



Research Paper

When early childhood teachers read books about bullying to preschool aged children; Are the bystanders discussed?

Vanessa A. Green^{a,*}, Tessa Jacobsen-Grocott^a, Isabel Taylor-Holmes^a, Emma Pitt^a,
Christina Salmivalli^b, Marc Wilson^a, Kelsey Taylor^{a,†}

^a Faculty of Education, Health, and Psychological Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington, Kelburn, P. O. Box 600, Wellington, 6140, New Zealand

^b Department of Psychology, University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 7, 20500, Turku, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Books
Bystander
Bullying prevention
Silent socialization
Preschool

ABSTRACT

The reasons why most young children do not typically engage in defending behavior when they witness their peers being victimized are unclear. However, early socialization practices, such as *how* teachers read books depicting bullying incidents may be a contributing factor. This study involved structured video-recorded observations of 76 early childhood teachers (70 female) from 42 centers, reading two adapted books about bullying to small groups of preschool aged children who were aged between 2 years and 4 years and 11 months. The books included child and adult witnesses, intentionality and repetition of inappropriate - but developmentally typical - preschool behavior. The teachers made 9,984 comments across the two books. There were 5,662 comments that referred to the critical incidents conveyed in the stories, and these were made by all the teachers ($M = 48.95$; $SD = 29.58$). However, there were only 186 comments about bystanders, made by 42% of the teachers; and just 20 comments made by 8% of the teachers that referred to the strategies the witnesses could try, to help solve the situation. There were no statistically significant relationships between the teachers' likelihood of discussing bullying or bystander behavior in the stories and their own experiences of child/adolescent bullying. Years of teaching experience and level of qualification were weakly correlated with comments related to critical incidents and bystanders respectively. The findings suggest defending behaviors are not typically discussed with young children; this omission could be seen as a form of silent socialization, where children are inadvertently socialized into passive bystander behavior when witnessing bullying. Implications for bullying prevention are discussed.

Several studies have shown that the targeted use of bullying-focused books that are accompanied by appropriate pedagogical practices can have a positive impact on preschool aged children's social development (e.g., Freeman, 2013; Rosen et al., 2025; Wee et al., 2022). These studies suggest that, when *prompted*, early childhood teachers, as key socialization agents, can help children navigate this complex social situation and learn how to support and defend those who have been victimized. However, less is known about how teachers read stories with a bullying focus to preschool aged children when they are *not* prompted to provide solutions. Parents are typically children's first key socialization agents, however in a recent study by Green et al. (2025), where parents were recorded reading a story about bullying to their preschool aged child in a naturalistic setting, the parents rarely discussed what bystanders could do to help the victim. Given that early childhood teacher training typically places an emphasis on social and emotional development, we

might expect that teachers would be more likely than parents to spontaneously discuss the bystanders and the potential intervention strategies that could be used to help the victim of bullying when reading to preschool aged children. The aim of this observational study was to investigate how early childhood teachers *typically* discuss books that present bullying behaviors with the preschool aged children in their care, when the teachers themselves haven't been prompted to focus on potential solutions.

One of the key frameworks for understanding bullying or peer victimization is an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model, where socialization agents (e.g., peers, parents, siblings and teachers) have all been recognized as powerful influences on the development and maintenance of bullying and victimization (Espelage & Swearer, 2004) through their responses and the modelling of inappropriate behaviours (Bandura, 1977). For example, the peer

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: vanessa.green@vuw.ac.nz (V.A. Green).

† Newbury Primary School, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

group can have a significant impact because of the participant roles (e.g., bully, assistant to bully, victim, defender, outsider) that may unfold during a bullying incident. The importance of the group dynamic during a bullying incident is highlighted in part because very few school age children adopt the role of defender, as most witnesses remain as outsiders or passive bystanders and rarely come to the defense of the victim (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Salmivalli, 2010).

When we consider bullying within the early childhood context, what perhaps begins as typical early childhood aggression, where young children are learning how to interact, play and share materials and other resources, can evolve into bully-like behavior (Monks et al., 2003; Monks & O'Toole, 2021; Ostrov et al., 2019). Due in part to rapid developmental changes, the typical absence of both a power imbalance and consistently targeted victims, there is however a reluctance amongst researchers and practitioners alike to use the traditional bullying definition when describing these behaviors in early childhood (Monks & O'Toole, 2021). Therefore, other terms such as bully-like, peer victimization, inappropriate behaviors or unjustified aggression are often used (Lee et al., 2016; Monks et al., 2003; Monks & O'Toole, 2021). Regardless of the terminology, it is still important to recognize that bully-like behaviour or victimization is prevalent in early childhood (Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012; Monks & O'Toole, 2021; Ostrov et al., 2019; Tanrikulu, 2020). For example, Monks et al. (2011) reported victim rates of between 15.2% to 32.4% and perpetrator rates of 15.2% to 25% in their cross-national study of 4–6-year-olds (Monks & O'Toole, 2021). In addition, the participant roles evident amongst school age children are also apparent in the preschool years. For example, in Monk et al.'s study of 56 children aged 4–5-years, bystanders were present in nearly two-thirds of the observed peer victimization incidents, but very few aided the victim. The few children who engage in defending behaviour are typically more socially competent and emotionally mature than those in other participant roles (Camodeca et al., 2015) and show higher levels of prosocial behavior and empathy (Swit et al., 2023).

There may be several reasons why most preschool age children remain as passive bystanders when witnessing bullying incidents. For example, it could be related to the 'bystander effect' where the number of other witnesses present and the subsequent diffusion of responsibility influences the behaviour of witnesses (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1970) or the cohesiveness of the group of witnesses (Fischer et al., 2011). This would be in keeping with the evidence to suggest that how the victim is viewed by the peer group can influence how bystanders respond. For example, if the victim is a rejected student, the bystanders may want to avoid association by coming to their aid (Reunamo et al., 2015; Rosen et al., 2025). In addition, bystander behaviour may be connected to young witnesses' inability to communicate clearly (Reunamo et al., 2015; Rosen et al., 2025) and could also be related to the physiological response of 'freezing' as a coping mechanism in the face of perceived danger (Gray, 1990; Gray & McNaughton, 2000; Siligato et al., 2024).

By the age of two most children can display empathetic responses that suggest they are aware of others' distress (Brownwell et al., 2009; Licata et al., 2016) and this awareness is typically built upon and facilitated in part by the socialization practices of parents and other caregivers (Maccoby, 2015; Spinrad & Gal, 2018). In addition, during the early years, most children are exposed to a wide range of social contexts, one of which may be a preschool setting. Teachers, alongside parents, are therefore key socialization agents, who not only act as role models, but their practices within the early childhood setting help to influence each child's developing social competence (Eisenberg & Harris, 1984). It follows that the early socialization practices adopted by adults may play an important role in the development of defending or bystanding behaviours. Typically, early childhood teacher socialization practices emphasize the development of positive social interactions. Therefore, teachers should ideally understand challenging social situations, such as bullying behavior (Espelage & Swearer, 2004), and many do have this understanding. For example, 93% of 188 early childhood

teachers knew about bullying in early childhood and were confident in managing incidents (Goryl et al., 2013). However, studies have also shown there is uncertainty amongst some teachers about what constitutes bullying in early childhood and how it may differ from aggression, which could result in bullying being downplayed or overlooked (Cameron & Kovac, 2016; Parsa, 2023; Swit, 2018; Swit et al., 2018). For example, in her study of 272 early childhood teachers, Parsa (2023) found that although most could distinguish between physical forms of bullying and aggression, approximately half were unable to distinguish between verbal bullying and verbal aggression.

