullying. One participant described her approach by

Table 2
Number of participants who indicated speaking to people in varying roles in response to bullying

Person spoken to	Number of participants (%)
Own child	25 (96%)
Child's teacher	26 (100%)
School senior management (e.g., principal, Board of Trustees member)	22 (85%)
Another teacher	7 (27%)
Non-teaching school staff member (e.g., counsellor, administrator)	5 (19%)
The bullying child/children	6 (23%)
A parent/parents of the bullying child/children	10 (38%)
Other	4 (15%)

Supporting their child. As indicated in Table 2, 25 participants spoke to their child in response to the bullying. Participants reported comforting and reassuring their child, discussing the situation with them, and trying to help

stating, "I think there will always be bullies and it's important to figure out some strategies your child can use."

Approaching the school. All 26 participants spoke to their child's

teacher in response to the bullying, and the majority (85%, $n=22$) also spoke with a member of the school senior management team (see Table 2). Parents also described approaching other school staff members (e.g., teachers, teacher aides, Resource Teachers of Learning and Behavior). In general, participants took this action immediately upon finding out their child had been bullied. However, six parents (23%) indicated that they only spoke to school staff when the bullying escalated to physical aggression. A further six participants (23%) reported only approaching the principal when they felt the classroom teacher's response was ineffective or insufficient.

Approaching the bully and their family. Ten participants (38%) indicated that they spoke with the parents of the bully in an attempt to address the situation. For example, one parent stated that she "was calm and talked nicely to the parents and understood that it was not going to happen again." Six participants (23%) spoke with the bullying children; one mother described explaining to a group of bullies "that what they did and were continuing to do was not nice, and really, it just needs to stop."

Seeking support and advice. Parents described seeking support and advice from a wide range of sources. Five participants (19%) sought support for their children through counselling services, child psychologists or community mental health services, while others spoke to the Ministry of Education ($n=2$), their family doctor ($n=1$), and visited websites ($n=1$). Nine participants reported relying on friends and family members for support and advice; one commented that "other parents with children in a similar situation were a useful support group."

Serious actions. Approximately half of the participants indicated that after they had tried multiple unsuccessful strategies to address the bullying, they eventually took more serious actions. Eight (31%) reported transferring their child to another class or another school, or beginning to home-school them. Two parents (8%) said they had directly confronted the school Board of Trustees and threatened to involve the Ministry of Education, the Police, or the Human Rights Commission. One parent reported refusing to pay the school donation,

while another reported keeping copies of all correspondence between herself and the school, and delivering this information to the Education Review Office, who were "very grateful for this."

Effects of bullying

Effects on parents. Parents expressed a wide range of emotions in response to their child's experience of bullying. A common emotion was worry or concern for their child, both as the bullying was occurring and in relation to their future: "[I was concerned for] how it would affect him further down the track, as a teenager or even older." A majority of participants (62%, $n=16$) also expressed anger towards school staff, towards the bullies and their parents, or towards the situation in general, and seven (27%) expressed a sense of failure or guilt that they had not been able to keep their child safe. As one parent described, "[I felt] awful, completely useless and powerless because I couldn't keep my child from being hurt. I feel that I let him down by not doing more to stop the bullying from happening." Overall, parents described feeling upset, disappointed, frustrated, and powerless, and two expressed regret that they had not taken action against the bullying sooner. Unexpectedly, four parents (15%) described feeling sympathetic towards the bullies. As one described, "at the time we felt very negatively towards [the bully] but I do recognise that he needed the most help out of everyone". Along with these emotional effects, participants described a range of physical effects on themselves as a result of working through their child's experience of bullying, including loss of sleep, stress-induced illnesses, excess alcohol consumption, and exhaustion.

Eleven parents (42%) described facing dilemmas in responding to the bullying, including deciding whether to remove their child from the school and considering whether their child was "over sensitive...or whether this is normal stuff." Parents faced the dilemma of wanting to assist their child, while simultaneously not wanting to "kick up too much of a stink", or "tell the teachers how to do their jobs". One mother felt that she and her son had acquired "reputations as complainers," while another "got tired of being called

an overprotective mother." A particularly salient dilemma for parents was the conflict between their sense of duty to ensure their child attended school, and their duty to protect them. As one parent stated, "there is nothing worse than sending your child to a place where there is no guarantee they will be happy."

