

Bullies in the Block Area:

The Early Childhood Origins of “Mean” Behavior

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August 2015



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Executive Summary

Bullying can pose a serious threat to children's immediate and long-term health and well-being, and can have profound impacts on all children involved in bullying behaviors, whether as the one bullying others, the one being bullied, or the one witnessing bullying. At least some of the roots of bullying behaviors, and conversely the roots of positive pro-social skills, can likely be found in adverse and positive experiences during early childhood, yet the research literature on these connections is limited. The early childhood field lacks a coherent, theoretical model that identifies the factors contributing to "mean" or aggressive behavior in young children, and establishes the developmental link between this early behavior and later bullying behavior.

This white paper summarizes the literature on seven key hypotheses about the roots of bullying behavior in early childhood experiences. There is a substantial body of evidence lending support to the following theories:

- **Parenting behavior and characteristics**, particularly parenting style, parental involvement, and engagement are related to the development of "mean" or aggressive behaviors. However, the majority of research has focused on the role of mothers rather than fathers.
- **Early childhood maltreatment**, such as physical abuse, is a significant predictor for involvement in bullying, both as the target and as the aggressor. Early and persistent maltreatment is also shown to physically alter the structure of a child's brain, which can lead to developmental deficits, including in social and emotional domains.
- **The quantity and content of television media exposure** have been linked to both the development of bullying behaviors as well as pro-social skills. Increased exposure to media, including media that is not inherently violent, has been linked to increases in bullying behavior. Conversely, exposure to television shows, such as *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* or *Sesame Street*, which are specifically designed to focus on pro-social skills, has been shown to increase these behaviors in young children.



Evidence is limited and/or mixed for the connection between bullying behaviors and caregiver-child attachment, the influence of early care and education settings, the effects of early exposure to bias and prejudice, and other environmental factors such as peers or socioeconomic status. Further research would enable us to better understand how these factors contribute to development of bullying behaviors from early childhood.

At the same time, the early years present a unique opportunity to take advantage of a variety of caregiver-child relationships and social settings (at home, in preschools, child care settings, playgrounds, etc.), in which modeling, teaching, and reinforcing pro-social behaviors, empathy, and kindness can take place. This white paper stresses the need to focus on promoting positive social and emotional skills and interactions to help prevent later bullying behaviors. Several promising and evidence-based programs and resources are available that can help facilitate these skills in early childhood. These include:

- **Media-based resources**, such as those offered through Sesame Street Workshop and the Fred Rogers Center.
- Guides and strategies to promote more **welcoming, supportive, and respectful classroom environments**, such as *You Can't Say You Can't Play* by Vivian Paley and the *Welcoming Schools* curriculum from the Human Rights Campaign.
- Evidence-based programs focused on building **young children's social and emotional skills**, including *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)*, *Second Step*, *AI's Pals*, and *The Incredible Years*.

Bullies in the Block Area: The Early Childhood Origins of “Mean” Behavior

A familiar scene in preschools nationwide might go something like this:

Jacob and Stella are building an elaborate castle for the family of farm animals they have gathered. Stella is the self-appointed architect and foreman of the construction, while Jacob hands over the materials and cheers Stella on as the towers go precariously skyward. Sam wanders over to admire their project. “Cool!” he says. “Can I help?” He picks up a yellow block and Stella quickly snatches it from his hands. “NO!” she yells. “We don’t want you to help!” “Yeah!” chimes Jacob. “You can’t play with us. Go away!” Sam begins to cry for his teacher as he slowly backs away.

Exclusionary or “mean” behavior in early childhood is no recent or rare phenomenon—in fact, scenarios like the one above are common in preschool classrooms or daycare settings. As children in this age group are still developing basic social skills and conceptions of morality, this type of interaction may be dismissed as “no big deal” or just “kids being kids.” Most people would hesitate to label the young children in the aforementioned scene as “bullies” or “victims,” yet verbal and relational aggression have clearly taken place, and a child has been excluded and rejected.

Despite the frequency of these interactions or the rejection inherent in them, little emphasis has been placed on the implications of these early experiences. Further, there has been scarce attention paid to how early warning signs for later bullying may manifest in this age group. The recent increased attention to the harmful effects of bullying for school-aged children and adolescents, however, has led to a heightened awareness of the problem of peer victimization—and a recognition of the importance of identifying and mitigating early childhood risk factors for later bullying.

Understanding and addressing the root causes of bullying is profoundly important, given the sometimes devastating consequences to its victims. Participation in bullying behavior—both as a target as well as an aggressor—is a risk factor for suicide among adolescents (Bonanno & Hymel, 2010). Further, in addition to emotional and psychological consequences that have been well-documented, research has found that being subjected to exclusion and separation activates the same part of the brain that responds to physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). This empirical evidence suggests that even non-physical forms of bullying can be perceived as pain. Thus, rejection can—quite literally—hurt.

These findings have continued to motivate interest in identifying the early antecedents of bullying and developing effective interventions to address them. To date, little attention has been given to the relationship between early childhood experiences and bullying behaviors later in life. The existing body of research on bullying in older children and youth is critically important, yet the factors that contribute to a child’s engaging in bullying behaviors are likely experienced earlier in life. In fact, studies show that the spontaneous demonstration of bullying behavior among school-aged children is highly unlikely (Nagin & Tremblay, 1999; Broidy, Nagin, Tremblay, Bates, Brame, Dodge, Ferguson, et al., 2003), and the precursors of bullying behavior can be seen already in early childhood (Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Vlachou, Andreou, Botsoglou, & Didaskalou, 2011). We may be missing an important opportunity to identify and address the antecedents of bullying before these behaviors become organized and intentional (Fraser, Lee, Kupper, & Day, 2010; Storey & Slaby, 2013; Tremblay, et al., 2010).

At least some bullying behavior likely has roots in adverse childhood experiences, such as experiencing or witnessing violence, or neglect by caregivers. Other correlates of bullying may, on the surface, seem less severe than these experiences, yet they can also have a profound, negative effect on a child and increase his or her



likelihood of future involvement in bullying. These may include certain parental personality traits (e.g., lack of warmth or empathy), lack of time spent engaging with caregivers or family members, and exposure to certain media. Empirical evidence documenting the links between experiences in early childhood (defined here as birth to age five) and later bullying has only recently begun to emerge. Further, there are few interventions designed to mitigate or change the course of potential future bullying behavior starting in the early years.

This paper aims to address some of these gaps, by (1) summarizing what is currently known about the developmental trajectory and stability of bullying behavior over the course of a child's life, (2) identifying the early experiences and factors that provide the strongest evidence for contributing to later bullying behavior, and (3) describing promising strategies and evidence-based intervention models designed to prevent bullying by addressing these factors in early childhood. The material presented here can be used to inform the first iteration of a theoretical model of early bullying behavior and its developmental link to later bullying, as well as next steps for the research, policy, and practitioner communities.

What is bullying, and when does it begin?

Among school-aged children, bullying is characterized by: (1) aggressive behavior; (2) that is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated; and (3) that reflects an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim (Gladden et al., 2013). Forms of bullying can be categorized as “direct,” which includes physical attacks, threats, theft, and name-calling, or “indirect,” which includes gossip, lying, and exclusion (Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999). There are also established roles in bullying interactions: bullies, victims, bystanders, and bullies who are also victims themselves (bully-victims) (Alsaker & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2010; Sullivan, 2000; Levine & Tamburrino, 2013). Some victims have also been described as “aggressive victims” in that their behavior may provoke peer victimization, and when provoked, they retaliate with exaggerated hostility (Olweus, 2001).

Existing research articulates that a young child's aggressive behaviors become more organized into bullying-like behavior during the preschool years. These behaviors are similar to bullying in many ways but do not consistently adhere to the criteria used to define bullying among school-aged children. For example, bullying behavior among very young children may not be carried out consistently over time, or the dynamic between the two children or groups of children may not reflect a consistent imbalance of power (Lamb, Pepler, & Craig, 2009). Bullying behaviors in early childhood may not be as systematic, consistent, or organized as those of a school-aged child, which suggests that labeling a behavior as bullying in early childhood may be inappropriate or even inaccurate (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2003).

Thus, since the term “bullying” is specifically defined for behaviors associated with school-aged children, the development of aggression and how aggression becomes organized into bullying behavior may be a better frame for examining early warning signs among young children (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2003).

How do bullying and aggression evolve over time?

The development and trajectory of aggression in young children, and how aggression in early childhood is predictive of aggression and violent behavior later in life, are the topics of a wide body of research. Specifically, research has established that chronic, disruptive behaviors and physical aggression are observable in children as early as 17 months of age, and that the prevalence of a child's aggression remains stable through the early infant and toddler years (Tremblay, Nagin, Seguin, Zoccolillo, Zelazo, Bolvin, & Perusse, et al., 2010). Another study found no evidence that children demonstrated dramatic changes in their aggressive behaviors over time (i.e., children who demonstrated no or low levels of aggression at a young age did not spontaneously become aggressive in adolescence), suggesting that the children who are most at risk of becoming bullies may be identifiable in the early childhood years (Broidy et al., 2003).