The reasons why teachers may dismiss or underplay the importance of addressing bullying incidents are complex. They include a lack of knowledge about bullying, possibly from few training opportunities, alongside diminished self-efficacy regarding intervention (Davis & Grere, 2018; Green, 2021; Mazzone et al., 2021; Rigby, 2018; Spears et al., 2018). For example, Goryl et al. (2013) found that teachers with university-level qualifications (i.e., a bachelor degree) were more confident in their ability to manage bullying situations compared to those teachers who had obtained their teaching qualification from a vocational and educational training institute (i.e., a pre-degree qualification). If there is uncertainty or a lack of knowledge about how to manage bullying incidents amongst key socialization agents such as teachers, there may be missed opportunities to discuss the topic of bullying and what can be done about it when engaging in typical socialization practices, such as storybook reading. Some evidence for this proposition was shown in a recent study by Green et al. (2025), where 97 parents read a book about bullying to their 2–4 year old children. Although most parents discussed the bullying incidents at least once in the story, very few (i.e., 5%) made any comments related to the witnesses in the story and even fewer made suggestions about what these bystanders could have possibly done to help the victim. The authors suggest it is plausible that this omission was unintentional, perhaps in part due to parents' own lack of knowledge or experience with engaging in defending behaviors when witnessing bullying incidents. However, as this study included parents rather than teachers, it is unclear whether the same level of omission would be evident with teachers.

The links between adults' experiences with bullying and victimization (typically in their youth) and their attitudes and behaviors regarding their own children's bullying and victimization have often been investigated directly. Typically, participants are asked about their own childhood experiences while also responding to questions about their current practices and recommendations using questionnaires and hypothetical scenarios. (e.g., Allan et al., 2024; Boddy et al., 2024; Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Karga et al., 2021; Mishna et al., 2006; Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017; Stives et al., 2021; Swit, 2018). In contrast, to enhance the ecological validity of the study, Grassetti et al. (2018, 2020) used each participants' home as a setting. The parent participants were explicitly asked to advise their children about what to do if they witnessed bullying incidents using a list of hypothetical scenarios. The findings demonstrated that there were some parents who explicitly advised their school-aged children *not* to get involved in bullying incidents. As the authors suggest, these parents may be teaching their children to assume the role of a passive bystander. To date, there are no parallel studies with teachers of school-aged or preschool-aged children. In addition, there are no studies where teachers have been video-recorded (as part of their daily work practices) reading books about bullying to children, when they *haven't been* prompted to provide advice or strategies to the children. Therefore, it is unclear whether early childhood teachers would spontaneously provide suggestions to preschool-aged children about what can be done to help a victim of bullying.

It is evident that bystanders in the early childhood context play a critical role in terms of the impact on the victim (Monks et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 2025). Without intervention, there is a risk that preschool children who are typically bystanders may become enablers or begin to engage in bully-like behavior themselves (Camodeca et al., 2015; Monks

et al., 2003; Rosen et al., 2025). However, given the developmental stage, most participant roles in early childhood are fortunately somewhat unstable (Belacchi & Farina, 2010; Camodeca et al., 2015; Monks et al., 2021; Saracho, 2016) and therefore amenable to change or intervention. Along these lines there have been numerous studies that have focused on the development of interventions in early childhood that encourage proactive bystanding (e.g., Kvestad et al., 2024; Levine & Tamburrino, 2014; McGoe et al., 2023; Ostrov et al., 2009, 2015; Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015), such as alerting an adult, helping the victim physically or emotionally or confronting the bully (Fredrick et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2025). Recent intervention studies have demonstrated the usefulness of using bullying-themed books within early childhood contexts to increase empathy towards victims of bullying and thereby increase the number of defenders. For example, in their study with 89 children (3–5.5 years), Rosen and colleagues (2025) reported that after being read books where bystanders stepped into help, older children (i.e., 4-year-olds) were less likely to suggest bystander inaction. In a similar vein, Wee and colleagues (2022) collaborated with early childhood teachers to use a bully-themed book in their classrooms, supplemented with role play scenarios, to teach 21, 5 year old children how to respond to bullying incidents. After six weeks, the children were more likely to offer solutions to the bullying issues and demonstrated more empathy toward the victims of bullying. These studies demonstrate that early intervention through the use of storybooks with preschool-aged children is an ideal time and format for promoting defending behavior. When they are equipped with some direct instruction and knowledge, preschool-aged children appear to be willing and able to intervene. Therefore, a lack of knowledge about what to do may be a contributing factor to the propensity to be a passive bystander.

The overall aim of the current study was to investigate what teachers spontaneously discuss with small groups of preschool-aged children when they are asked to read books that depict bullying during their typical teaching practice. We provided teachers with two developmentally appropriate books that explicitly depicted bullying behaviors and included bystander characters. Both books were commercially available, but were adapted for the current study. The first book focused on six key incidents that involved the same protagonist and victim, with peer witnesses evident during all incidents and an adult witness present in one. The second book included 8 key incidents and a more complex storyline than the first, with a wide range of characters and contexts (i.e., family, preschool, to-and-from school) at least two witnesses during several of the incidents, and an adult witness in another. Neither book mentioned the word bullying and all teachers were given the opportunity to review the books prior to the reading sessions.

The first aim of this systematic observational study was to determine the degree to which teachers discuss the moral underpinnings of the stories by pointing out the inappropriate behaviors on display in the books. We predicted that most teachers would likely provide discussion points regarding the inappropriate behaviors, due to the focus on social and emotional development in the early childhood curriculum.

The second aim was to determine whether teachers spontaneously refer to the bystander characters and their potential behaviors presented in the two books. We predicted that teachers would discuss the bystanders, however this would not be universal given the propensity to minimize the seriousness of the behaviors displayed by some teachers (Parsa, 2023; Swit, 2018).

The third aim sought to first determine whether teachers' professional experience and their level of qualification was related to their propensity to discuss the moral underpinnings of the story, and we predicted a positive relationship. Second, we investigated whether teachers' own role in school bullying and victimization was related to how they discuss books depicting bullying behaviors with children in their classroom. Given that previous research (Green et al. (2025) had shown no relationship between adults' own experiences of bullying and discussions with young children about bullying, we did not predict a relationship.

1. Method

1.1. Ethics

The study was approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee. Teacher participants were informed of the general purpose of the study; however, they were not told about the specific focus on whether teachers discuss bystander and defending behaviors during book reading sessions. Therefore, any terminology related to bystander and defending behaviors were not included in recruitment materials. As such, recruitment materials included general statements, such as "Our project explores bully-like behavior in early childhood and aims to improve methods of bullying prevention". A group based debriefing session was scheduled at each center once data collection was completed and during this session the teacher participants were debriefed to the full purpose of the study. They were also provided with an opportunity to give feedback about the research study. The focus of the study was on teachers, however as the children within each centre (who were read to by the teachers) were being video-recorded while they listened to the stories, parental consent to be video-recorded was obtained along with child assent.

1.2. Recruitment

Teacher participants were recruited via phone outreach to early childhood education centers. A list of all early childhood education centers within the Greater Wellington Region was compiled. This list included over 300 centers. The centers that were part of a larger consortium or group were only contacted after permission was obtained from the relevant overarching organization (e.g., New Zealand Kindergartens). As a result, a total of 265 centers were contacted and invited to participate. In addition, posters that included information about the study and a QR code were deployed in a range of community settings (e.g., libraries, cafés, sports centers). Centers that expressed interest were sent digital information packs via email. These included information sheets and consent forms for centers and early childhood teachers. For those who were interested, arrangements were made to meet teachers before organizing a book reading session for them and the children in their center.

1.3. Participants

Data was collected from 79 early childhood teachers within 42 centers. Due to some missing data related to the completion of a questionnaire, the final teacher participant number was 76 (70 females). In this final sample, there was no missing data. The teachers ranged in age from 21 to 67 years ($M = 42.53$, $SD = 10.88$). Most participants reported their ethnicity as New Zealand European (70%), while the remaining 30% included Māori, Pacific Islander, Asian, Indian, South African, European, and American. Fifty-eight teachers were in full-time early childhood education employment, and 18 were part-time early childhood teachers. Over two-thirds of the teacher participants held a bachelor's degree in early childhood education (67%), an additional 25% had a diploma of teaching (which is below a bachelor's degree), and 12% held an early childhood education-related postgraduate qualification. The remaining teacher participants had either different teaching-related qualifications (e.g., Bachelor of Education [teaching] primary), unrelated qualifications, or no qualifications. Six teacher participants held more than one teaching-related or early childhood education qualification. Teacher participants' years of experience as early childhood teachers ranged from one year to 40 years ($M = 14.90$, $SD = 9.86$).