Negative effects on children and families. Participants described a wide range of negative emotional, physical, and behavioral effects on their children as a result of the bullying, including increased anxiety, fear, and loneliness; decreased confidence and self-esteem; feeling sick; and wanting to avoid school. Given that these effects have been extensively described in the wider bullying literature (e.g., Due et al., 2005; Salmon, James, Cassidy & Javaloyes, 2000), they will not be described in detail here.

However, several cognitive effects observed by parents are worthy of discussion. Several parents reported that their children appeared to modify their perceptions of themselves and the world as a result of the bullying. For example, four participants (15%) felt that their child had begun to believe that what the bullies said about them was true. One parent commented that her daughter began to agree that the bully "was right in saying that she was ugly and had terrible clothes," while another stated that her daughter had almost accepted that it was 'normal' to be bullied. Five parents (19%) commented that their children began to think differently about approaching their school for help. As one mother stated, "[my son's] experiences in the past of not really being taken seriously by teachers has taught him it won't do any good to speak up."

The effects of bullying appeared to go beyond the individual child, affecting others in the family system as well. Ten participants (38%) made comments relating to increased general tension within the home, stress between themselves and their partners, and reduced opportunities for family "quality time", due to the amount of time they had to spend supporting the child who had been bullied. Tensions also arose between the child who had been bullied and their siblings. Three participants (11%) noted that the child who had been bullied would take out their frustration

the attention that the child who had been bullied was receiving. As a result, these siblings became angry and frustrated; one parent stated that all of her children had begun "acting up more" at home.

Positive effects on children and families. An unexpected theme was the perceived positive outcomes of the bullying experience on their children and families. For example, eleven participants (42%) made comments suggesting that their child had developed a greater understanding of how their family would support them, and appeared to feel a closer connection with them as a result. As one parent commented, "my daughter realised that we were really in her corner, and she started to open up to us again." Similarly, three participants indicated that they perceived a stronger, more positive connection between their child and their school as a result of the bullying having been successfully resolved. Another positive outcome reported by five parents (19%) was the development of resiliency within their child. As one parent commented, "we were worried for a while there, but she still sings in the shower."

Participants also described positive effects on the wider family as a result of the bullying experience. For example, five parents (19%) described sibling relationships having become closer as siblings tried to protect, support, and reassure the child who had been bullied. Four parents (15%) also reported strengthened family relationships overall, as a result of their shared experience. As one parent commented, "if anything we pulled together to get [our son] through this tough time...you could say it drew us close to fight a common enemy."

Experiences with and perceptions of schools

How schools responded to bullying. Parents' descriptions of schools' responses to bullying were categorised as positive, where the school was active in responding to the bullying, or negative, where the school did not take action. Parents described a wide range of experiences, both positive and negative, which did not appear to depend on the child's age, gender, location (e.g., city vs small town) or school decile; which is particularly pertinent given that there was a range of deciles represented in

the sample.

Positive responses included the school taking action in relation to the bully (e.g., requiring that they apologise, increased supervision and monitoring, suspending the bully) or meeting with the bully's parents to discuss the situation. Schools also took wider preventive measures, such as addressing "bad language" with all students and holding discussions about "being a good friend and what that looked like." Participants also described the positive actions schools had taken to ensure that their child felt supported and safe, including apologising to the child, praising and reinforcing them for reporting the bullying behavior, reassuring them that staff members were available to talk to, and suggesting strategies which the child could use in counteracting bullying. Two parents described in detail how the school had reinforced their child's self-esteem by subtly supporting them and including them in school activities. For example, one parent commented that her daughter was "monitored by teaching staff in her syndicate (in a way that she wasn't aware of or uncomfortable about) and given some extra special tasks to make her feel good about herself. The principal was very clear about this being important."

Unfortunately, the majority of parents did not experience positive and active responses from their child's school. For example, only three (11%) participants explicitly stated that the school had actively informed them of their child's bullying experience. The remainder were told about the bullying by their child, often reluctantly; told by other parents; or became aware of the bullying after having investigated possible reasons for changes in their child's behaviour. For example, one parent commented, "it got to the point when I was dropping him off to school [and] he was crying and refusing to want to go. That's when I knew something wasn't right."

Ten parents (38%) made comments suggesting that the school simply did not believe their child's reports of the bullying, while seven (27%) felt that their concerns about the extent of the bullying were not taken seriously. Four participants (15%) described schools appearing to attempt to relieve themselves of responsibility, by stating

that the child should address the bullying themselves or that the bullying was not their problem if it occurred outside of school. Six parents (23%) felt that the school had tried to further relieve their responsibility by providing excuses for the bully's behaviour. For example, one participant described being told that a bully was "horrible to everyone", another that the bully had been "put up to it by an older child," and a third that an incident was simply "play that's got out of hand."

