


## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# An Observational Study of Parents Reading a Storybook About Bullying to Their Young Child: Are Bystander Responses Discussed?

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of bullying the developmental progression of how and why most children remain as passive bystanders is unclear. Early socialization practices such as *how* parents read storybooks that depict bullying to their young children may be a contributing factor. Structured video-recorded observations of 97 parent–child dyads (85 mothers) (M age of children = 37.9 m) were conducted in participants' own homes. Participants were instructed to read a specifically adapted book that included child and adult witnesses, and the repetition of inappropriate—but developmentally typical—preschool behavior. Of the 1767 comments made by the parents (that were not part of the story script), 614 referred to the moral messages conveyed in the story; however, only nine of these comments were bystander-related and were made by five parents. One parent made suggestions about what a witness could do to help the victim. There were no statistically significant relationships between the likelihood of parents highlighting bullying/bystander behaviour and their own experiences of child/adolescent bullying. The findings from this study suggest that children may be inadvertently socialized into passive bystanding behaviour when witnessing bullying because defending behaviours are not typically taught to young children. This omission may be considered as a type of *silent socialization*.

## 1 | Introduction

Storybook reading is one of the typical socialization practices that parents use to facilitate language development as well as moral behaviour and values with their preschool aged children (Aram et al. 2013; Brownell et al. 2013) including the development of prosocial attitudes (Schapira and Aram 2020). Storybook-reading has also been used as a tool for helping young children to manage complex social issues such as bullying within pre-school settings (e.g., Freeman 2013; Rosen et al. 2025; Wee et al. 2022). Despite the availability of many storybooks about bullying (see Oppliger and Davis 2015) little is known about the naturalistic, and thereby unprompted discussions that may arise between parents and

young children when reading storybooks that depict bullying behaviours. In addition to potentially discussing the problematic social interactions portrayed in the storybook (i.e., bullying behaviour), it is unclear whether parents make suggestions about what any witnesses to the bullying behaviours depicted, could do to help the victim.

Bullying occurs across the lifespan within a wide range of contexts (Smith and O'Higgins Norman 2021) and is defined as intentional harmful behaviour that is repeated and where there is a power imbalance between the bully and victim (Olweus 1993). It is a major global social issue with approximately a fifth of school-age children reporting that they experience bullying several

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times a month (OECD 2023). Bullying has significant potential negative short and long-term consequences for all those involved (Arseneault et al. 2006; Smith and O'Higgins Norman 2021; Vaillancourt et al. 2013).

It has been well established that the peer group is a key influence on the development and maintenance of bullying (Espelage and Swearer 2004). Therefore, bullying is often considered to be a group process where each participant (i.e., victim, bully, assistant to bully, reinforcer of the bully, defender, and outsider) has a role to play and is influenced by the actions of others' participant roles (Salmivalli et al. 1996). A rare minority adopt the role of defender and either come to the aid of the victim, seek adult assistance, or stand up to the bully, while most witnesses, onlookers or outsiders assume the role of a bystander and do not intervene (Salmivalli 2010). How the participant roles play out in any given bullying incident are highly relevant to understanding and preventing bullying. This is likely because, unlike single acts of aggression, bullying appears to be perpetuated in part by the existence of bystanders (Salmivalli et al. 1996).