The early childhood centers where teachers worked and children attended were located in a wide range of socio-economic areas, with a mean decile score of 5.14 ($SD = 3.05$). Decile scores indicate levels of socio-economic deprivation, where a score of 1 represents the *least* deprived 10% of the population, and a score of 10 represents the *most*

deprived 10% of the population. For early childhood centres that include infants, it is typical practice in New Zealand to divide children into two age groups (i.e., infants up to 2 years; toddlers 2 years and over). The children who were read stories in this study were aged between 2 years and 4 years 11 months.

1.4. Materials

The two books that were used in the study were adapted from the original versions for private use only and have not/will not be distributed or profited from in any way. Therefore, the inclusion of two commercially available books meets the principles of fair use. The books were found in part by using the list of children's books that discuss bullying, compiled as part of a content analysis by [Oppliger and Davis \(2016\)](#). We also conducted a web search to find other suitable (more recent) books and found an additional 40 books. All the books were checked against the following criteria; 1) whether the bullying behavior being portrayed adhered to at least one element of [Olweus' \(1993\)](#) definition of bullying (i.e., intentional harm, power imbalance and/or repetition) 2) whether passive bystander characters were present, 3) whether the books were age-appropriate for two- to five-year-olds, and 4) whether the story reached a positive resolution. From the overall list, 16 books met all the criteria (i.e., at least one element of [Olweus' definition](#); included passive bystanders; age appropriate, positive resolution). The physical books were then presented to two groups of participants as part of a small project (i.e., [Scarrow, 2021](#)). There were 13 female participants aged between 18 and 45 years ($M = 21.6$ years) who were all students in the Faculty of Education at the authors' institution. Within this group, five of the participants were also parents and three were early childhood teachers, enrolled in post-graduate studies. The participants were asked to read the books and provide commentary about each book in terms of suitability for preschool aged children. Analysis of the comments made by the participants included the following themes; 1) the storyline needed to be set in a preschool based context 2) the story content should include realistic resolutions to the bullying incidents and avoid labelling the bully and 3) the book design was important (i.e., the size of the font, complexity of the illustrations) ([Scarrow, 2021](#)). The consensus was that there were two commercially available books that would be suitable, however they would still need some word adaptations and a title change.

The first book was authored and illustrated by Anna Dewdney and originally called *Llama Llama and the Bully Goat*. It portrayed anthropomorphic animal characters (i.e., to represent preschool aged children and their teacher). Our adapted version was renamed *Llama Llama Goes to Preschool* and included the same characters and some of the original wording. However, it was shortened from the original text to ensure that there were six critical incidents (i.e., three verbal bullying incidents and three physical bullying incidents), that were typical, but not severe enough to cause distress. To demonstrate intentionality and repeated behaviors (i.e., two of the three definitional characteristics of bullying), the same character (i.e., Gilroy Goat) mocked the same character (i.e., Llama Llama). He mocked Llama's singing, called Llama names, disrupted his play, threw Llama's toy, shouted and kicked sand at Llama. In addition, the storyline was adapted to ensure that two-three child characters were visibly present throughout the story and during each incident. The child characters displayed shocked looks on their faces as they watched the incidents. In addition, a teacher character was present during one of the incidents, but was not shown to be directly watching the incident. These adaptations were created to provide teachers with the opportunity to comment on the bystanders, none of whom intervened. Finally, we kept a positive ending to comply with our ethical requirements. The story included 16 pages with 193 words and took approximately five minutes for teachers to read.

The second book was originally called *The Little Bully* and was authored by Beth Braken (illustrated by Jennifer A. Bell); however, we changed the title to *Fred and Billy*. This book also included

anthropomorphic animal characters and was set in a preschool. The main character was a beaver called Billy, and the protagonist was a mouse called Fred. There were eight verbal bullying incidents presented in the story where Fred victimized Billy, including Fred knocking over his tower of blocks, mocking his clothing, drawings and writing, and accusing him of using 'girl' colors in his artwork. Most of the incidents were depicted as occurring within the classroom setting of the preschool, while one occurred on the school bus. In three of these incidents there were two-three same-age witnesses who were explicitly shown to be watching what was happening to Billy, and were depicted as having sad/scared facial expressions. The bus driver was also a witness to the bullying. The story was more complex than the first book because it also included Billy at home telling his parents he didn't want to go to preschool, but he doesn't give the real reason. In addition, there are images of Billy alone and sad accompanied by a description of how Billy is feeling about himself (i.e., suggesting he had developed low self-esteem). At the end of the story Billy threatened Fred by saying that if he didn't stop being mean then they couldn't be friends. Fred stopped being mean and became friends with Billy. The story had 30 pages (445 words), and it took approximately eight minutes to read. We added one additional line to the end of the story (i.e., "Fred was nice to everyone").

Teacher participants were directed to an online survey after the reading session and responded to demographic questions (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, years of early childhood teaching experience, qualifications) and survey measures as part of a larger study. Teacher participants completed either an original or adapted version of the Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire (RBQ; [Schäfer et al., 2004](#)). The RBQ versions were being compared as part of a different research project. The versions had minimal direct overlap; therefore, the data could not be used interchangeably. However, all teacher participants responded to one question about their involvement in school-based bullying. Specifically, teacher participants selected the option that best described their involvement: (a) I was not involved, and I never saw it happen, (b) I was not involved, but I saw it happen, (c) I would sometimes join in bullying others, (d) I would sometimes get bullied by others, and (e) at various times I was both a bully and a victim.

1.5. Procedures

To increase the ecological validity of the observations, the study was set within 42 early childhood centers. The materials and procedures were piloted in one early childhood center to obtain feedback on the procedures; however, no alterations were made. Once a center had agreed to participate, the research team (always two individuals) arranged an in-person planning visit to describe what participation involved (i.e., reading books to children while being audio- and video-recorded, completing a self-report questionnaire, attending a follow-up session). Teachers were also given copies of the books in the weeks prior to the observation session so they could familiarize themselves with the story content and to ensure that the books were considered appropriate to read to their students. In addition, a space within the center was selected to hold the future reading session. Centers were given information sheets and consent forms for the center and early childhood teachers, and flyers outlining the study were sent home with children, where parents could give consent for their child to take part. Only those teachers who had been employed in the centre for at least six months were eligible to participate in the study to ensure that the teachers knew the children. In addition, team teaching is typical within New Zealand early childhood settings, therefore all teachers who teach within the 2-4 year old area within each centre are familiar with all the children. In addition, during the planning sessions and in collaboration with the centres, the team ensured the teachers were familiar with all the children who were going to participate.

Once a date for the video recorded observation had been formalized, the research team visited the center and refreshed teachers on the procedures of the book reading sessions. Children whose parents consented

to their involvement in the study were invited by the head teacher to participate in a reading session. This resulted in a wide range of group sizes from one to 14. The average number of children within each group was 5. Two small cameras were used to record the video (one facing teachers, one facing the group of children), and two microphones were used to record the audio (one worn on teachers' clothing, one behind the group of children). In addition to the parents completing consent forms for their children, center managers or head teachers signed a consent form on behalf of centers, and teachers signed a consent form regarding their own participation. Teacher consent forms covered the recording and confidentiality of the video recordings, confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study during or after the reading sessions. In addition, prior to the start of the reading session, the teachers guided each child (who had assembled) through an assent form designed for the children to indicate their happiness to take part in the study. Each child chose either a happy or sad face stamp and were directed to put it next to their name. It was clearly explained to the children that they could stop participation at any time and were free to leave the reading session at any point.

Prior to the reading session and while the recording equipment was being set up identical instructions and a copy of the adapted books were given to all teachers by a research assistant. Specifically, the assistant said to the teacher 'We encourage you to read each story as if it were any other story you would normally read to the children and as if there was no research going on'. They were asked to read *Llama Llama Goes to Preschool* first, followed by *Fred and Billy*. This procedure was to avoid a carry-over effect. Book 1 was shorter, had a simple story line that was set in one context, while Book 2 was more complex, involved several contexts and discussed the impact of the bullying on Billy. Written instructions were also provided should the teacher wish to refer to them during the session.