What schools should have done.

Participants provided a range of suggestions for how they felt the school should have responded to their situation. Overall, parents wanted the school to take bullying more seriously. Twelve parents (46%) expressed the need for schools to follow a clear response process in responding to bullying, including suggestions such as contacting the parents of the children involved, providing the support of a counsellor, organising mediation, and establishing and implementing an 'action plan' with the support of "an outside expert with bullying."

Participants also made suggestions about how schools could better respond to bullying in general, including increased supervision in the playground, programmes focusing on positive behaviour, and clear consequences for bullying. Four parents (15%) felt that schools should have a 'zero tolerance' policy for bullying; one parent suggested that schools could use incidences of bullying as a "learning opportunity for all the kids involved." Five participants (19%) acknowledged that the bully and their family may also need support and advice, and suggested that they must be involved from the beginning of the process.

Schools' attitudes towards bullying.

In general, participants felt that the attitudes of school staff towards bullying appeared to influence their responses to the situation. For example, six parents (23%) described that school staff seemed to perceive bullying as a normal, accepted part of school culture. Three parents (11%) commented that bullies tended to be popular children, "held in high regard by the teachers"; staff therefore appeared reluctant to accept that these children had bullied others. Similarly, four participants (15%) expressed their

concern that schools tend to focus on 'fixing' the bully, leaving the victims to fend for themselves. As one mother commented, "I think there is a culture of protecting the bully and helping them, while the victim is left to struggle on." Overall, parents felt that schools must listen to the child who had been bullied, avoid blaming them for the situation, and ensure that they feel supported and safe.

Who is responsible? Approximately half of the participants made comments reflecting the importance of shared responsibility for bullying between parents, teachers, and school staff. As one parent commented, "there has to be a partnership between school and family as there are two parts to play in dealing with bullying." However, participants also clearly identified certain aspects of bullying for which they felt the school must take primary responsibility, particularly if the bullying had occurred on school grounds, during school hours. Seven parents (27%) stated their firm belief that it is the school's responsibility to create and maintain a safe environment for their children, for example: "The school needs to provide a place that is safe for all kids – that is not something we can do as a family." Five participants (19%) commented that schools must take responsibility for informing parents of what is happening at school and ensuring clear, open communication.

Five participants (19%) stated that the bully's family should be responsible for being aware of their child's behaviour at school, and modelling appropriate behaviours and relationships in the home. Participants felt that their responsibility, as the parents of the child who had been bullied, was to take action if the school was ineffective, to teach respect and empathy, and support and advocate for their child. Three parents (11%) discussed the importance of wider community involvement in preventing and responding to bullying. As one parent stated, "I believe everyone in a community needs to take responsibility for bullying, it seems to be a nationwide problem and not just in schools and with children." Another parent concluded, "everyone should take responsibility. It is everyone's problem."

Discussion

This study examined the experiences of 26 parents whose children had been bullied at primary school in New Zealand. These parents reported taking a wide range of actions in response to bullying; highlighted the significant effects of the bullying on themselves, their children, and their families; and described their experiences in their interactions with schools in response to the bullying.

Similar to previous studies (Brown, 2010; Humphrey & Crisp, 2008; Sawyer et al., 2011), the majority of participants reported that they were not informed of their child's experience of bullying by the school. Several participants indicated that their child had been reluctant to tell them of their bullying experience, while others found out only through observing changes in their child's behaviour. Once they were aware of the bullying occurring, all 26 participants took action, by supporting their child emotionally and suggesting strategies they could use, advocating for their child by approaching school staff or the bully and their family, and seeking further support from external agencies. Such strategies are similar to those reported by parents in Brown (2010), Greeff and Van den Berg (2013), Purcell (2012), and Sawyer et al. (2011).

The wide range of actions described by parents, and the fact that the majority reported working both with their child and school staff, clearly suggests that these parents saw the need for a comprehensive, collaborative response to bullying. While these parents did what they could within the microsystem of their home (e.g., comforting and reassuring their child, giving them guidance), they also took action within the meso-systemic context, in their interactions with schools, families of bullies, and community representatives (e.g., counsellors, doctors).