Given that bullying behaviour has been identified in early childhood (Saracho 2016), considerable attention has been given to understanding how it may differ from the typical aggressive behaviour displayed during these early years (Ostrov et al. 2009). For example, bullying in early childhood is not as easily defined because the behaviour is not always repeated and the targets are not necessarily more vulnerable. As such the behaviours are often referred to as bully-like, and a precursor to bullying behaviour (Levine and Tamburrino 2014; Saracho 2016; Swit 2018; Swit et al. 2018). Although the pattern of participant roles identified in the school-based literature are already evident in the preschool years, they are more fluid (Belacchi and Farina 2010; Camodeca et al. 2015; Monks et al. 2021; Saracho 2016). According to Monks et al. (2021), while most incidents have witnesses, few children become reinforcers, assistants or defenders and most take on the role of a bystander. In doing so they inadvertently help to maintain the social norm of inaction; thereby reinforcing the bullying behaviour (Barhight et al. 2017). According to Camodeca et al. (2015) bystander children appear uncertain about how to interact positively with peers, which puts them at risk for becoming enablers of the bully and for engaging in bullying behaviour themselves (Camodeca et al. 2015; Monks et al. 2003). Defenders, however, show higher levels of empathy and prosocial behaviour than their peers (Swit et al. 2023) and this behaviour appears to increase with age (Belacchi and Farina 2010; Camodeca et al. 2015). They are more socially competent than those in other participant roles (Camodeca et al. 2015) and they are also more likely to defend in situations that involve relational or verbal bullying rather than physical bullying (Swit et al. 2023; Tanrikulu 2020). In addition, as less bullying occurs in classrooms where children take on defender roles (Salmivalli et al. 2011), increasing the number of children who take on a defender role not only reduces the impact on the victims, but also helps to reduce overall bullying and may help to create a more inclusive environment.

Studies in early childhood contexts have highlighted interventions to prevent bullying behaviours and encourage proactive bystanding (Kvestad et al. 2024; McGoey et al. 2023; Ostrov et al. 2009; Ostrov et al. 2015). For example, in a study with 21 preschoolers conducted by Wee et al. (2022), early childhood

teachers were asked to discuss bullying-themed storybooks and facilitate role playing scenarios with the children. The results showed an improvement in the children's empathy toward the victims in the story. In addition, Rosen et al. (2025) reported on a study where young children were read storybooks where the bystanders stepped in to help. They found that because of this intervention the older children in particular (i.e., 4-year-olds) were less likely to suggest bystander inaction. These studies suggest that the use of storybooks with preschool aged children to help promote defending behaviour is a potentially useful form of early intervention. However, the developmental progression of *how* and *why* most children begin their preschool journey as passive bystanders (i.e., onlookers), and without intervention rarely become defenders, is still unclear. It is possible that the progression may be influenced by early socialization practices.

By 3 years of age, most children have begun to display the type of empathetic response that suggests they are not only aware of others' distress but are becoming more capable of helping others to relieve their distress (Brownwell et al. 2009; Licata et al. 2016). This progression is aided by parental socialization practices that emphasize the development of moral values and positive social interactions (Maccoby 2015). For example, in an early study by Laird et al. (1994) mothers' natural conversations with their preschool aged children typically included advice about peer aggression, and good advice was predictive of children's social competence. However, when considering challenging social situations such as bullying in early childhood, there is still a small percentage of parents and teachers who have some uncertainty about what constitutes bullying and how it may differ from aggression (Cameron and Kovac 2016; Parsa 2023; Swit 2018). Parents, for example, are reluctant to label young children as 'bullies' and some don't believe that children *can* bully peers (Swit 2018). Furthermore, they are more likely to downplay its occurrence in early childhood (Cameron and Kovac 2016). In a study of 73 parents of preschool aged children in New Zealand conducted by Swit (2018), although the majority of parents believed young children were capable of bullying, 13% indicated that they were unsure. Furthermore, in a study by Parsa (2023) that included 107 parents, most parents could accurately identify a scenario displaying physical bullying. However, for the verbal bullying scenario 30% mis-labelled the scenario as aggression and 22% were unsure. While in a study by Cameron and Kovac (2016) approximately 20% of the 141 parent participants believed that the attention given to bullying in early childhood was undeserved. Given that some parents are uncertain about what constitutes bullying or the importance of addressing bullying in early childhood, there may be missed opportunities to discuss the topic of bullying and perhaps more importantly what can be done about it when engaged in typical socialization practices such as storybook reading.