Empirical work confirms the prevalence and predictive power of early warning signs for bullying. One study (Campbell, Spieker, Burchinal, Poe, & the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2006) found that both moderate and low levels of aggression in children that remained stable over time were predictive of bullying behavior problems in elementary school. In contrast, a moderate but decreasing trajectory of aggression was not associated with later bullying. Therefore, even low levels of aggression can be predictive of later social and bullying outcomes in childhood if the pattern of aggression remains stable over time. However, although it is understood that bullying is a form of aggression, not all aggression is or becomes bullying. Examining the

possible pathways and mediating factors a young child may experience that might catalyze their propensity for later bullying is discussed in the next section.

The roots of bullying: What does the research say?

To summarize the empirical evidence for the early childhood antecedents to bullying, we focused on the family-based factors affecting a child’s propensity to be involved in bullying—a logical approach, given that families (typically) play the most important role in a young child’s life. Although children of all ages can be influenced by multiple systems—including individual characteristics, school or neighborhood factors, and peers—by their nature, young children are uniquely tied to their caregivers and home environment. As children grow and develop, their world expands, as does the potential of other factors to influence their behavior; however, these other systems seem of secondary importance to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Still, nearly 60 percent of children under the age of five spend some or most of their day in care settings outside of their home (National Household Education Surveys, 2007), so it is important to take non-parental caregivers and early care and education settings into account as well. We thus place the greatest emphasis here on the relationships and experiences that are most prevalent and important in the early childhood years: parents, non-parental caregivers, and experiences in the home and early care/education environments.

In this section, we describe the research base for three primary risk factors of the parent and family system that appear most strongly related to a child’s involvement in bullying: (1) caregiver attachment, (2) parent behaviors and characteristics, and (3) maltreatment. We also address the effect of other environmental influences on young children, particularly: (4) early care and education settings, and (5) additional environmental factors (e.g., media exposure).

For each of the primary risk factors, we provide a brief overview of the construct and how it might relate to bullying and/or aggressive behaviors, followed by a summary of the research (both the general link between the construct and bullying, and findings specific to early childhood).

Attachment

Considerable attention has been given to the link between a child’s attachment style and concurrent or future difficulties with interpersonal relationships. Attachment theory, pioneered by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, posits that the early relationship between an infant and a primary caregiver serves as the foundation for the individual’s future interactions with others. Bowlby (1988) argued that through early experiences with our caregivers, we develop an “internal working model” of the world, through which we perceive, interpret, and react to all future situations. Observations of infant behaviors through the “Strange Situation” experiments led to the development of three distinct attachment classifications (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). These attachment styles are: (1) *secure* (occurring when caregivers have been consistent, responsive, and attentive to the needs of the child); (2) *insecure-ambivalent* (also referred to as “anxious-resistant”; occurring when caregivers have been inconsistent and unreliable in attending to or responding to the child’s needs); and (3) *insecure-avoidant* (also referred to as “anxious-avoidant”; occurring when caregivers have been inattentive or dismissive of the child’s needs) (Ireland & Power, 2004; Troy & Sroufe, 1987). (A fourth classification was later adopted—*disorganized*—to capture children whose attachment styles do not adhere to one of the primary profiles [Main & Solomon, 1990].)

The theory of “endemic anxious attachment” and its consequences for the social and emotional development of children represent an important new direction for early childhood research.

Why does attachment matter? According to attachment theory, securely attached infants develop a general sense of trust and security, giving them the confidence to explore and engage in new situations, the skills to regulate emotions and impulses, a sense of empathy, and a view of themselves as worthy (Levy & Orlans, 2000; Koiv, 2012). In contrast, insecurely (or anxiously) attached infants lack positive expectations of others and views of themselves, which may lead them to encounter new people or situations with a sense of distrust or hostility (Levy & Orlans, 2000). According to Levy and Orlans (2000), a secure attachment that develops between a caregiver and a child acts as the primary protection against the development of aggressive and violent behaviors, by allowing children to develop emotion/impulse regulation skills, prosocial behaviors and empathy, and a positive sense of self, to manage stress and adversity, and to create and maintain emotionally reciprocal relationships.

When this secure attachment process is disrupted, children may have difficulty moderating their feelings and developing positive relationships with others (Levy & Orlans, 2000).

In her outline of bullying's antecedents and interventions, VanderVen (2011) argues that early experiences with attachment play a critical role in a child's participation in bullying. She highlights the "...*crucial internal sense of being deeply cared for and protected*" (p. 88) as a key experience for children—the absence of which can create anxiety and insensitivity, as well as an inclination toward aggressive behavior. VanderVen has put forth the concept of "endemic anxious attachment" for consideration in understanding a young child's proclivity for "mean" behavior (2013). According to VanderVen (2011), attachment issues are experienced by a growing number of children today largely due to disrupted child-rearing practices. These disrupted or unstable situations may stem from challenges faced by parents (who may be single parents, unemployed, or in demanding jobs) that can result in children experiencing low-quality or "make-shift" child care. This may contribute to a child lacking a sense of attachment and belonging, resulting in less desirable social behavior on the part of the children—insensitivity to other's needs, the use of aggressive behavior to enhance feelings of safety, and the need to feel "in" by making others feel "out" (VanderVen, 2011). The theory of "endemic anxious attachment" and its consequences for the social and emotional development of children represent an important new direction for early childhood research—particularly given its recognition of changes in child rearing practices over time, and the realities and challenges faced by modern families.

How is attachment linked to bullying? A snapshot of the research:

In light of attachment theory's tenet that insecure attachment can help explain later interpersonal difficulties, many researchers have explored the connection between attachment style and aggressive behavior or bullying.



Our review of the literature suggests that an important relationship exists between attachment and bullying involvement. The bulk of the research in this area has examined the connection between attachment styles and bullying involvement in middle childhood or early adolescence, although some studies have focused on younger children. Studies of older children have repeatedly demonstrated a connection between a lower quality or level of attachment to caregivers and a higher likelihood of involvement in a bullying relationship (e.g., Marini, Dane, Bosacki, & YLC-CURA, 2006; Koiv, 2012; Walden & Beran, 2010). Notably, in addition to providing evidence that attachment may be correlated with bullying behavior, these studies also highlight the importance of considering attachment styles as a risk factor for being victimized.

Other research has also identified a relationship between attachment and bullying, though findings illuminate potential mediating variables in this relationship, suggesting a more complex dynamic between these factors. Children without the benefit of a secure parental attachment may expect others to be unpredictable or unresponsive to their needs, which affects how they interpret and respond to others' behavior and

interactions. They, for example, may mistakenly interpret hostile intent where there is none, and respond aggressively (Eliot & Cornell, 2009). In one study, middle school students with current insecure attachment profiles were significantly more likely to bully than their securely-attached peers, though this effect was mediated by the children's attitudes toward aggressive behavior; specifically, students with a self-reported preference for resolving conflict using physical aggression, or a bias towards erroneously attributing hostile intent on the part of others, demonstrated more peer bullying (Eliot & Cornell, 2009). Additionally, a study of college students retrospectively reporting on their parental attachment and aggressive behaviors found a positive relationship

between aggression and insecure attachment, through results varied by gender of the participant, gender of the parent, and type of aggression (Williams & Kennedy, 2012). Specifically, female participants with higher levels of attachment avoidance to their mothers and attachment anxiety with their fathers were more likely to be physically aggressive.¹ In addition, among females, higher levels of attachment anxiety to their mothers was associated with more relational aggression; similarly, males were more likely to engage in relational aggression² when they experienced higher levels of attachment anxiety to their fathers. These studies suggest an important interplay between attachment and bullying, with individual characteristics of children (such as gender and aggressive attitudes) possibly influencing the degree of the relationship.

What does the early childhood research say?

The prominent focus in the literature on the relationship between attachment and bullying in older children is perhaps not surprising, given that most cultural and academic attention has been paid to victimization occurring in this age group. Fewer studies have specifically focused on the relationship between insecure attachment and bullying (or pre-bullying) behavior in early childhood, and findings have been somewhat variable. Troy & Sroufe (1987) observed interactions between pairs of four- to five-year-olds whose attachment styles had been previously classified when they were toddlers. Researchers found that a child's attachment style was a consistent predictor of victimization occurring in an interaction with another child. Specifically, avoidant attachment history in a child was significantly related to victimization occurring in the pair, and all of the victimizers in this study had an avoidant attachment history. According to the authors, these findings suggest that children with an anxious-avoidant attachment history demonstrate an inclination to adopt a role that is familiar to what they have experienced in previous relationships (Troy & Sroufe, 1987).