The reading sessions occurred where teachers typically read books to their students, although some were held in center offices or in quiet rooms to maintain privacy while video recording. In keeping with the naturalistic setting and typical story reading practices, teachers were not given a time limit to read the books, however most reading sessions typically took between 15 and 20 minutes. Furthermore, to cause the least amount of disruption, the research team typically waited in another part of the center while the reading session took place and returned once it was finished. It is important to note that the reading session(s) were incorporated into the typical daily routines to cause minimal disruption to the centre, the children and the staff. This meant that on occasion there was a delay due to a scheduled break or outing and this subsequently increased the overall amount of time researchers spent in each centre. In some instances, reading sessions at any one center took place over multiple days, if several teachers from a center were interested in participating. At the end of the reading session the teachers were directed to an online questionnaire (see materials) to complete in their own time, and a follow-up visit was scheduled to debrief teachers. Centers received book vouchers for their participation.

1.6. Observational coding of book reading activity

Video recordings were viewed and transcribed by five postgraduate students who were involved in data collection. The coding scheme used in the present study was based on the scheme developed for a similar study including parent participants (Green et al., 2025) and included three broad codes (i.e., critical, bystander, surface-level). The first code (i.e., critical) identified whether teachers used words like "bullying" or related terms, or mentioned the inappropriate behaviors being exhibited during the critical incidents that were portrayed in both stories (i.e., when Llama Llama was being bullied by Gilroy Goat or Billy was being bullied by Fred). This code also included any emotions related to the incidents and any mention of the importance of being a good friend. The critical code was divided into 1) statements that were related to the characters in the books (e.g., "Fred is not being very nice") and 2)

statements related to the children listening to the stories (e.g., "You all know how to be good friends, right?"). Comments were identified as stand-alone words or phrases and could vary in length from one word to several words (i.e., sentences).

The second code related to any mention of the bystanders/witnesses. This code was further delineated into three sub-types, including 1) mentioning the presence of witnesses (e.g., "The squirrel in the background there"), 2) mentioning what the witnesses may be thinking or feeling about what they see, (e.g., "The bunny looks... worried" and "Do you think they think that's not the right thing to do?") and 3) mentioning specific strategies that witnesses could use to help the victim (e.g., "Do you think they need to go and talk to the teacher that was doing the knitting?" and "What would you guys do, if you saw one of our friends laughing at somebody like that?"). It is important to note that, by design, the terms and potential behaviors related to bullying and bystander behaviors (i.e., bullying, defending, witnesses, telling adults, helping the victim) were never mentioned in the story scripts, however, the potential 'bystanders' (i.e., friendship/peer group) were illustrated and present throughout the books. Also, a teacher was visibly present on one occasion in Book 1 and a school bus driver was visible in Book 2. The third broad code was the identification of surface level comments that were not connected to any of the critical incidents (i.e., related to aspects of the story content such as the characters playing a game or having lunch).

One of the two postgraduate students (4th author) who helped develop the coding scheme coded all 76 transcripts. The second author used this system to code 30% of the transcripts. Each comment was individually coded into a category and the percentage of agreement on the classification (i.e., type) of each comment made was calculated as follows: Agreement/(Agreements + Disagreements) x 100. The IRR for the surface level comments was 87.4%; for critical comments (book related) it was 87.3%; for critical comments (child related) it was 85.6%; and for bystander comments it was 95.7%. The overall agreement was 87.5%. The bystander comments underwent a further round of reliability checking with a third coder. The first author coded 30% of the transcripts that contained bystander comments and calculated the IRR using the same process as above. The overall agreement was 80%.

1.7. Analytic plan

To address aims 1 and 2, summary statistics were calculated for the teacher's comments, as shown in Table 1 and Table 2. Furthermore, to

Table 1
Types of comments made by teachers while reading two books, that depicted bullying incidents, to small groups of children in their centers.

Type of comment	Percentage of teachers making each type of comment (n = 76)	Total number of comments made across the two books	Average number of comments made by the teachers across the two books M (SD)
Surface level	100%	4,136	54.42 (34.35)
Critical incident	100%	5,662	48.95 (29.58)
Book focused	100%	3,974	52.29 (37.35)
Child focused	91%	1,688	22.21 (21.81)
Bystander Comments	42.1%	186	2.45 (5.02)
Comments related to the presence of witnesses	27.6%	75	0.99 (2.36)
Comments related to emotions/cognitions of witnesses	25%	91	1.20 (3.02)
Comments related to the strategies that witnesses could try	7.9%	20	0.26 (1.01)

Table 2

Number, type and proportion of bystander comments made by teachers while reading two books, that depicted bullying incidents, to small groups of children in their centers.

	Book 1 (193 words)				Book 2 (445 words)			
	Percentage of teachers who made bystander comments (n = 76)	Total number of bystander comments	Average number of bystander comments M (SD)	Bystander comments as a proportion of book length	Percentage of teachers who made bystander comments (n = 76)	Total number of bystander comments	Average number of bystander comments M (SD)	Bystander comments as a proportion of book length
Bystander Comments	15.8%	36	0.47 (1.30)	18.65%	34.2%	150	1.97 (4.68)	33.70%
Types of Bystander Comments								
Related to presence of witnesses	7.9%	16	0.21 (0.82)	8.29%	23.7%	59	0.78 (2.10)	13.26%
Related to emotions/cognitions of witnesses	7.9%	13	0.17 (0.70)	6.73%	28.9%	78	1.03 (2.76)	17.52%
Related to strategies that witnesses could try	2.6%	7	.09 (0.61)	3.62%	5.3%	13	0.17 (0.82)	2.92%

compare the ratio of bystander comments between the two books, Z-scores for population proportions were calculated. To address aim 3 Bivariate Spearman's rank correlations were calculated to investigate potential relationships between teacher's qualifications and years of teaching experience and their comments, while Fischer's tests were run to investigate any relationship between teacher's past experiences with bullying and their comments.

2. Results

The first aim of this observational study was to determine whether teachers discussed the inappropriate behaviors being exhibited in two stories that depicted (but did not name) bullying behaviors. As shown in Table 1, there were 9,984 comments made by the 76 teachers over and above what was written in the script across the two stories. Just over half of these comments (5,662) related to the moral underpinnings of the stories (i.e., involved discussions about the critical incidents). All teachers made critical incident comments, and the majority related directly to the characters in the book.

The second aim of the study was to ascertain whether teachers spontaneously talked about the bystanders (i.e., witnesses to the bullying incidents) when discussing the critical incidents in the stories. As seen in Table 1, 42.1% of teachers made 186 bystander comments and this represented just 3.3% of the total number of critical incident comments made by the teachers. Most of the 186 bystander comments were related to either the presence of the witnesses (e.g., "The teacher is sitting and knitting") or what the witnesses may have been thinking or feeling (e.g., "Does everybody look happy now?"), with very few comments made about potential strategies the witnesses could try.

In Table 2 we have presented the bystander comments information as a function of each book. For the first book (*Llama Llama Goes to Preschool*), 15.8% of teachers made 36 total comments relating to the bystanders. Most comments discussed the presence ("I can see some people") or cognitions and emotions of the bystanders ("What do their faces look like?"), with only seven comments related to possible strategies (e.g., "Do you think they need to go and talk to the teacher that was doing the knitting?") made by 2.6% of the teachers. In the second book (*Fred and Billy*), 34% of the teachers made 150 comments related to the bystanders. There were 59 comments related to the presence of bystanders (e.g., "The squirrel in the background there"), and 78 comments made about the emotions and thoughts of the witnesses (e.g., "The bunny looks... worried", "Do you think they think that's not the right

thing to do?"). However, only 5.3% of the teachers made 13 comments about the strategies that bystanders could adopt in the book or in daily life (e.g., "What would you guys do, if you saw one of our friends laughing at somebody like that?").

As the two books differed in length, the proportion of bystander comments as a function of the total number of words in the book is provided for each type of bystander comment in Table 2. Z-score calculations for two population proportions showed that there were more overall bystander comments made in book two ($z = -3.86; p < .0001$) compared to book one, and teachers also made more bystander comments related to the presence of the bystanders ($z = -1.80; p < .05$) and their emotions ($z = -3.59; p < .001$) in book two compared to book one. There was no significant difference between the two books regarding the number of bystander strategies mentioned ($p = .319$).