The negative emotions described by parents in this study in response to their child's experience of bullying (i.e., worry, guilt, anger, frustration) reflect those of previous studies (Brown, 2010; Humphrey & Crisp, 2008; Sawyer et al., 2011). Similarly, parents' descriptions of the negative effects experienced by their children (i.e., anxiety, fear, decreased confidence, feeling sick) are also demonstrated elsewhere in the bullying literature (e.g., Due et al.,

2005; Salmon et al., 2000). However, participants reported a range of positive and negative effects on themselves, their children, and their families, which do not appear to have been explored in previous studies within the bullying literature. For example, parents described feelings of sympathy for the bully, dilemmas they faced in responding to the bullying, and tensions which arose between family members. Parents also described the development of resiliency in their children, and the development of closer relationships between family members and between their children and their school. These findings suggest that parents' experiences of bullying vary significantly across families and that there is a need to explore the possibility of post traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 1996, 2004) in children and families after bullying. In particular, post traumatic growth (PTG) has been defined as "the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p.1). How individuals cope with stress and trauma appears to play an important role in whether individuals experience recovery (a return to former levels of functioning), survival (a lower level of functioning), or thriving (a higher level of functioning) (Aldwin, 1994). Studies have shown that there are three broad outcomes associated with PTG: changes in self-perception (e.g., increased sense of personal strength), changes in interpersonal relationships (e.g., greater empathy and compassion for others), and changes in philosophy of life (e.g. greater wisdom and spirituality) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Future studies should not ignore the possibility of positive effects of bullying and should focus on the narratives individuals and families tell about their experiences. (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Parents expressed their views on the responsibilities of the multiple people involved in responding to bullying, with a number of parents expressing the opinion that schools need to take greater responsibility for bullying. By contrast, Green et al. (2013) found that educators generally felt that parents and families should be more involved with preventing and responding to bullying. As such, it could be concluded that the frustration

and conflict between adults in relation to bullying may be as a result of schools not meeting families' expectations, and vice versa. These concerns must be addressed to encourage an effective and collaborative response to bullying.

Several findings of this study suggest that schools were focusing on bullying only within their micro-systemic social environment, without considering the interactions between the wider social-ecological contexts of school, home, and community. For example, parents reported that they were rarely contacted by schools in relation to bullying, that their actions were sometimes perceived as interfering and inconvenient, and that schools appeared to attempt to relieve themselves of responsibility for bullying. Participants felt that bullying must be taken more seriously by schools, and that schools must provide effective support and guidance for children and parents. The majority of participants reported approaching more than one school staff member in response to their child's experience of bullying, which suggests that parents may feel unsure about who to approach within a school in relation to bullying. Participants placed particular importance on schools having clear processes in responding to bullying, including the need to inform parents of their child's experience of bullying, to include the family of the bully in the response process, and to utilise support and guidance from external sources. These findings suggest that parents want to be actively involved in the process of responding to their child's experience of bullying. Parental involvement in school in general has been found to have benefits for students (e.g., increased academic achievement), teachers (e.g., improved school climate), and parents (e.g., increased parental confidence), as well as improved overall parent-teacher relationships (Hornby & Witte, 2010).

A significant limitation of this study must be acknowledged in the relatively small, homogeneous sample – of the 26 participants, all were female, most were NZ European and approximately two-thirds indicated that their child experienced bullying while at a high decile school. This somewhat non-representative sample may have been a result of the authors being unable to contact potential participants

directly, given that we were not, for instance, seeking participation from parents who had registered their contact details with a particular organisation or community group. The Internet-based nature of the recruitment procedures and the questionnaire may also have contributed to the small sample size by restricting access to the study for parents without access to a computer or the Internet. Participants were also required to self-select, which may have led to a homogeneous and potentially biased sample. Self-selection may bias research findings when participants who actively choose to participate in research differ from those who choose not to (Olsen, 2008). In the current study, parents may have chosen to participate specifically because of their negative experiences with and perceptions of bullying. By contrast, parents who held neutral, ambivalent, or even positive perceptions of bullying may have chosen not to participate; accordingly, their experiences and perspectives are not reported here.

Another concern during the recruitment process was the lack of uptake from schools who were asked to help with recruiting participants. Of the 98 schools emailed with a request to advertise the study in their school newsletters, only two replied, both declining to participate. It is unclear why schools were reluctant to respond, however the outcome is similar to the low response rate experienced by Mattioni (2012) in her attempt to invite schools to participate in an anonymous online survey about the bullying perceptions and attitudes of teachers and principals. A more successful approach may have been to pre-notify each school of the upcoming request with a written letter, followed by an email, as described by Bandilla, Couper and Kaczmirek (2012).