Another early childhood study exploring the relationship between avoidant attachment and various externalizing behavior problems found no significant relationship between the two constructs, however (Fagot & Kavanaugh, 1990). Researchers found no differences in parents' ratings of problem behaviors between young children who were securely or insecurely attached, and no differences in observations of problem behaviors at home or in a playgroup setting between attachment styles of the children. Although they do not discredit a relationship between attachment and behavior, the authors argue that in light of these findings, caution should be used in making "clinical predictions" based on children's attachment styles (Fagot & Kavanaugh, 1990). Finally, another study, involving four- to six-year-olds, found that two-thirds of children classified as aggressors were found to have insecure attachment profiles, though the relationship between attachment and role (aggressor, victim, or defender) was also not significant (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2005).

That these two studies on the relationship between attachment style and aggressive behavior for preschool-aged children lack significant findings is notable, particularly in light of the more consistent findings regarding attachment and bullying for older children. The variation raises questions about possible methodological limitations (e.g., sample sizes) in the studies of early childhood populations, or perhaps highlights some of the challenges inherent in assessing bullying or pre-bullying behaviors with this young age group (briefly referenced earlier in the discussion of how "bullying" seems to differ for younger children).

¹According to the research summary presented in Williams & Kennedy (2012), attachment avoidance and anxiety refer to the quality of attachment styles of children. All infants form attachments to their primary caregiver and this attachment can be secure or insecure based on the quality of early interactions with the caregiver. Insecure/avoidant children may be antisocial, fail to show emotions, have increased instances of externalizing behavior, or fail to form close relationships with others. Insecure/anxious children may seek excessive attention from others, need constant reassurance, or engage in unhealthy social comparison.

²Relational aggression involves causing harm within relationships through manipulative behavior such as social exclusion or persecution (for example, the "silent treatment" or gossiping).

Given the multitude of studies documenting a significant relationship between insecure attachment and a likelihood of involvement in a bullying dynamic, it seems incumbent on the early childhood community to continue to explore this link, and to consider the influence and importance of caregiver attachment when designing interventions.

Summary of attachment's role in bullying:

The existing literature suggests that a child's attachment to his or her caregivers plays an important role in later interpersonal difficulties, but that there may be important interacting variables to consider (including the sex of the child and parent, and a child's feeling towards aggression). Further, our review of the literature found some disagreement as to which types of attachment styles may be correlated with various bullying roles (i.e., the bully, victim, or bully-victim), and inconsistency regarding the strength and significance of the relationship between insecure attachment and bullying. However, given the multitude of studies documenting a significant relationship between insecure attachment and a likelihood of involvement in a bullying dynamic, it seems incumbent on the early childhood community to continue to explore this link, and to consider the influence and importance of caregiver attachment when designing interventions.

Parent behaviors and characteristics

Another key antecedent of bullying involves parent behaviors and characteristics—such as discipline techniques, maternal mental health and empathy, and parents' involvement with their children.

Why do parents matter?

The importance of parent behaviors and characteristics on children's development is nearly indisputable. Even before a child is born, families set the stage for their development, which begins with adequate prenatal care and



a healthy pregnancy (Love et al., 2002). Families work to ensure that their young children receive adequate food, shelter, and medical attention (Langford, 2009), and also ensure that children live in safe and stimulating environments in which they can explore and learn (Cox & Harter, 2003). As children develop their skills and abilities through their relationships with those around them (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), the opportunity to form secure attachments with sensitive, nurturing parents (or other primary caregivers) is critical to both their cognitive and social-emotional growth (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969; Dykas & Cassidy, 2011). A lack of a warm, positive relationship with parents/caregivers increases the risk that children develop major behavioral and emotional problems, including substance abuse, antisocial behavior, and juvenile delinquency (Coie, 1996; Loeber & Farrington, 1998).

Thus, it follows that parent-centric factors may be important predictors for a child's involvement in bullying. Olweus (1996) concluded that parenting behaviors that include a lack of warm environment and parental empathy, such as a negative emotional attitude of the primary caregiver, can lead to bullying. Permissiveness of aggressive behavior by the primary caregiver is an additional factor, he argued, as well as the use of power-assertive parenting techniques, including physical punishment (Olweus, 1996).

How is parenting linked to bullying? A snapshot of the research:

As is the case with research on attachment's links to bullying, a great deal of the empirical work on parenting and bullying behavior involves school-aged children and adolescents. These studies have identified many parent-specific factors correlated with bullying behaviors, including: marital satisfaction, ability to cope with demands of parenthood, discipline styles/techniques, propensity to anger, depressive symptoms, social and emotional support, conversations/interactions with their children, and familiarity with children's friends (e.g., Curtner-Smith, 2000; Shetgiri, Lin, and Flores, 2012). Further, bullying has been found to correlate with children not participating in outings or activities with their family or having "friendly discussions" with parents (Curtner-Smith, 2000). Authors suggest that the findings support the importance of considering parents' own interpersonal skills (or lack thereof) as they relate to the relationship skills of their children, and that parent modeling may be critically important (Curtner-Smith, 2000).

Discipline techniques employed by parents may be a key correlate to children's aggressive and/or bullying behaviors—particularly with regards to the use of physical discipline. Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon (2000) found

that higher levels of bullying behavior in middle school students were associated with more frequent physical discipline at home, and with a lack of time spent with adults. These factors were significantly related to bullying behavior even after controlling for involvement with peers, suggesting that they operate independently of peer influence (Espelage et al., 2000).

What does the early childhood research say?

Specific to young children, research has documented a correlation between parental discipline styles and aggression in toddlers. Mothers of aggressive toddlers were found to use more dysfunctional discipline practices (i.e., lax or over-reactive discipline strategies) to address the pre-aggression behaviors of their toddlers (Del Vecchio & O'Leary, 2006). Research also supports a relationship between parental factors in early childhood and the likelihood of a child's employing aggressive and/or bullying behaviors in later years. A study found that that hostile/ineffective parenting and inconsistent parenting at age two predicted later indirect aggression, most notably for girls, and that this relationship remained significant even when accounting for low socioeconomic status (Vaillancourt, Miller, Fagbemi, & Tremblay, 2007). For boys, inconsistent parenting and reduced positive parent-child interactions were associated with higher use of indirect aggression (Vaillancourt et al., 2007).

Additionally, an exploration into the relationships between family factors for five-year-old boys and their later bullying involvement found that aggressive victims were exposed to more aggressive, violent, and hostile home environments at age five than any other group was (passive victims, non-victimized aggressors, and uninvolved children) (Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997). Non-victimized aggressors had more exposure to violent role models and marital conflict than uninvolved children; however, aggressive victims were more likely than non-victimized aggressors to have experienced direct victimization in their families (Schwartz et al., 1997). Finally, Bowes et al. (2009) found that family factors present at age five (including a child's being exposed to domestic violence and antisocial behavior of parents) were related to bullying by the time the child was seven, even after controlling for children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors. These studies highlight a strong link between early negative home and parenting experiences and later involvement in bullying.

Parental involvement and engagement with children in the early years of life also shows a connection to bullying behavior at older ages. Zimmerman, Glew, Christakis, and Katon (2005) found that cognitive stimulation (e.g., being played with or read to) and emotional support (e.g., having meals with both parents) at age four were each inversely associated with a child's bullying behavior at elementary school age. This finding suggests that these types of positive interactions between child and caregiver(s) may serve as protective factors to a child's later propensity for involvement in bullying.

Maternal characteristics specifically have also been shown to be a correlate to bullying behavior in preschool-aged children. Curtner-Smith et al. (2006) observed relational and overt bullying in four-year-olds, and determined that relational bullying in the preschool children was most closely related to parenting styles of mothers. Specifically, maternal empathy was the parenting characteristic most strongly associated with bullying of either type (relational or overt)—mothers who displayed less maternal empathy in their parenting had children who were more likely to be rated by their teachers as engaging in relational and overt bullying. Researchers also found that mothers' appropriate developmental expectations were inversely related to relational aggression—mothers who had less appropriate developmental expectations for their children had children who were more likely to engage in relational bullying. Additionally, mothers who scored higher on a measure of asserting power over their children (versus engendering independence) were more likely to have children who engaged in relational bullying than mothers with lower scores. The authors suggest that perhaps low maternal empathy leads to a deficiency in the mother's ability to react appropriately to and fulfill the needs of her children. Further,

Exposure to a variety of suboptimal parenting techniques, behaviors, or traits may be a risk factor for later bullying involvement (e.g., inappropriate discipline, hostility, low empathy); research also shows that positive parent-child interactions (encompassing cognitive stimulation or emotional support) correlate to a lower likelihood of bullying.

parents who are not in tune with the emotional needs of their children may parent in ways that are not conducive to children's developing their own empathic skills (Curtner-Smith et al., 2006).