Book 1 portrayed different types of bullying incidents therefore this provided an opportunity to investigate whether the type of incident (i.e., verbal vs physical bullying) evoked more critical comments from teachers during the reading of the *Llama Llama* story. The story included three verbal bullying incidents (i.e., Gilroy mocks Llama's singing, points and bleats at Llama, and calls Llama an unkind name) and three physical bullying incidents (i.e., Gilroy stands in Llama's way, kicks sand on Llama's shirt and pushes Llama's toy out of the way). As the *Fred and Billy* story only contained examples of verbal bullying, no additional analyses were conducted. To determine whether the teachers made more critical incident comments while discussing the physical incidents compared to the verbal incidents while reading the *Llama Llama* story, we summed the number of comments made during the three physical incidents and the number of comments made during the three verbal incidents for each participant. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test revealed a significant difference in the number of bullying-related comments between physical and verbal incidents, $Z = 3.10, p = .002$ (two-tailed), indicating that teachers made significantly more bullying-related comments about physical incidents ($Mdn = 8, IQR = 9.25$) compared to verbal incidents ($Mdn = 4, IQR = 7.25$).

The third aim of the study was to investigate whether the propensity to discuss the underlying moral issues in the story, particularly bystander related behavior, was related to a teachers' years of experience, level of qualification, or their own experiences of bullying and/or victimization. Bivariate correlations were calculated to examine whether teachers' level of qualification or years of experience explained variance in the number and type of comments teachers made while reading the books. As the raw data included non-continuous numerical

variables, Spearman's rank correlations were calculated. A significant, but weak correlation was found between teachers' level of qualification and the number bystander related comments they made while reading book one ($r = 0.25$, $p = 0.027$), suggesting that teachers with a higher level of qualification may be slightly more likely to make comments related to bystanders. A significant, but weak, correlation was also found between teachers' years of experience and the number of critical comments they made overall ($r = 0.23$, $p = 0.047$).

Teacher participants' responses to a question about their childhood/adolescent experiences of bullying and victimization were categorized into six types. The results from the 76 teacher participants revealed that there were 27 adults who indicated they had been a victim of bullying, 19 who had been bully/victims, 20 who had seen bullying but didn't get involved, one who identified as having been a bully and nine who didn't see any bullying. Given the sample size, number of coding categories and bullying experiences, a Fisher's test was conducted comparing teachers' types of critical comments (whether they made bystander related, child-related or book related critical comments) across both books with their past experiences of bullying ($p = 0.803$). Further Fisher's tests were also conducted after collapsing the six categories of past bullying experience into two (involved vs not involved in bullying, $p = 0.419$) and separating the comments out between the two books (book one, $p = 0.512$; book two, $p = 0.171$). All the Fisher's tests were non-significant, indicating that teachers' own bullying experience does not appear to have a significant impact on the type of comments they make when reading a book that portrays bullying incidents.

3. Discussion

This systematic observation of early childhood teachers reading two books that focused on bullying incidents to young children, demonstrated that all the teachers discussed the moral underpinnings of the stories (i.e., critical incidents) in the books. There were over 5,500 comments made about the critical incidents, and during the book readings the teachers made on average about 49 comments across both books. These results suggest that the key themes, that centered around the inappropriate behaviors portrayed in the stories, were evident to the teachers and therefore worth discussing. The choice to discuss the issues portrayed in the stories was likely due to their professional expertise in promoting social and emotional development amongst preschool-aged children. However, while discussing the critical incidents, less than half of the teachers mentioned the bystanders. When they did, the total number of bystander comments amounted to 3.3% of the critical incident comments. Additionally, although there was some recognition of the bystanders in terms of what they may have been thinking or feeling across the 186 comments, teachers rarely mentioned any strategies to address the situation. Only 8% of teachers mentioned any potential strategies that the witnesses could try (i.e., there were 20 comments in total about strategies). Furthermore, despite a proportionally small number of bystander comments being made overall, the teachers tended to make more bystander comments during the reading of the second story compared to the first. As the books differed in length and complexity it is difficult to determine the reason for the difference. It may be because the impact of the bullying on the victim was discussed in Book 2 or that there were more incidents in the second book. The book order was specified from simple to more complex to avoid a carry-over effect. However future studies could incorporate a counter balanced design to compare books that are similar in length and complexity, but differ in the number and type of visible witnesses. In addition, as the age of the children may also influence the depth of discussion and number of comments made by teachers, future studies conducted in centres with specific age based cohorts could determine whether a child's age would influence the number and type of comments made by teachers.

Comparing the current results to those found by Green et al. (2025), it is evident that teachers were more forthcoming in their comments concerning the critical incidents and were more likely to mention the

bystanders than parents, although the total number of bystander comments was still low. Importantly, in both studies, only a very small percentage of adults suggested any potential strategies. One of the limitations of the current study is that we could not conduct post-observation interviews with the teachers to ascertain why they may have omitted discussions about what the bystanders in the stories could do to help. This was due to several factors. The observations occurred as part of the curriculum within the daily practices of each centre, and as such teachers were on duty and could not leave the floor. In addition, the observations were the first component of a larger project and alerting teachers to the purpose of the study may have influenced their subsequent responses to the questionnaires. Once all data collection had been completed for each center, in-person debriefing sessions were conducted and provided an opportunity for the teacher participants to discuss the study and ask any questions. During these center-based follow-up sessions (that typically included 1-4 teachers), we did not specifically discuss or reveal each teacher participant's performance during the tasks, to uphold our ethical requirements.

Consistent with Green et al. (2025), the teachers in the current study individually volunteered to be involved in a project about bullying prevention, and therefore we may assume they consider bullying to be an important issue to address in early childhood. However, why the majority did not suggest any witness strategies is still unclear. One possible explanation is that teachers were not overly familiar with the stories, however they had ample opportunity to review the stories and discuss the content with their colleagues prior to participating in the observations. Another explanation is that the teachers did not recognize that the behaviors being portrayed in the text were examples of bullying behaviors or peer victimization. Given the uncertainty amongst some early childhood educators regarding the definition of bullying, it is possible that the seriousness of bullying incidents across the two books may have been underplayed, and this may have resulted in the behaviors being minimized by the teachers (Cameron & Kovac, 2016; Parsa, 2023; Swit et al., 2018). Consequently, the teachers may have been less likely to suggest that bystanders could or should intervene. That is, if we consider that a behavior must first be defined as a problem before a solution can be considered, it may be that the early childhood teachers in the current study did not readily recognize that repeated inappropriate behaviors toward an individual character in the book could be considered examples of bullying or peer victimization.

There is evidence that not only is bullying behavior often overlooked in early childhood contexts (Cameron & Kovac, 2016) the type of bullying behavior being displayed can also influence teachers' responses (Parsa, 2023; Swit et al., 2018). We found that teachers made more critical incident comments while discussing the physical bullying incidents compared to the verbal bullying incidents while reading the *Llama Llama* text. It is possible the teachers considered the physical bullying incidents as more serious than the verbal bullying incidents, but we cannot be certain of this. The result is however in line with the findings that teachers are less sympathetic towards victims of relational and verbal bullying compared to victims of physical bullying (Parsa, 2023). As the number of bystander comments were so infrequent we could not determine whether type of bullying incident influenced the types of bystander comments. Future studies could include texts that have a more specific focus on different types of bullying incidents (verbal, relational and physical) to determine whether the type of critical comments made by teachers, including those related to bystander behaviour differ depending on the type of bullying.

Another plausible reason why the presence of bystanders and what they could potentially do to help the victim were rarely discussed by most teachers, may be due to an unintentional omission that is not necessarily related to the story content, but instead related to the nature of book reading. That is, the relative neglect of the bystander characters could be because the bystanders, by definition, were not critical characters in the storyline (i.e., they were not the protagonist or the victim), so it is less clear whether this omission is due to the bystanders' relative

importance to the storyline. However, it is important to note that the bystanders were not completely ignored by all teachers: approximately 40% of teachers mentioned the emotions and cognitions of the bystanders at least once. Possibly the more relevant finding is that even when they *did* mention the bystanders, they rarely made any suggestions about what the bystanders could do to help. Regardless, future studies could include a comparison of storylines (about different topics) that have additional characters to see if they are mentioned by teachers. This type of experimental design could help to determine the extent to which teachers typically discuss other characters when reading stories.

A strength of the study is that data was gathered from many different early childhood settings. These settings were particularly varied regarding the type, size, and socio-economic location of the service. This diversity would have also increased the likelihood that a wide range of early childhood teaching practices would have underpinned the 42 centers involved in the sample. Furthermore, the teachers themselves were diverse in terms of cultural background, age, qualifications and teaching experience.