Overall participation rates and the total amount of data collected may also have been affected by individual participant motivation, given that research participants may be influenced by "the degree to which the topic of a question is personally important, beliefs about whether the survey will have useful consequences, respondent fatigue, and aspects of questionnaire administration" (Krosnick & Presser, 2010, p. 266). Furthermore, Couper (2000) notes that

participation and measurement error in web-based survey research, as opposed to traditional, in-person data collection, may be affected by comprehension problems, technical flaws, or design and layout issues. These factors could explain why four individuals followed the questionnaire URL link and began to answer the questionnaire, but did not complete it. However, the fact that the 26 participants who completed the questionnaire spent an average of 35 minutes completing their questionnaire, and wrote an average of 730 words, suggests that they understood the questions and were motivated to answer them in significant detail.

Holbrook, Krosnick and Pfent (2008) note that researchers have been responding to an overall drop in survey research participation rates in recent years in a number of ways, including extending the period of data collection, increasing the number of contact attempts with potential participants, sending advance notice of participation requests, and offering incentives. However, given the restrictions on this study as part of a university Masters research project (e.g., limited time frame for data collection and submission of final report, lack of funds) alongside the data-rich nature of the 26 participants' responses, it was decided that data analysis would proceed appropriately with the available sample.

This study has identified a number of directions for future research. Firstly, further examination of this topic with a more diverse sample (i.e., participants of both genders, of different ethnicities, and from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds) could provide greater insight into the social-ecological network of influences on bullying. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to understand the perspectives of parents whose children's experiences of bullying differ from those examined in this study, either as a function of age, type of bullying (e.g. traditional vs cyberbullying) or the role the child played. Such studies could also further explore the use of social networking and respondent-driven sampling in participant recruitment, given the unexpectedly successful use of social networks in this study. The majority of participants (81%) stated that they had heard about the study through links to the study webpage on

Facebook or emails from friends or work colleagues. This success highlights the importance of social networks in relation to bullying, and the potential to utilise such networks to gain access to this population for future research.

Another beneficial direction for research could be to examine parents' use of strategies in response to bullying in greater depth. Parents could be interviewed about the decision processes behind the actions they took in response to bullying, and their perceptions as to why some strategies may be more successful than others. Parents' sources of information and advice could also be explored, in order to identify the types of information gained from formal (e.g. books, published guidelines, 'expert' advice) and more informal resources (e.g., website forums, friends and family, other parents in similar situations). Such research could help contribute to the development of effective resources within these domains, such as specialised support groups run by parenting organisations.

The findings of this study suggest that the development of resiliency, post traumatic growth or stress-related growth appears to be one of the few positive outcomes resulting from a child's experience of bullying. While several previous studies (e.g., Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffit & Areneault, 2010; Greeff & Van den Berg, 2013) have examined the correlations between family factors and resiliency in response to bullying; post-traumatic growth processes and outcomes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 1996, 2004) is another area which could benefit from further research. For example, future studies could qualitatively and longitudinally examine the development of resiliency, protective factors and coping strategies in families in response to bullying, in order to contribute to a better understanding of how best to support and promote such processes and outcomes.

A final direction for future research could be an in-depth examination of the micro- and meso-systemic processes involved in single episodes of bullying, through the use of case study research. The actions, experiences, and complex interactions of the relevant children, families, school staff, and external representatives could be followed

throughout the complete process of responding to an incident of bullying, from the initial disclosure to the resolution of the situation, successful or otherwise. This detailed analysis would provide a greater understanding of bullying, based on the interactions and perspectives of individuals at all levels of the social-ecological network.

A significant implication arising from the findings of this study is the need for clear and comprehensive school policies detailing each school's unique approach for preventing and responding to bullying in their community. Such policies would demonstrate the school and Board of Trustees' commitment to meeting the Ministry of Education's National Administration Guideline 5(a), which states that schools must "provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students" (Ministry of Education, 2012). Furthermore, it appears that there is considerable interest amongst school staff to make anti-bullying policies obligatory, with one recent survey finding that 65% of 1,236 teachers and principals agreed that anti-bullying guidelines should be compulsory for all schools (Green et al., 2013).

The Bullying Prevention Advisory Group (BPAG) was convened in 2013 and has produced guidelines to assist schools with the development of such policies. The group consists of representatives from a wide range of organisations, including the Ministry of Education, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, the Education Review Office, the Human Rights Commission, and the New Zealand Police. The aim of BPAG is to "provide practical information for schools to support effective prevention and management of bullying behaviour... [and] help schools prevent and respond to bullying effectively as part of promoting positive environments in which all students can learn and thrive" (Bullying Prevention Advisory Group, 2015, p. 4). With the help of these guidelines, school policies should be tailored to each school community and involve the collaboration of staff, parents, and external support agencies (e.g., educational psychologists, police education officers).