What about the fathers?

It should be noted that our review of the literature highlighted a scarcity of focus on paternal characteristics and their impact on bullying behavior in early childhood. Rather, more studies appeared to both focus on and/or involve (i.e., as a data source) the mother. This is acknowledged as a notable void in the literature, which is perhaps related to cultural and historical conceptions of the mother as primary caretaker. However, the majority of children under 18 in the United States lived with two married parents in 2012 (64.1 percent), and 4 percent lived in father-only households that year (Child Trends DataBank, 2013). In addition to household composition data illustrating that the majority of children live with their fathers, many fathers also serve as the primary caregiver for their young children. Recent U.S. Census data show that of fathers with employed wives, 21 percent of those with preschool-aged children served as their children's primary child care provider in 2011 (Laughlin, 2013). Thus, paternal characteristics, behaviors, and parenting styles may be a critical, yet to our knowledge largely underexplored, area of investigation within the domain of research on the early childhood roots of bullying.

Summary of parenting's role in bullying:

These studies highlight the crucial role that parent characteristics and parenting behaviors play in a child's concurrent and future involvement in bullying. Exposure to a variety of suboptimal parenting techniques, behaviors, or traits may be a risk factor for later bullying involvement (e.g., inappropriate discipline, hostility, low empathy); research also shows that positive parent-child interactions (encompassing cognitive stimulation or emotional support) correlate to a lower likelihood of bullying. Findings provide additional weight to targeting and including parents in bullying prevention or remediation programs. It is apparent that the experiences of children in their homes, and the personalities and behaviors of their caregivers, are critical components of a child's current or subsequent experiences with his or her peers.

Child maltreatment

It is well-documented that child abuse and neglect correlate with negative outcomes across a wide range of domains throughout the lifespan, including emotional and mental health issues, academic problems, criminality, substance abuse, and interpersonal difficulties, to name just a few (e.g., Herrenkohl, Seunghye, Klika, Herrnkohl, & Russo, 2013; Widom & Maxfield, 1996; Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, & Howing, 1990). Of particular relevance to the early childhood community, federal data show that young children are particularly vulnerable to experiencing

maltreatment, with children aged zero to five years more likely than older children to be determined by child protective services agencies as victims of maltreatment (DeVooght, McCoy-Roth, & Freundlich, 2011). Further, the youngest children have the greatest risk of maltreatment, with children under one having the highest victimization rate of any other age group (U.S. DHHS, 2013). Given the heightened risk of maltreatment occurrence for the youngest children, combined with the known adverse effects for children of abuse or neglect at the hands of their caregivers, it is crucial to consider how these experiences in early childhood might influence later involvement in bullying behavior.

Why does maltreatment matter?

In addition to the negative effects of maltreatment outlined above, research has also repeatedly identified an association between physical abuse and aggressive behavior in children (Teisl & Cicchetti, 2008; Vandenberg & Marsh, 2009).

According to Teisl & Cicchetti (2008), children who have experienced physical abuse may be primed to interpret innocuous situations as hostile—constituting a “social information processing” error that in turn may contribute to a greater likelihood for aggressive behavior in these children. Additionally, Shields and Cicchetti (2001) argue that children may act in ways that can be considered adaptive for them in their homes, though these behaviors



may actually be dysfunctional in other contexts. In other words, ways of interacting with others and with their environment that could be successful survival skills in their stressful or violent home environments are elsewhere unsuccessful (Shields & Cichetti, 2001). Further, in concert with attachment theory, Shields and Cichetti (2001) assert that “children who are directly victimized by caregivers may develop working models of relationships as dangerous and malevolent” (p. 359). These schema may shape and influence their future peer relationships (Shields & Cichetti, 2001).

Further, early and persistent maltreatment can actually alter the physical structure of a child’s brain, resulting in developmental deficits in numerous areas, including social and emotional domains (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009). Combined with data showing that the youngest children are at the greatest risk of experiencing abuse and neglect (U.S. DHHS, 2013), it seems imperative that a theoretical model of the early childhood antecedents to later bullying acknowledge and incorporate maltreatment as a key construct.

How is maltreatment linked to bullying?

A snapshot of the research: In addition to evidence supporting a correlation between abuse and aggressive behavior in children, several studies have focused specifically on maltreatment as a correlate of bullying. To briefly summarize the body of research on older children, in one study, school-aged youth who had experienced maltreatment were found to be more likely to both engage in bullying behaviors as well as be victimized than their non-maltreated peers (Shields & Cichetti, 2001). In particular, children who were victims of physical or sexual abuse were at a higher risk for bullying than children who had experienced other maltreatment types (Shields & Cichetti, 2001). A similar result was found in a study exploring the relationship between “physical child harm” (encompassing both corporal punishment and physical child abuse) and bullying, where individuals who been subjected to physical harm by family members were more likely to have been involved in bullying than those who had not experienced physical harm (Dussich & Maekoya, 2007). Similar to Shields and Cichetti (2001), the authors suggest that techniques developed by children to cope with this type of maltreatment may impact their later involvement in bullying. Additionally, they note that the “social coping model” may help explain relationships wherein children who experience physical harm in their family may internalize a fight or flight response and project it onto other relationships (Dussich & Maekoya, 2007).

An exploration of the relationship between a history of family involvement with child protective services (CPS) and bullying involvement in adolescents (Mohapatra et al., 2010) showed that females who reported a history of CPS involvement were significantly more likely than their non-involved peers to report bullying (as the perpetrator). This same effect was not significant for males; however, both males and females who had been involved with CPS were significantly more likely than their non-involved peers to be victims of bullying. This study highlights the importance of considering gender and its potentially unique relationship to bullying pathways, similar to the role gender may play in attachment’s relationship to bullying.

What does the early childhood research say?

With respect to the early childhood population, a study by Bowes et al. (2009) found that child maltreatment assessed at age five was a significant predictor of involvement in bullying by age seven—as either a bully, victim, or bully-victim. Additionally, Schwartz et al. (1997) found that the experience of being physically harmed by parents or other adults, as assessed at age five, was a risk factor for being an aggressive victim or non-victimized aggressor in third or fourth grade. Although these studies suggest a link between maltreatment in the earliest years of a child’s life and later bullying involvement, the evidence base is small, and thus further research is warranted.

Summary of maltreatment’s role in bullying:

The research on the role of child maltreatment as an antecedent for bullying involvement documents a consistent relationship. The link between the two again argues for anti-bullying interventions to consider the caregiver-child relationship, and the experiences of the child at home. It is also important to acknowledge that child abuse and neglect may be a risk factor for future bullying behavior, but it is not prescriptive of such behavior. Although studies show that experiencing harm at the hands of one’s caregiver is a strong risk factor for future aggressive behavior or victimization, there is positive news in the research, in that a multitude of variables have been identified that may ameliorate maltreatment’s relationship to future involvement in bullying. Hong, Espelage, Grogan-Kaylor, and Allen-Meares (2011) identified three potential moderators to the relationship between maltreatment and bullying involvement: the quality of (1) the relationship between the parent and child,

(2) a child's relationship to peers, and (3) a child's relationship to teachers. Specifically, a secure relationship and attachment to a non-abusive parent or other supportive adult figure may promote self-confidence and reduce the risk of future antisocial behavior. Likewise, children who are victims of maltreatment may fare better if they avoid deviant peers and instead experience positive peer acceptance and social support. Teachers can influence the trajectory of bullying by promoting positive interactions among students and remaining aware of problem behaviors, and addressing them in a supportive manner. The authors also identified four potential mediators in this relationship—or factors that may explain or account for the relationship between maltreatment and bullying: (1) emotional dysregulation, (2) depression, (3) anger, and (4) deficits in social skills (Hong et al., 2011). These factors suggest key opportunities for the early childhood community to intervene in targeted ways for children who have been exposed to, or victimized by, maltreatment.

Early care and education environments

As noted above, the child's environment outside the home is the fourth major area identified as an important early childhood antecedent to bullying behavior—given the large proportion of children under the age of five who receive care outside of their home. However, we found a noticeable gap in the literature on this topic. Indeed, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD ECCRN)

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recently noted that “to our knowledge researchers have not yet examined child care experience in the first years of life as a predictor of relational aggression in middle childhood” (Spieker, Campbell, Vandergrift, Pierce, Cauffman, Susman, Roisman, 2012, p. 358).