An additional key strength of this study is its ecological validity. It involved in vivo observations conducted during teachers' daily practice (e.g., book reading time on the mat). This environment would have increased the likelihood of teachers engaging in their typical practices while reading stories to young children. Although they were being video- and audio-recorded, the experience of being watched while teaching is very common, particularly in open-plan early childhood settings such as those used in the current study. This observational design provides an important methodological contribution to our understanding of teachers' influences on the development, maintenance and possible prevention of bullying behaviors in early childhood. Typically, teachers are asked to provide responses to hypothetical scenarios or reflect on what they may have done in the past. However, the current method may have evoked more spontaneous or typical socialization practices, given that the teachers were not prompted to provide any strategies for addressing the issues raised in the books. This observational design however also presents a possible limitation in our study. Early childhood educators often read storybooks multiple times across several days and potentially focus on different aspects of the stories to avoid overwhelming children. A future study could incorporate multiple observations within a smaller number of centres and assess the way in which teachers read books across a range of topics that have a moral focus. In addition, it could be useful to interview the teachers about how they would use the books in the classroom.

Another limitation of the study is that our sample consisted of 76 teachers. However, given that most centers only had a few staff, we had to engage and get permission from many centers to gain this number. The recruitment of centers took place over a period of approximately 30 months. Future studies involving bigger early childhood centers, with a higher number of staff per center, would enable the gathering of a larger sample of teacher participants. A further limitation is that we had a self-selected sample of centers and teacher participants who were interested in bullying prevention and may have therefore been more inclined to discuss the issues raised in the books. However, as the data indicates, the recognition of how bystanders may be able to intervene was very limited, suggesting that in the broader population (presumably in centers where this topic is not given a priority), we may have found even fewer examples of bystander comments.

An additional limitation of the current study is that we could not obtain a complete and audible recording of all the children's responses to the stories. As we collected data in a naturalistic setting, where we ensured that the least obtrusive/disruptive observational procedures were in place, we did not have control over the background noise being emitted in the centre. This meant that despite having microphones in place (on the teacher and behind the children), we were unable to clearly detect children's comments. In addition, we did not have control over the number of children in each group, as the children were free to enter or leave the book reading sessions as they wished. Children for

whom we did not have parental consent for involvement in a book-reading session were relocated from the reading location prior to the observation and were directed to other center activities. Further studies, perhaps conducted in more structured, and quieter environments, and focusing on older children (i.e., 4-year-olds), could provide additional insight into the dynamics of book reading. This could include how teachers discuss stories about bullying to young children and their responses during these discussions.

There are several possible reasons why an individual may engage in bystander behaviour, including a physiological 'freeze' response (Gray, 1990; Gray & McNaughton, 2000; Siligato et al. (2024), an acute awareness of group size (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1970), group dynamics (Fischer et al. 2011; Reunamo et al., 2015; Rosen et al., 2025), and by imitating others (Bandura, 1977). The findings from this study are potentially among the first to suggest early socialization practices by teachers may contribute to the onset and propensity of bystander behavior amongst preschool-aged children. As noted by Green et al. (2025), with parent participants engaged in a similar activity, the omission of possible solutions being discussed in response to the display of inappropriate behaviors may demonstrate to 2-4 year old children that the consequences of the behaviors being exhibited are to be expected and possibly unavoidable. Taken together, the findings from these two studies suggest that socialization practices (where key ideas are unintentionally avoided or overlooked), may therefore be important, due to their absence. As a result, this may have consequences for how children behave in other future settings. For example, the prevailing social norms present in schools, whereby defending behavior is rare amongst children, may be adhered to in part due to a lack of knowledge about what to do when witnessing bullying incidents.

Considerable attention has been given to teaching preschool aged children how to behave in a socially competent manner to prevent the onset of bullying behaviors (Alsaker, 2004; Alsaker & Nagale, 2008; Littlefield et al., 2017). Extant class-wide programs in collaboration with teachers target friendship formation, social skills and bullying prevention (e.g., Beauchesne et al., 2017; Froschi et al., 1998; Littlefield et al., 2017; McGoe et al., 2023; Ostrov et al., 2009; Ostrov et al., 2015; Wee et al., 2022). In addition, several recent studies have focused on helping preschool aged children learn how to become defenders through books and role-play activities, and the findings are promising (Rosen et al., 2025; Wee et al., 2022). These are all important initiatives, however the findings from the present study suggests that they are unlikely to happen spontaneously as part of teaching practice.

It is evident from the current study that all teachers discussed the moral underpinnings of the story; however, this did not appear to be *strongly* related to either their years of professional experience as teachers or their level of qualification. This contrasted with a related finding reported by Goryl et al. (2013), where a higher level of qualification was related to knowledge about bullying and confidence in managing it. The difference could be due to the smaller sample in the current study, or the specific nature of the topic under investigation. That is, unlike Goryl et al. (2013), where teachers professed to being able to understand and manage bullying incidents, we were investigating more naturalistic responses. In this respect, most teachers in the current study did not spontaneously discuss solutions (i.e., what the bystanders could do) in response to the inappropriate behaviors being portrayed in books about bullying. This suggests that a lack of knowledge and/or awareness about the role of bystanders may be underpinning the unintentional omission. Therefore, regardless of whether the behaviors are deemed inappropriate, bully-like or examples of bullying, it is important that the behaviors are recognized as a problem that needs to be addressed early. Thus, the broader issue is how to ensure that potential active bystander strategies (or defender strategies) are central to any discussions about bullying behaviors in early childhood. One way this can be achieved is through increased knowledge and understanding amongst early childhood professionals. For that reason, alongside professional development, teacher training programs need to ensure that

there is a strong focus on the social and emotional development of children. In particular, the topic of bullying and the critical importance of the peer group for helping to reduce bullying behaviors should be included in the curriculum (Green, 2021; Mazzone et al., 2021; Rigby, 2018; Spears et al., 2018). For example, early childhood teacher training programs and professional development programmes could include information about bullying and how it differs from typical childhood aggression (Parsa, 2023). They could provide pre-service teachers with materials (i.e., based on research studies) that have been shown to improve defending behaviour in early childhood classrooms (Rosen et al., 2025; Wee et al., 2022). Strategies that would be appropriate to teach young children include seeking adult help, offering comfort to the victim and depending on the circumstances there may be some children who would be confident enough to verbally ‘call out’ the perpetrator. For example, in keeping with typical classroom behaviours, a witness may be encouraged to tell a perpetrator that they are not being a good friend. Which strategies children are taught may differ depending on the context and could also differ across cultures. This increased emphasis on understanding bullying in early childhood is particularly important, as it is evident that parents as primary socialization agents are unlikely to spontaneously cover this topic as part of their socialization practices (Green, 2025; Green et al., 2025).

The increased recognition and understanding by teachers that bullying behaviors (whether intentional or not) have their beginnings in early childhood would enable a shift in focus from pity for the victims, to one where there is an increased awareness that perpetrators may also need help in learning to behave more appropriately. This help may involve some sort of intervention which would contribute to preventing further occurrences of misbehavior. Similarly, the shift in focus may also help preschool-aged children, who are typically passive bystanders, to feel more empowered knowing that something can and should be done to help the victim. As teachers cannot possibly be involved in every peer interaction, recruiting the peer group to assist in helping each other by learning appropriate defender behaviors can provide preschool aged-children with the opportunity to show agency and compassion.

Finally, regarding the books themselves. Typically books about bullying are written from the perspective of the victim, who is often expected to solve the issue themselves, with little mention of the bystanders (Oppliger & Davis, 2016). However, with appropriate training and knowledge about the existence and importance of peer victimization (or bullying) in early childhood, teachers could compensate for the limited storylines to ensure that preschool-aged children are aware of the potential strategies they could use from an early age.

4. Conclusion

The way teachers discussed stories about bullying with young children in the current study provides evidence that their professional socialization practices, particularly around the topic of bystander behaviours, may be limited. The consequence of this omission by most teachers of any discussion of possible bystander strategies could be viewed as a type of ‘silent socialization’ (Green, 2025). In turn, this potentially unintentional lapse may have consequences for children entering school, and for the prevention of bullying. Specifically, in the absence of any intervention, most children will likely continue to abide by the pervasive social norm of passive bystanding when witnessing bullying behaviors.