In response to the findings of this study, policies should encourage improved communication and positive relationships between schools and

parents by clearly identifying processes in response to incidents of bullying. Guidelines could include: (a) who in the school, parents, students, and staff should report to in response to bullying; (b) whether and how the school will inform parents of incidents of bullying; (c) what emotional and practical support the school can provide for parents and children; and (d) how schools will act to involve the victim/s, bully or bullies, parents, bystanders, and external agencies in responding to the bullying. Ensuring that parents and staff are aware of and have access to a clear, comprehensive, collaborative school policy, which outlines key roles and responsibilities, will also enable accountability in the process of responding to bullying.

Schools could also consider investing in specific programmes which prevent or deter bullying and promote a positive school climate. There are a considerable number of evidence-based anti-bullying programmes available (Olweus & Limber, 2010; Smith, 2011; Jimerson, Swearer & Espelage, 2010), including KiVa (Salmivalli, Kärnä & Poskiparta, 2011), which has recently been brought into New Zealand. Explicitly stating how such initiatives are implemented in a school could demonstrate both the school's commitment to providing a safe environment for students, and how the school is protecting and fostering students' rights to education and personal security, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Human Rights Commission, 2009; 2013).

A further implication is the need for parents to be aware of the wide-reaching effects of bullying on themselves and their family, as well as their child who was bullied. For example, parents may need to be aware of and attuned to changes in their child's behaviour which may indicate that they are experiencing bullying, including angry outbursts, becoming easily upset, or refusing to go to school. Furthermore, parents should be aware of the potential effects of bullying on the relationships between parents and children, between siblings, and between partners. Given that participants reported closer family bonds as a result of having worked through their child's experience of bullying together, parents could seek

support through family counselling to promote this positive outcome. More research needs to be done on the role that professionals and the therapeutic process can play in helping families experience post-traumatic growth following adversity (Jackson, 2007).

This study has focused on parents' experiences with bullying in New Zealand, in order to contribute to a growing literature exploring the impact and experience of bullying within multiple contexts. Participants reported acting quickly and using a wide range of strategies in response to bullying, which was found to affect children, parents, and the wider family system. Parents felt that bullying could be addressed more effectively if schools and families work together; clear, comprehensive, collaborative school policies and practices may contribute to this. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations resulting from this study will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of bullying, and to the development of effective policies, initiatives, and practices to reduce the impact of bullying on children, young people, and their families in New Zealand and worldwide.

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Appendix: Questionnaire questions

1. Please describe what happened during your child's experience of bullying, and how you found out about it.

2. How long had the bullying been going on before you found out?

3. Please indicate which of the following people you talked to or approached in response to your child's experience of bullying.
 - Your own child
 - School senior management (e.g., principal, deputy principal, Board of Trustees member)
 - Your child's teacher
 - Another teacher
 - Non-teaching school staff member (e.g., nurse, counsellor, administrator)
 - The bullying child/children
 - A parent/parents of the bullying child/children
 - Other (please describe)

4. Based on your responses to the above question, please describe, in as much detail as you can, what actions you took when you found out about your child's experience of bullying.

5. Please describe the effects of your actions on your child and the situation (e.g., did your actions help stop the bullying? Did your actions comfort your child?)

6. Please describe, in as much detail as you can, what actions the school took (if any) to address the bullying, or support you and your child.

7. Please describe the effects of the school's actions on your child and the situation (e.g., did they help stop the bullying? Were they effective?)

8. Please describe, in as much detail as you can, what effects the bullying had *on you personally?* (i.e., your emotions as you went through the process of responding to the bullying)

9. What effects did the bullying have *on your child*?

10. What effects did the bullying have *on your other family members*? (e.g., your child's relationship with their siblings, your relationship with your partner, etc.)

11. Did you seek or receive any form of support while dealing with the bullying?

- If you did, please describe this support and how it helped.
- If you did not seek or receive support, please explain why this was the case.
- What type of support would you have liked?

12. There is growing concern over a general disagreement between schools and families about who should take responsibility for dealing with bullying. What are your thoughts on this?

13. Do you have anything else you would like to say about your experience of supporting your child in his/her experience of bullying at primary school? Please share any further comments you may have, remembering that your responses will remain anonymous.