While there is a gap in research exploring specific connections between child care participation and bullying, studies do explore the relationship between child care participation and a broader category of externalizing behavior problems. The NICHD ECCRN published a controversial study that indicated that though parental influences were the strongest and most predictive of children's development, children's exposure to higher dosage and intensity (i.e., more days a year and for longer hours) of child care (particularly during infancy) was predictive of externalizing behavior problems (i.e., “fearful and anxious,” “hits others,” “disobedient”) throughout elementary

school (Belsky, Burchinal, McCartney, Vandell, Clarke-Stewart, & Owen, 2007). Since the release of the Belsky, et al. (2007) findings and the release of the NICHD ECCRN 15-year-old follow-up (Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2010; which continued to demonstrate findings similar to Belsky, et al., 2007), a number of studies have sought to further examine the NICHD ECCRN findings.

Recently, studies have found a lack of connection between time spent in non-parental care in early childhood and behavioral or emotional problems later in life, and these have been replicated with large populations of children in both Australia and Norway (Claessens & Chen, 2013; Zachrisson, Dearing, Lekhal, Toppelberg, 2013). The Australian study clarified that the time spent in child care was not as predictive of later behavior problems as was the multiplicity of care arrangements and lack of attachment between a child and a consistent caregiver (Claessens & Chen, 2013). The Norway study emphasized that the quality of care was a stronger predictor—children who spent more time in low-quality care were more likely to demonstrate externalizing behavior problems later in childhood (Zachrisson et al., 2013). Other studies have also found that participation in high quality child care can in fact mitigate behavior problems later in life, especially for low-income boys (Campbell & Ramey, 1995; Reynolds, 1999; Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield, & Nores, 2005; Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Maldonado-Carreño, Li-Grining, & Chase-Lansdale, 2010). Though the authors in the aforementioned studies did not explicitly examine the quality of the teacher-child interactions in early care settings, other studies have demonstrated that low quality care is characterized by poor caregiver-child interactions, and that poor

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caregiver-child relationships in early childhood are associated with poor behavioral outcomes later in life (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

The mixed findings with regard to the role of quantity and quality of care on later aggression and externalizing behaviors suggests that we may not yet have a strong enough evidence base of the influence early childhood care experiences may have on bullying later in life. Researchers examining this issue commented that as such, *“the mechanisms leading from quantity of care to individually elevated aggression to diffusion of this aggression... remains a black box. In fact, the NICHD ECCRN team felt themselves puzzled by the ‘developmental mystery’ of the relation between quantity of childcare and aggression”* (Linting & Van IJzendoorn, 2009, p.242).

Other environmental influences

Though the degree and direction of the role that child care providers and settings have on bullying later in life is not quite clear, the literature is teeming with other environmental factors that have been shown to correlate with a likelihood of aggressive or bullying behavior in children, including: exposure to negative peer influences; (e.g., Espelage et al., 2000), neighborhood safety concerns or issues (e.g., Bowes et al., 2009; Espelage et al., 2000; Shetgiri et al., 2012), and lower socioeconomic status (e.g., Bowes et al., 2009; Schwartz et al., 1997; Vaillancourt et al., 2007). Although we will not explore each of these environmental variables in depth, it is evident that the impact of these factors must be included in any theoretical model for the early childhood antecedents to bullying.

The role of bias as a precursor to bullying behaviors is another significant consideration. This area of study is just emerging, particularly with younger children. However, studies of gender stereotypes have found that children as young as three to six years of age have well-developed gender stereotypes that affect how they treat their peers in social situations (Theimer, Killen, & Stangor, 2001). Theimer, Killen, and Stangor (2001) demonstrate that often children exclude peers during play based on stereotypic beliefs about gender roles (e.g., “Boys don’t play with dolls; girls don’t play with trucks.”).



Research on the development of other types of bias, such as racial bias, in early childhood is scarce. Although research demonstrates that young children develop racial discernment and “in group” preferences and attachments, this is described as developmental in nature for the most part, and these preferences tend to disperse by age seven and reemerge in adolescence, but for different reasons (Aboud, 2003; Castelli, Zogmaister, & Tomelleri, 2009; Kowalski, 2006; Raabe & Beelman, 2011; Sinclair, Dunn, & Lowery 2005).

Research on older children exploring the link between bullying behaviors and bias or prejudice on the basis of personal characteristics such as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, or disability is more prevalent. In one study of data from 17,366 youth assessments in two states, bias-based harassment at school was associated with compromised health of the victims (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2011). Another study examined the relationship of prejudice related to sexual orientation to

biased language use and associated bullying (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). While there were differences between boys and girls, overall the study found that sexual prejudice served as a moderator for the intensity of biased language use, and that such language was associated with increased bullying, underscoring the need to address biased language and prejudice as part of anti-bullying programs. Scherr & Larson (2010) found that differences based on race, ethnicity, and immigration status are often the basis for bullying ranging from direct aggression, such as taunting and derogatory remarks, to indirect aggression, such as social exclusion. However, further research is needed to better understand the influence of students’ social environments on their attitudes and participation in discriminatory bullying.

Also of particular relevance to young children and later bullying may be **exposure to television (TV) and other electronic media**. While children experience diverse media platforms – including TV, computers, video games, and mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones – at ever younger ages (Kirkorian, Wartella, & Anderson, 2008; NAEYC & Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media, 2012), we focus here on research concerned with television media. There has been much concern about the negative impact of TV-watching, both

in terms of quantity and content of the shows (Levin, 2013). Specifically with regards to bullying, Zimmerman et al. (2005) found a correlation between the amount of TV-watching at age four and later bullying behavior in elementary school, with more hours of TV watched predicting a greater likelihood of bullying. The authors suggest that even if the content is not violent, children may witness antisocial behavior (such as people being disrespectful toward others), which could serve as a model for verbal aggression that would constitute bullying behavior (Zimmerman et al., 2005). An additional study assessing media exposure (by type and dosage) and behavior in preschoolers found that more time spent watching television was associated with greater relational aggression for girls, and greater physical aggression for boys (Ostrov, Gentiel, & Crick, 2006)—even though the study population watched primarily educational programming. According to the authors, this suggests that even educational programming may model relationally aggressive behaviors for young children. Further, there seem to be differential impacts of content by gender, with boys possibly absorbing and internalizing what they see on the programs differently than girls (Ostrov et al., 2006).

In contrast, studies have also demonstrated the potentially positive effects of exposure to media on social skills (Mares & Woodard, 2005; Wilson, 2008). Two popular shows targeted at young children – *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* – have been rigorously researched (Anderson, D.R., Huston, A.C.; Schmitt, K.L.; Linebarger, D.L.; & Wright, J.C., 2001; Coates, Pusser, & Goodman, 1976). Children who watched *Sesame Street* episodes with pro-social messages were more likely to demonstrate cooperating, helping, and sharing behaviors than children who did not watch (Zielinska & Chambers, 1995). Similarly, in comparison with children not exposed to the show, young children who regularly viewed *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* showed higher levels of self-control and improved prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, nurturance, and ability to verbalize feelings (Friedrich & Stein, 1973). Research generally supports the conclusion that content – *what* the child views – is as important as, if not more important than, how much time is spent watching TV, and that real world guidance from adults is key to avoiding the development of anti-social or aggressive behaviors (Kirkorian, Wartella, & Anderson, 2008 ; NAEYC & Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media, 2012).

It is apparent that a variety of external factors, including peers, neighborhood, socio-economic status, and the media, may be critical to a child's propensity to be involved in bullying. These variables should be acknowledged and incorporated into the design and implementation of interventions.

Summary

In this section, we have described a substantial body of research evidence for three potential early childhood antecedents to bullying: (1) attachment, (2) parenting, and (3) maltreatment. We have also briefly highlighted the influence of (4) early care and education settings and (5) other environmental factors that have clear implications for children's social and emotional development. Taken together, the research evidence points to the crucial role that parents, caregivers, and the home environment play in a child's propensity toward involvement in bullying. Findings from the studies reviewed underscore the key early influences that a child's parents/caregivers have on a child's subsequent social interactions. The involvement of parents and/or other caregivers, therefore, is arguably an essential (if not the most the critical) component of a successful bullying prevention or intervention program for young children.

Building on this research base, in the next section we address the question of what can be done. We review promising practices for addressing or preventing “mean” or aggressive behavior in preschool-aged children, and summarize a set of intervention approaches that have been found to be effective in addressing parent-child dynamics, and mitigating or reducing incidences of bullying.

How can early bullying be prevented and addressed?

Our review of the research indicates that families, parents, and caregivers matter—and matter a great deal—to a child’s propensity for involvement in aggressive or bullying behavior. Young children obviously rely heavily on the adults in their lives—to a degree that, in most situations, will lessen as the child ages. Thus, the early years present a unique opportunity to take advantage of a variety of caregiver-child relationships and social settings (at home, in preschools, daycares, playgrounds, etc.), in which modeling, teaching, and reinforcing pro-social behaviors, empathy, and kindness can take place. In this section, we provide a brief overview of promising strategies for reducing aggressive or exclusionary behavior in early childhood populations, including highlighting several practice resources, followed by a summary of two evidence-based interventions for young children to reduce bullying later in life. The interventions presented here are largely programmatic in nature and focused on promoting protective factors and contexts for young children. A broader, more societal shift will likely be needed to address the contextual risk factors presented earlier in this paper.