Funding

The current research was supported by a grant from the Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Research Fund awarded to the first author (Principal Investigator) (VUW2021; E3836). The fifth and sixth authors were Associate Investigators on this grant.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Vanessa A. Green: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Tessa Jacobsen-Grocott:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Isabel Taylor-Holmes:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation. **Emma Pitt:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Christina Salmivalli:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis. **Marc Wilson:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis. **Kelsey Taylor:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The methodology for this study was approved by the Victoria University of Wellington, Ethics Committee (Reference number: 29429). Informed consent was obtained from all teacher participants, and from the parents of the children who were being read to. A modified consent was also obtained from the children who were under five years.

Acknowledgements

We would like to sincerely thank the teachers and children for participating in this study. We would also like to thank the following additional post-graduate students and research assistants for their contributions to the selection of the books, recruitment of participants, data collection and data coding: Hayley Robinson, Zoe Donald, Ari Thomason, Siobhan Gardiner, Stacey Reedy, Miro Tidswell, Grace Connery, Sarah Scarrow, Gemma Woolcock, Bevan Connell, Shania de Terte, Uella McBryde, Ambah Lintern, Brittany Moore, Shrinidhi Bharadwaj, Ali Porteous, Gabrielle Watson, Sola Freeman and Rose Ellis.

Data availability

The dataset generated during this study are available in an OSF project. Social Worlds of Young Children DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/3MWAJ.

References

- Allan, K., Johnston, M., Boddy, E., & Green, V. A. (2026). Mothers’ and fathers’ definitions of bullying and the strategies they would recommend to their children in response to bullying. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 44, 62–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2024.2435004>
- Alsaker, F., & Nägele, C. (2008). Bullying in kindergarten and prevention. In D. Pepler, & W. Craig (Eds.), *1. Understanding and addressing bullying: An international perspective PREVNet Series* (pp. 230–248). Authorhouse.
- Alsaker, F. D. (2004). The Bernese program against victimization in kindergarten and elementary school (Be-Prox). In P. K. Smith, D. Pepler, & K. Rigby (Eds.), *Bullying in schools: How successful can interventions be?* (pp. 289–306). Cambridge University Press.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Beauchesne, M. A., Farquharson, P. E., & Beauchemin, P. (2017). Buddies not bullies: An approach to bullying prevention education in preschool children, their families and the community. *Nursing Children and Young People*, 29(3), 41–45. <https://doi.org/10.7748/ncyp.2017.e843>
- Belacchi, C., & Farina, F. (2010). Prosocial/hostile roles and emotion comprehension in preschoolers. *Aggressive Behavior*, 36, 371–389. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20361>
- Boddy, E., Johnston, M., Allan, K., Jacobsen-Grocott, T., & Green, V. A. (2024). The relationship between parents’ own responses to childhood bullying and what strategies they would recommend to their children. *Trends in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43076-024-00391-2>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard university press.
- Brownwell, C. A., Svetlova, M., & Nichols, S. (2009). To share or not to share: When do toddlers respond to others’ needs? *Infancy*, 14(1), 117–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15250000802569868>