Promising practices and strategies for early childhood care and education settings

“You Can’t Say You Can’t Play”

The opening vignette of this paper describes an all-too common interaction in preschool environments, where a child (or group of children) rejects another’s request to play. Even an isolated incident may be hurtful and significant to the excluded child. Vivian Gussin Paley, a former preschool and kindergarten teacher, describes her innovative approach to preventing exclusionary play behaviors in preschoolers by changing the attitudes of the classroom as a whole, rather than focusing on the behaviors of individual children, in her book, *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* (Paley, 1993).

Paley writes of the emotional struggles of excluded children, and describes the origins of her idea to implement a rule in her preschool classroom that says children are not allowed to exclude other children from their play activities: the rule is, simply, “You can’t say you can’t play.” She also developed a fairy tale to share with the children, woven throughout her book, designed to help them understand and explore the emotional consequences of exclusion. Paley held group discussions about the rule with children in other grades (k-5) at the school, and garnered a variety of reactions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, while children who are typically excluded and rejected by their peers were in favor of the new rule, the children who were not typically excluded/rejected or who engaged in the excluding/rejecting objected to the new rule. In general, the children expressed doubt that the rule would be effective. Ultimately, Paley implemented the rule in her classroom. In her book, she describes the success achieved, and the positive changes she observed in the children and class dynamic.

An intervention centered around *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* was evaluated by Harrist and Bradley (2003), though results were mixed, suggesting more research is warranted to determine the effectiveness of this type of classroom-wide program. Specifically, the results of what the authors describe as a “pilot study” showed that children in intervention classrooms reported that they liked to play with each other more than the children in control classrooms (i.e., the classrooms not receiving the intervention) did; however, no significant differences were found between the two groups in teacher reports or observations. Also, unexpectedly, children in the intervention classrooms reported higher “social dissatisfaction” scores when compared to control classrooms. The authors note that the small sample size, short duration of the intervention, and lack of assessment of the fidelity to the intervention design are all important methodological considerations (Harrist & Bradley, 2003).

Promoting safe and welcoming classrooms

Although Paley’s classroom code of conduct has not been rigorously evaluated, her experiences and observations of its effects on her kindergarteners are notable, and have garnered the attention and interest of the early childhood community. As an example, a practitioner guide, *The Anti-Bullying and Teasing Book for Preschool Classrooms*, (Sprung, Froschl, & Hinitz, 2005) is based on the ideas Paley put forth in *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* (1993). The handbook focuses on helping preschool teachers create a classroom environment that prevents bullying and engenders a safe, welcome setting for all of the children. The book provides sample letters for children’s families to facilitate their support and involvement in reinforcing the themes presented in the classroom (aligning with research findings underscoring the critical role parents and the home environment play in preventing bullying).

Each chapter of the handbook presents overall themes to incorporate into the classroom, as well as structured activities to reinforce each of the four themes: (1) *Community*, (2) *Feelings*, (3) *Friendship*, and (4) *Teasing and Bullying*. The *Feelings* theme, for example, involves helping children identify and understand a range of emotions, and how their behaviors and emotions impact the feelings and behaviors of others—with a particular focus on how it feels to be left out of or excluded from activities. Structured activities proposed in the *Feelings* section include having the class write and sing a song together that gives examples of behaviors that make children feel welcome or unwelcome.

Similarly, *Eyes on Bullying in Early Childhood* (Storey & Slaby, 2013; <http://preventingbullying.promoteprevent.org/preventing-bullying-in-early-childhood>) presents a resource for early childhood educators to help them identify, prevent, or de-escalate bullying among their students and instead foster positive interactions. This report discusses how bullying develops in early childhood, provides activities to help children develop social skills to prevent and stop bullying, helps teachers learn how to take advantage of teachable moments, and provides information on developing an action plan for intervention. A toolkit designed for parents, caregivers, educators, and healthcare providers who work with children and youth in homes, early childhood programs, schools (k-12), afterschool and youth programs, camps, and healthcare settings is also available (<http://www.eyesonbullying.org/pdfs/toolkit.pdf>).

Another resource, developed by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, tackles the roots of bullying embedded in bias towards the many types of diversity found in our communities, including LGBT families and individuals.

Taking a preventive approach, *Welcoming Schools* (<http://www.welcomingschools.org/>) provides training, tools, lesson plans, and other resources for elementary schools on embracing family diversity, avoiding gender stereotypes, and ending bullying and name-calling. Training for school staff focuses on how to respond to students' questions about sexual identity and help students develop the skills and confidence to respond to hurtful comments. Lesson plans for K-3 cover topics including *What is a Family?*, *Looking at Family Diversity*, and *Tree of Caring and Caring Community "Family Trees"* (which graphically demonstrates how children are connected to those that care for them). A key component of *Welcoming Schools* includes working directly with families. Tools include film showings to prompt family and community dialog, a panel-discussion planning guide, thematic book bags (book, prop, and activity kits for home use), and resources on answering children's tough questions. While not yet rigorously evaluated, this anti-bullying approach holds great promise. For example, a 2007-2008 pilot of *Welcoming Schools* in three San Francisco elementary schools found significant, positive changes in school personnel's gender role beliefs and comfort in discussing topics related to gender identity and sexual orientation. However, changes to student attitudes or behaviors were not assessed (Center for LGBTQ Evidence Based Applied Research, 2008).



Guidance and problem-solving

Another practitioner resource focused on promoting prosocial, positive development in young children is the *"Guidance Matters"* column in the journal *Young Children* (published on the National Association for the Education of Young Children website), primarily authored by former Head Start teacher and professor Dan Gartrell. Gartrell (2005) defines the concept of "guidance" as "the commitment a teacher makes to teaching children how to solve their problems rather than punishing them for having problems they haven't learned how to solve." Several over-arching themes of Gartrell's work include involving family in strategies to overcome problem behaviors, communicating clearly and respectfully with both the child and their family, and incorporating developmentally appropriate practices into the classroom. Columns that may be of particular interest to early childhood education practitioners seeking strategies to prevent and address bullying or pre-bullying behavior in their classrooms include: "Fostering Resilience: Teaching social-emotional skills" (http://www.naeyc.org/yc/files/yc/file/201407/YC0714_Guidance_Matters.pdf), "Aggression, the Prequel: Preventing the need" (http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/201111/Guidance%20Matters_Online_1111.pdf), and "Swearing and Words That Hurt" (<http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200711/BTJGuidance.pdf>).

A 2008 *Guidance Matters* column was devoted entirely to the theme of bullying (“Understand Bullying,” Gartrell & Gartrell, 2008; https://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200805/BTJ_Guidance_Bullying.pdf). The authors assert that preschool can be a stressful time for children, as they are in a new environment outside of the family unit with an unfamiliar social hierarchy, and are exposed to the new ideas of social acceptance and rejection. Gartrell and Gartrell (2008) call upon ideas presented by Paley (1993), and Sprung, Froshl, and Hinitz (2005), that addressing and preventing bullying in the classroom should be proactive and comprehensive—not limited to addressing isolated incidences. Establishing a culture of respect in the classroom that recognizes and celebrates individual differences and commonalities is important for preventing and mitigating bullying, they note, as is addressing the underlying emotional causes behind acts of bullying in individual children. Gartrell and Gartrell (2008) also advise teachers to address incidents of bullying by helping the bully and victim find alternative ways to resolve conflicts that are more socially responsible, and to seek insight into the underlying causes behind the bullying that may be unrelated to the situation in which aggression was carried out. They present the idea of “liberation teaching,” which emphasizes that comforting the victim and punishing the bully perpetuates the bully-victim cycle; instead, it is important for the teacher to help each child express their feelings about the situation, and to teach the bully that those behaviors will not help to establish an identity within the classroom group (Gartrell & Gartrell, 2008).

Promoting kindness and compassion

Children undergo a tremendous evolution in their social and emotional awareness and skills in the first few years of life (e.g., Halle, 2002). The early childhood years thus represent a critical period in which to help children develop positive, adaptive, and healthy socio-emotional capabilities, such as empathy, kindness, concern for others, perspective-taking, and compassion—traits at odds with the intentional harm to others inherent in bullying behavior. Children’s media pioneer and child development expert Fred Rogers (of the famed *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* television series) used his platform to bring the social and emotional development of young children to the forefront. Through embracing and celebrating differences, affirming emotional experiences, and welcoming all into a “neighborhood,” *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* nurtured empathy and self-esteem in children at an early age. In light of research showing the importance of a child’s early relationships for later interpersonal skills, coupled with the recognition that the preschool years are a critical period in a child’s socio-emotional development, Mr. Rogers’ work has particular relevance for preventing and addressing bullying in young children. In her presentation, “Development and intervention into ‘mean’ and bullying behavior,” VanderVen (2013) stressed the importance of several of Mr. Roger’s teachings and philosophies in preventing and addressing early bullying behavior, including: validating children’s feelings (e.g., anger), providing unconditional acceptance to children, treating others with mercy, helping children to feel safe, understood, and special, and encouraging inclusiveness and diversity in play.