- Cameron, D. L., & Kovac, V. B. (2016). An examination of parents and preschool workers' perspectives on bullying in preschool. *Early Child Development and Care*, 186, 1961–1971. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1138290>
- Camodeca, M., Caravita, S. C. S., & Coppola, G. (2015). Bullying in preschool: The associations between participant roles, social competence, and social preference. *Aggressive Behavior*, 41, 310–321. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21541>
- Cooper, L. A., & Nickerson, A. B. (2013). Parent retrospective recollections of bullying and current views, concerns, and strategies to cope with children's bullying. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 22(4), 526–540. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-012-9606-0>
- Darley, J. M., & Latané, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 8(4), 377–383.
- Davis, T., & Greer, B. (2018). Teachers' beliefs and predictors of response to verbal, physical and relational bullying behaviour in preschool classrooms. *IAFOR Journal of Psychology and the Behavioral Sciences*, 4(2), 15–31.
- Eisenberg, N., & Harris, J. D. (1984). Social competence: A developmental perspective. *School Psychology Review*, 13(3), 267–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.1984.12085105>
- Espelege, D. L., & Swearer, S. M. (Eds.). (2004). *Bullying in American schools: A social-ecological perspective on prevention and intervention*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Fischer, P., Krueger, J. I., Greitemeyer, T., Vogrinic, C., Kastenmuller, A., Frey, D., ... Kainbacher, M. (2011). The bystander-effect: A meta-analytic review on bystander intervention in dangerous and non-dangerous emergencies. *Psychological Bulletin*, 137(4), 517–537. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023304>
- Fredrick, S. S., Jenkins, L. N., & Ray, K. (2020). Dimensions of empathy and bystander intervention in bullying in elementary school. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 79, 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2020.03.001>
- Freeman, G. G. (2014). The implementation of character education and children's literature to teach bullying characteristics and prevention strategies to preschool children: An action research project. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 42(5), 305–316. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-013-0614-5>
- Froschi, M., Sprung, B., Mullin-Rindler, N., Stein, N., & Gropper, N. (1998). *QUIT IT: A teacher's guide on teasing and bullying for use with students in grades K-3*. 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481: Publications Department, Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College.
- Goryl, O., Neilsen-Hewett, C., & Sweller, N. (2013). Teacher education, teaching experience and bullying policies: Links with early childhood teachers' perceptions and attitudes to bullying. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 38(2), 32–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911303800205>
- Grassetti, S. N., Hubbard, J. A., Smith, M. A., Bookhout, M. K., Swift, L. E., & Gawrysiak, M. J. (2018). Caregivers' advice and children's bystander behaviors during bullying incidents. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 47(1), 329–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2017.1295381>
- Grassetti, S. N., Hubbard, J. A., Docimo, M. A., Bookhout, M. K., Swift, L. E., & Gawrysiak, M. J. (2020). Parental advice to preadolescent bystanders about how to intervene during bullying differs by form of bullying. *Social Development*, 29(1), 290–302. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12397>
- Gray, J. A., & McNaughton, N. (2000). *The neuropsychology of anxiety. An enquiry into the functions of the septo-hippocampal system*. Clarendon Press/Oxford University.
- Gray, J. A. (1990). Brain systems that mediate both emotion and cognition. *Cognition and Emotion*, 4, 269–288.
- Green, V. A. (2021). The role of teachers. In P. K. Smith, & J. O'Higgins Norman (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of bullying: A comprehensive and international review of research and intervention*, 2 pp. 333–369. John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Green, V. A. (2025). The development of the bystander: A socialization oversight? In D. M. Green (Chair), Who holds the power? Using innovative studies to challenge thinking about bullying prevention. June 11–13 [Symposium]. World Antibullying Forum, Stavanger, Norway.
- Green, V. A., Jacobsen-Grocutt, T., Salmivalli, C., & Wilson, M. (2025). An observational study of parents reading a storybook about bullying to their young child: Are bystander responses discussed? *Social Development*, 34(3). <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12815>
- Karga, S., Chatzipemou, T., & Bibou-Nakou, I. (2021). Parents and bullying. In P. K. Smith, & J. O'Higgins Norman (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of bullying: A comprehensive and international review of research and intervention*, 1 pp. 433–449. John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Kirves, L., & Sajaniemi, N. (2012). Bullying in early educational settings. *Early Childhood Development and Care*, 182(3–4), 383–400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2011.646724>
- Kvestad, I., Adolfsen, F., Angeles, R. C., Brandseth, O. L., Breivik, K., Evertsen, J. G., Foer, I. K., Haaland, M., Homola, B. M., Hoseth, G. E., Jonsson, J., Kjerstad, E., Kyrrestad, H., Martinussen, M., Moberg, A., Moberg, K., Skogstrand, A., Solberg, L. R., & Aasheim, M. (2024). Effectiveness of a bullying intervention (Be-Prox) in Norwegian early childhood and education care centers: Protocol for a cluster randomized controlled trial. *JMIR Research Protocol*, 13, Article e60626. <https://doi.org/10.2196/60626>
- Latané, B., & Darley, J. M. (1970). Social determinants of bystander intervention in emergencies. *Altruism and Helping Behavior*, 13–27.
- Lee, S. H., Smith, P. K., & Monks, C. P. (2016). Participant roles in peer-victimization among young children in South Korea: Peer-, self-, and teacher-nominations. *Aggressive Behavior*, 42, 287–298. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21623>
- Levine, E., & Tamburino, M. (2014). Bullying among young children: Strategies for prevention. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 42, 271–278. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-013-0600-y>
- Licata, M., Williams, A., & Paulus, M. (2016). The development of empathy in early childhood. In D. F. Watt, & J. Panksepp (Eds.), *Psychology and neurobiology of empathy* (pp. 111–148). Nova Biomedical Books.
- Littlefield, L., Cavanagh, S., Knapp, R., & O'Grady, L. (2017). KidsMatter: Building the capacity of Australian primary schools and early childhood services to foster children's social and emotional skills and promote children's mental health. In E. Frydenberg, A. J. Martin, & R. J. Collie (Eds.), *Social and emotional learning in Australia and the Asia-Pacific* (pp. 293–311). Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3394-0>
- Maccoby, E. (2015). Historical overview of socialization research and theory. In J. E. Grusec, & P. D. Hastings (Eds.), *Handbook of socialization theory and research* (2nd ed, pp. 3–34). The Guilford Press.
- Mazzone, A., Kollerová, & O'Higgins Norman, J. (2021). Teachers' attitudes toward bullying: What do we know, and where do we go from here? In P. K. Smith, & J. O'Higgins Norman (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of bullying: A comprehensive and international review of research and intervention: 1* (pp. 139–157). John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- McGoey, K. M., Aberson, A., Green, B., & Bandi Stewart, S. (2023). Building foundations for friendship: Preventing bullying behavior in preschool. *Perspectives on Early Childhood Psychology and Education*, 7(1), 187–205. <https://doi.org/10.58948/2834-8257.1038>
- Mishna, F., Pepler, D., & Weiner, J. (2006). Factors associated with perceptions and responses to bullying situations by children, parents, teachers and principals. *Victims and Offenders*, 1(3), 255–288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564880600626163>
- Monks, C. P., & O'Toole, S. (2021). Bullying in preschool and infant school. In P. K. Smith, & J. O'Higgins Norman (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell handbook of bullying: A comprehensive and international review of research and intervention: 2* (pp. 3–19). John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Monks, C. P., Smith, P. K., & Swettenham, J. (2003). Aggressors, victims, and defenders in preschool: Peer, self-, and teacher reports. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 49(4), 453–469. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mpq.2003.0024>
- Monks, C. P., Palermitti, A., Ortega, F., & Costabile, A. (2011). A cross-national comparison of aggressors, victims, and defenders in preschools in England, Spain and Italy. *Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 14, 133–144. https://doi.org/10.5209/rev_SJOP.2011.v14.n1.11
- Monks, C. P., Smith, P. K., & Kucaba, K. (2021). Peer victimisation in early childhood: Observations of participant roles and sex differences. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(2), 415. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18020415>
- Offrey, L. D., & Rinaldi, C. M. (2017). Parent–child communication and adolescents' problem-solving strategies in hypothetical bullying situations. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 22(3), 251–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2014.884006>
- Olweus, D. (1993). *Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do*. Blackwell.
- Oppiger, P. A., & Davis, A. (2016). Portrayals of bullying: A content analysis of picture books for preschoolers. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 44, 515–526. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-015-0734-1>
- Ostrov, J. M., Massetti, G. M., Stauffacher, K., Godleski, S. A., Hart, K. C., Karch, K. M., Mullins, A. D., & Ries, E. E. (2009). An intervention for relational and physical aggression in early childhood: A preliminary study. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 24(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2008.08.002>
- Ostrov, J. M., Godleski, S. A., Kamper-DeMarco, K. E., Blakely-McClure, S. J., & Celenza, L. (2015). Replication and extension of the early childhood friendship project: Effects on physical and relational bullying. *School Psychology Review*, 44(4), 445–463. <https://doi.org/10.17105/spr-15-0048.1>
- Ostrov, J. M., Kamper-DeMarco, K. E., Blakely-McClure, S. J., et al. (2019). Prospective associations between aggression/bullying and adjustment in preschool: Is general aggression different from bullying behavior? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28, 2572–2585. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1055-y>
- Parsa, A. (2023). *Early childhood teachers' and parents' perception of aggression and bullying behaviour in New Zealand's early childhood settings [Doctoral dissertation]*. Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington. Open Access Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington. <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.24202419>
- Repo, L., & Sajaniemi, N. (2015). Bystanders' roles and children with special educational needs in bullying situations among preschool-aged children. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 35(1), 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2014.953917>
- Reunamo, J., Kallioma, M., Repo, L., Salminen, E., Lee, H. C., & Wang, L. C. (2015). Children's strategies in addressing bullying situations in day care and preschool. *Early Childhood Development and Care*, 185, 952–967. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2014.973871>
- Rigby, K. (2018). Exploring the gaps between teachers' beliefs about bullying and research based knowledge. *International Journal of School and Educational Psychology*, 6(3), 165–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683603.2017.1314835>
- Rosen, L. H., Scott, S. R., & Higgins, M. G. (2025). Books and bullies: Responses to bullying in preschool students. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 7, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-023-00171-z>
- Salmivalli, C., Lagerspetz, K., Björkqvist, K., Österman, K., & Kaukiainen, A. (1996). Bullying as a group process: Participant roles and their relations to social status within the group. *Aggressive Behavior*, 22(1), 1–15.
- Salmivalli, C. (2010). Bullying and the peer group: A review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15, 112–120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.08.007>
- Saracho, O. N. (2016). Bullying: Young children's roles, social status, and prevention programs. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187, 68–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1150275>

- Scarrow, S. (2021). *How appropriate are storybooks for facilitating discussion around bullying and defending behaviours? [Unpublished Master of Educational Psychology Report]*. Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington.
- Schäfer, M., Korn, S., Smith, P. K., Hunter, S. C., Mora-Merchán, J. A., Singer, M. M., & Van der Meulen, K. (2004). Lonely in the crowd: Recollections of bullying. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 22(3), 379–394. <https://doi.org/10.1348/0261510041552756>
- Siligato, E., Iuele, G., Barbera, M., Bruno, F., Tordonato, G., Mautone, A., & Rizzo, A. (2024). Freezing effect and bystander effect: Overlaps and differences. *Psych*, 6(1), 273–287. <https://doi.org/10.3390/psych6010017>
- Spears, B., Taddeo, A., Ey, C., Stretton, L., Carslake, T., A., Langos, C., ... Sundaram, S. (2018). Pre-service teachers' understanding of bullying in Australia and India. In P. K. Smith, S. Sundaram, B. A. Spears, C. Blaya, M. Shafer, & D. Sandhu (Eds.), *Bullying, cyberbullying and students' wellbeing in schools: Comparing European, Australian and Indian perspectives* (pp. 208–235). Cambridge University Press.
- Spinrad, T. L., & Gal, D. E. (2018). Fostering prosocial behavior and empathy in young children. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 20, 40–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.08.004>
- Stives, K. L., May, D. C., Bethel, C. L., & Mack, M. (2021). Understanding responses to bullying from the parent perspective. *Frontiers in Education: Educational Psychology*, 6, Article 642367. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.642367>
- Swit, C., McMaugh, A. L., & Warburton, W. A. (2018). Teacher and parent perceptions of relational and physical aggression during early childhood. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 27, 118–130. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0861-y>
- Swit, C. S., Blakely-McClure, S. J., & Kamper-DeMarco, K. K. E. (2023). Preventing bullying in preschool-age children: Predictors of defending behaviour. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 5, 202–216. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-023-00166-w>
- Swit, C. S. (2018). Early childhood educators' and parents' perceptions of bullying in preschool. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 47(3), 19–27. <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/wgtn.ac.nz?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/early-childhood-educators-parents-perceptions/docview/2166298264/se-2?accountid=14782>
- Tanrikulu, I. (2020). Teacher reports on early childhood bullying: How often, who, what, when and where. *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(4), 489–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1479404>
- Wee, S.-J., Kim, S. J., Chung, K., & Kim, M. (2022). Development of children's perspective-taking and empathy through bullying-themed books and role-playing. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 36(1), 96–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2020.1864523>