In concert with research on media exposure described earlier, indicating the potentially negative influence that media may have on the behavior of young children, of particular interest to the early childhood community may be the work of The Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media, at St. Vincent College. The Center’s website features a blog and several publications discussing the developmentally appropriate uses of media in early childhood, with an emphasis on using media to establish interpersonal connections. The mission of the Center and the blog were recently revised to expand to a broader emphasis on social and emotional development in young children—or as they note on their home page (www.fredrogerscenter.org), “...to focus on helping children grow as confident, competent, and caring human beings.”

The topic of engendering kindness and compassion in children has recently gained attention in the popular media as well, including in a *Washington Post* article providing guidance to parents: “Are you raising nice kids? A Harvard psychologist gives 5 ways to raise them to be kind” (Joyce, 2014). The article summarizes five strategies for raising “moral, caring children” from the *Making Caring Common Project* at Harvard University, including prioritizing care for others, and providing opportunities for children to practice these desired behaviors. Taken as a whole, it appears that there are a growing number of resources available through the mainstream media for parents, caregivers, and others interested in promoting and supporting the development of empathy and compassion in young children.

Evidence-based early childhood interventions

In addition to the practitioner and parent resources outlined above, it is important to highlight evidence-based interventions for addressing and preventing risk factors for bullying in young children. The five interventions

summarized in this section are designed to support children ages birth to eight. Two are designed primarily to promote positive parenting techniques, including the Incredible Years Series, which focuses on reducing aggression in young children, and the ACT Raising Safe Kids program, which focuses on reducing child maltreatment. Three are universal programs intended for use in early childhood classroom settings: Al's Pals: Kids Making Healthy Choices, PATHS for Preschool, and Second Step, all of which help promote children's emotional and social competencies and help prevent social conflict and aggression. Al's Pals and the PATHS program also offer a suite of resources for parents, and Second Step has been found to improve classroom climate by enhancing teacher capacity to support children's development in this area.



Al's Pals: Kids Making Healthy Choices

What is it? Al's Pals (see <http://wingspanworks.com/healthy-al/>) is a comprehensive curriculum and teacher training program that develops social-emotional skills, self-control, problem-solving abilities, and healthy decision-making in children ages three to eight. The program specifically aims to address or prevent bullying behavior and the peer rejection that often accompanies bullying. Al's Pals teaches children to express feelings appropriately, control impulses, show empathy, establish friendships, and solve problems peacefully. Al's Pals helps children on the receiving end of bullying by giving them the skills to assert themselves, and encourages potential passive bystanders to care about the feelings of others and not tolerate hurtful behavior.

How does it work? The program consists of a 46 lessons lasting 10 to 15 minutes each, with two lessons presented per week over a 23-week period. The interactive lessons, delivered by trained classroom teachers, use guided creative play, brainstorming, puppetry, original music, role plays, and movement activities. Each lesson has specific resilience-based learning objectives, and includes narratives, puppet scripts, songs, and activities based on real-life early childhood experiences. Between the lessons, educators help children practice and generalize skills in daily classroom interactions, which are reinforced by posters, photographs, and music provided with the curriculum materials. Ongoing communication with parents is also part of Al's Pals. Teachers regularly send parents letters to update them about the skills the children are learning, suggest home activities to reinforce these concepts, and inform parents about their child's progress.³

What does the evidence say? Research to date includes a multi-year, multi-state evaluation of the effectiveness of the Al's Pals: Kids Making Healthy Choices early childhood prevention program. Lynch, Geller, & Schmidt (2004) noted significant improvements in Al's Pals participants' prosocial behaviors and social independence, as well as reductions in their problem behaviors, antisocial/aggressive and social withdrawal behaviors. Specifically, the Al's Pals evaluation data demonstrate that the intervention helps to prevent increases in antisocial and aggressive behavior that might otherwise occur in young children participating in early childhood programs over a period of time. This finding is tremendously important relative to mixed findings regarding the effects on the social and emotional development of children enrolled in center-based care of varying quality (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009).

Incredible Years

What is it? The Incredible Years (IY) Series (see <http://incredibleyears.com/>) is a set of training programs designed for parents, teachers, and children ages birth to 12 years, to help children with ADHD or conduct/behavioral disorders.

- **For parents:** The "BASIC" parenting programs target four key timeframes in a child's development: birth to eight months, one to three years, three to six years, and six to 12 years. The goals of the parenting programs are to improve parent-child interactions, build positive relationships and attachment, and improve parenting skills related to nurturing, communication, and problem solving. Parents can also participate in "ADVANCE"

³ Information provided here was collected and adapted from the Al's Pal evidence summary prepared by the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP; see <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=116>) and the Al's Pals website (<http://wingspanworks.com/bullying/>).

topical learning modules designed to address depression and anger management, develop attentive parenting skills, and build skills to support their child's school readiness.

- **For children:** There are two programs for children: a small group program for children ages four to eight, and a classroom-based “Child Dinosaur” program for children ages three to eight. Both programs are designed to reduce early childhood aggression, and promote pro-social behavior, social-emotional development, problem solving, and communication skills.
- **For teachers:** Teachers of young children can also participate in a classroom management program. The goal of the teacher program is to improve teacher-student relationships, and to support teachers in developing proactive classroom management skills and effective communication skills with families.

How does it work? The program is delivered to parents, children, and teachers through a variety of interactive approaches. Parents and teachers participate in small groups with two trained facilitators to discuss individual or group challenges and problem solving strategies. Parents and teachers also engage in individual coaching and feedback sessions, video discussions, goal-setting, and homework. Children work in small groups with trained facilitators, and work through a series of curriculum modules on topics such as following rules, cooperation, expressing emotions, problem solving, anger management, and strategies for making friends.

What does the evidence say? Several experimental design evaluations have been conducted on the IY series to assess the program's efficacy. The classroom-based “Child Dinosaur” program had a significant impact on reducing aggression and promoting pro-social behaviors among young children (four to eight years old; Webster Stratton & Hammond, 1997; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 1999; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2004). Children whose parents participated in the parent program also benefitted. Evaluations demonstrated that children ages four to eight whose parents participated in the BASIC parent program with or without the additional ADVANCE learning modules showed a reduction in aggressive behavior as compared to the control group immediately following the intervention and at the three year follow-up (Reid, Webster-Stratton, & Hammond, 2003; Beauchaine, Webster-Stratton, & Reid, 2005).

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) for Preschool

What is it? The PATHS curriculum (see <http://www.pathseducation.com/what-is-paths/paths-curriculum>) is a comprehensive, preventive program that promotes emotional and social competencies, aimed at reducing aggression and behavior problems in preschool through elementary school-aged children, while also enhancing the educational process in the classroom. The PATHS Preschool/Kindergarten curriculum, designed for children three to six years of age, supports the development of self-control, positive self-esteem, emotional awareness, basic problem-solving skills, social skills, and friendships. The curriculum is designed for educators and counselors to be used over time in a multi-year, universal prevention model. PATHS is primarily focused on the school and classroom settings, however information and activities are also provided for use with parents.

How does it work? The PATHS curriculum consists of 20- to 30-minute lessons taught two to three times per week. The program provides teachers with systematic, developmentally-based lessons, materials, and instructions to facilitate their students' emotional literacy, self-control, social competence, positive peer relations, and interpersonal problem-solving skills. Skills and concepts are developed through direct instruction, class discussion, modeling, storytelling, role-playing activities, and video presentations. The main objective of promoting these developmental skills is to prevent or reduce behavioral and emotional problems.

What does the evidence say? While there have been numerous studies of the elementary school version of PATHS, thus far only a single study has evaluated the PATHS preschool intervention (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007). While effect sizes were small, this study found significant positive effects across three domains: *emotional knowledge*, *internalizing behaviors*, and *social-emotional competence*. For *emotional knowledge*, when compared with children who did not receive the program, children in the PATHS Preschool intervention demonstrated a larger receptive emotion vocabulary and were better at identifying feelings. The program also significantly improved children's ability to correctly identify the feelings of others who are angry (e.g. they demonstrated reduced “anger bias”). With respect to *internalizing behaviors*, by the end of the school year, preschool children exposed to PATHS Preschool were significantly less likely to be described by their teachers as anxious, withdrawn, or lacking friends. *Social-emotional competence* also improved. Following the intervention,

PATHS Preschool teachers described their students as significantly more cooperative (though only for children with higher levels of verbal ability), emotionally aware, and interpersonally skilled following the program. In addition, parents of preschool children who received the PATHS program reported greater social and emotional competence than did parents of children in comparison classrooms.⁴

Raising Safe Kids

What is it? The Adults and Children Together (ACT) Against Violence Raising Safe Kids (see <http://actagainstviolence.apa.org/>) program teaches positive parenting skills to parents and caregivers of children from birth to age eight. Raising Safe Kids is primarily designed for families at risk for child maltreatment to promote positive parenting approaches for the success of the family and the long-term success of the child. The intervention focuses on positive parenting strategies also as a method for reducing children's externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and bullying.

How does it work? The curriculum is delivered typically in eight, two-hour sessions by trained facilitators. Each session covers a different topic such as: understanding children's behaviors; young children's exposure to violence; understanding and controlling parents' anger; and discipline for positive behaviors.

What does the evidence say? One recent evaluation study specifically examined the association between parent hostility and children's later bullying behavior, and the impact of Raising Safe Kids on reducing children's bullying behavior (Burkhart, 2013). The experimental study included 92 participants between the ages of four and 10. Parents in the experimental group completed a pre-test assessment of their own and their child's behaviors, and then participated in the eight parenting sessions and completed a post-test assessment. Parents who participated in the Raising Safe Kids program reported a significant decrease in bullying behavior among their children following participation in the program. In addition, a significant relationship was found between parental hostility and bullying behavior, suggesting that reduced parental hostility toward children can help to prevent child bullying behaviors.



Second Step

What is it? Second Step (see <http://www.cfchildren.org/second-step>) is a universal classroom-based social-skills program for children ages four to 14. The program teaches socioemotional skills with the goal of reducing impulsive and aggressive behavior while increasing social competence. Children are taught to identify and manage their own emotions as well as to understand others' emotions. Second Step guides children to reduce impulsiveness and emotion-driven decision making while also teaching them to make positive goals. The Second Step model combines cognitive

behavioral intervention models with social learning theory, empathy research, and social information-processing theories. The program is implemented on various platforms, including in-school curricula, parent training, and skill development (National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices [NREPP], 2014).⁵

How does it work? Second Step Early Learning (for children ages four to five) offers 28 lessons covering five units: Skills for Learning; Empathy; Emotion Management; Friendship Skills and Problem Solving; and Transition to Kindergarten. Foundational skills for emotion identification and anger management are embedded within the lessons in developmentally appropriate ways. Second Step lessons are presented weekly, and last approximately 25 minutes. Each lesson uses scripts, photo cards, puppets, classroom posters, "listening rules" cards, and feelings cards to introduce key concepts to the students. Questions invite discussions designed to promote perspective-taking and, as the lesson progresses, elicit from the children specific strategies they could use for dealing with the illustrated situations. Teachers model the key skills, and children practice specific self-regulatory strategies and behavioral skills through role-playing and other classroom activities. Strategies for teachers related to cueing, coaching, and acknowledging the targeted behaviors are included in program materials, as well as guidance on integrating lesson content with the academic program.

⁴ Information provided here was adapted from the PATHS evidence summary prepared by the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP; see <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/Viewintervention.aspx?id=2>)

⁵ The NREPP evidence summary presented studies completed with children ages 6-12 years. See below for information on studies with younger children.

What does the evidence say? Research with elementary school children participating in the Second Step program has demonstrated that, for children as young as kindergarten-age, rates of prosocial behavior improved, and instances of antisocial or aggressive behavior decreased (Frey, Nolen, Edstrom, & Hirschstein, 2005). In a preliminary study of the early learning curriculum (Upshur, Wenz-Gross, & Reed, 2013), researchers demonstrated impacts on classroom quality, however a number of factors (including small sample size) prevented the researchers from exploring changes to teacher-reported problem behaviors or social skills. Still, they concluded that the curriculum holds great promise, and went on to secure funds for a larger and more rigorous evaluation of the early learning Second Step curricula. A randomized control trial following children from preschool into kindergarten is currently being performed by the University of Massachusetts Medical School, led by Dr. Carole Upshur, under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences (for more information, see: <http://www.umassmed.edu/news/news-archives/2014/01/umms-researchers-examine-how-preschoolers-develop-social-emotional-skills/>).

Summary and next steps

This paper provided an overview of risk factors in early childhood for later involvement in bullying, and summarized a variety of strategies, interventions, and guidance for parents, caregivers, teachers, and others for addressing and preventing aggressive behavior in young children. We first discussed important research on the stability of aggression over time, and the development of bullying behavior. While a theoretical model that articulates the developmental trajectory of a bully from early childhood into adolescence or adulthood does not exist, patterns of aggression that may lead to bullying are evident early in life. Next, our review of the literature on the early childhood correlates of bullying uncovered substantial support for the role of several major factors: (1) attachment, (2) parental behaviors and characteristics, and (3) child maltreatment. Taken together, research suggests that a child's relationship with his or her caretakers is absolutely critical to consider when exploring the roots of later involvement in bullying (in some cases, as either victim or bully). Based on the robust support of the research for an association between the relational dynamics of children and their caretakers and subsequent or later aggressive or bullying behavior, interventions with the early childhood population should include a keen focus on improving, strengthening, or maintaining these essential relationships.

Additionally, we explored the influence of (4) early care and education settings and (5) other environmental factors (in particular, media exposure and the precursor of bias) on bullying behavior. Research on the role of non-parental caregivers and settings on later bullying is limited, underscoring a substantial gap in the literature. Nevertheless, the role of peers, neighborhood characteristics, socioeconomic factors, media exposure, and bias have all been identified as correlated to bullying. So, these factors external to the child-parent relationship should not be ignored for this young population, even if some of these factors (such as peer relationships) may have greater relevance to school-aged children or adolescents.

There are a number of evidence-based approaches that have been found to be effective in addressing aggression in early childhood, as well as promising practices and strategies for teachers, parents, and other caregivers to promote prosocial, compassionate behavior in children. Ideas for classroom interventions and activities put forth by Paley (1993) and Sprung, Froschl, and Hinitz (2005) provide early childhood educators with strategies for age-appropriate activities designed to prevent exclusion and other "mean" behaviors. Online resources from organizations such as NAEYC help translate research into practice tips, and put forth innovative strategies for problem solving with children. Finally, resources in and about popular media (with the particular example of the work of Fred Rogers) can help parents and caregivers make healthy, prosocial choices about the use of media with their young children.

Our review of the research literature shows that effective, evidence-based early childhood interventions primarily used a curriculum-based approach with specific strands of content to support the classroom educator, the child, and the parents/caregivers in addressing aggressive behaviors. Key themes among these approaches included using a mix of educational materials with a tailored interactive approach, and using goal setting and action planning. However, our review also indicated that none of the evidenced-based programs identified in this review evaluated their effectiveness with very young children (ages birth to three), a clear gap of existing research.

In sum, though an explicit pathway identifying the root causes of bullying has not been established in the empirical literature, decades of research on aggression, attachment theory, and parent-child interactions provides a substantial research base upon which to build. This literature review may be most beneficial as a starting point for experts in the field to further explore and map the developmental trajectory of bullying, its root causes, and mitigating factors. Future research must continue to explore the slippery slope of the terminology used here, being careful not to conflate typical social, emotional, and behavioral norms with signs and behaviors that suggest a child may be at risk of later bullying behavior or victimization. We propose that the field focus efforts on analyzing the benefits promoting positive relationships and fostering desirable, pro-social behaviors and skills. Once a theoretical model is developed, effective and innovative new approaches to combat the growing prevalence of bullying can be designed and implemented.

Acknowledgments

Child Trends would like to acknowledge the review and contribution of the expert reviewers who participated in a leadership roundtable on this topic on June 2, 2015, including Alice Cahn, CahnWorks Consulting; Suzanne Greenfield, Director of the D.C. Citywide Bullying Prevention Program, D.C. Office of Human Rights; Jacquelyn Gross, University of Maryland; Miriam Lund, Education Program Specialist, U.S. Department of Education; Rebecca Parlakian, Director of Parenting Resources at ZERO TO THREE; Cynthia Popovich, University of Pittsburgh; Annette Santella, Coordinator of Training, The Fred Rogers Company; Andrew Schneider-Muñoz, Ed.D., Associate Professor, University of Pittsburgh; Roberta Schomburg, Ph.D., Associate Dean and Professor, Carlow University; Ron Slaby, Ph.D., Senior Scientist, Center of Media and Child Health, Children’s Hospital Boston/Harvard Medical School; Kyle Snow, Ph.D., Senior Scholar and Director of the Center for Applied Research, National Association for the Education of Young Children; Kim Storey, Ed.D., Educational Media Consultant and Bullying Prevention Expert; and Rosemarie Truglio, Ph.D, Vice President of Education and Research, Sesame Workshop.



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