To illustrate the potential impact of parents' early socialization practices surrounding difficult social situations such as bullying, we can be guided by research on racial prejudice socialization. For example, Pahlke et al. (2012) asked 84 European American mothers in the USA to read two stories to their young children. The first book included racially diverse child characters but didn't explicitly mention race or ethnicity; while the second book was designed to raise issues of racial prejudice by posing questions about what would happen if zebras lost their stripes. The authors

found that the vast majority of mothers made no comments about race, ethnicity, diversity or intergroup contact. In particular, the parents didn't mention the racial diversity illustrated in the first book and while over half the parents had discussions about diversity while reading the second book, the theme of discrimination was rarely discussed. When asked, the parents indicated their avoidance was intentional because they did not want to 'sound racist' (Pahlke et al. 2012). As the authors suggest, by ignoring the obvious racial diversity depicted in the first story and avoiding the topic of discrimination in the second story and instead adopting what the parents' thought was a positive 'colour-blinded' attitude, their children often came to view colour as a taboo subject. In turn they developed misguided and racist beliefs about people with different coloured skin from their own. These data suggest that there are likely to be negative impacts on children's attitudes and behaviours because of parents failing to acknowledge and discuss the obvious differences in children's skin colour and not discussing the topic of discrimination.

Although Pahlke et al. (2012) focused upon the development of racism, parallels may be drawn with whether parents discuss bullying and victimization, and in particular bystanding behaviour with their children. It may follow that when reading stories that depict bullying to their preschool aged children, if parents minimize the importance of the behaviours being illustrated and don't suggest any strategies for helping the victim, the children themselves may believe that nothing can be done when witnessing bullying incidents.

The role of parents in the development and maintenance of bullying and victimization has been well established (Conners-Burrow et al. 2009; Karga et al. 2021; Offrey and Rinaldi 2017). In particular, parents have been asked to define bullying, provide the strategies they have suggested to their children in the past or indicate what they would say to their children in response to hypothetical scenarios (e.g., Allan et al. 2024; Karga et al. 2021; Offrey and Rinaldi 2017; Stives et al. 2021) as well as how effective these strategies were and whether they would recommend them to their children (e.g., Boddy et al. 2024). However, there is evidence to suggest that many parents are uncertain about the definition of bullying and how they can help their children manage bullying incidents (Allan et al. 2024; Boddy et al. 2024; Ey and Campbell 2020; Karga et al. 2021; Navarro et al. 2021). For example, only 17% of 185 Australian parents of 5- to 10-year-olds mentioned a power difference as being a key component of bullying (Ey and Campbell 2020). While 86.2% of the 260 parents surveyed by Cooper and Nickerson (2013) said they would recommend avoidance strategies to their children. Other studies have found some parents dismiss incidents of bullying and consider it to be a normal part of growing up (Boddy et al. 2024; Greeff and Van den Berg 2013; Lovegrove et al. 2013; Waasdorp et al. 2011).

Parents have also been specifically asked to guide their child through scenarios depicting bullying and provide direct advice on how to respond as a bystander (e.g., Grasseti et al. 2017; Grasseti et al. 2020). Using an in vivo research design, Grasseti et al. (2017) audio-recorded 106 parents and their school aged children (mean age = 10.5 years) as they worked through specific hypothetical scenarios that depicted typical bullying incidents. Parents were prompted to give advice to their children about what to do if they

witnessed each incident (Grasseti et al. 2017; Grasseti et al. 2020). The findings demonstrated that defending behaviour exhibited by the child participants at school was linked to the extent to which their parents had high expectations and stressed the importance of comforting and helping a victimized peer. Although 90% of parental advice fell into one of the three categories: stop the bully, help/comfort the victim, or tell an adult, there were parents who explicitly advised their school aged children *not* to get involved in bullying incidents. According to Grasseti et al. (2017) these parents may be teaching their children to assume the role of passive bystander or even to become enablers of the bully.

The reasons why parents may avoid, downplay or are uncertain about the definition of bullying and how to address it is still unclear, but may be influenced by their own childhood experiences (Boddy et al. 2024; Karga et al. 2021; Mishna et al. 2006). For example, parents of children who are experiencing bullying, and were themselves victims or witnesses of bullying are more likely to offer their child suggestions for coping (Cooper and Nickerson 2013). The Grasseti et al. (2017) studies demonstrated that, *when prompted*, parents appear to make specific choices about the type of advice they give when discussing the topic of witnessing bullying with their school aged child. What is still unknown is whether parents spontaneously provide advice to their preschool aged children when they *aren't* prompted and whether this is related to their own childhood experiences of bullying and victimization.

The present study was designed to extend one aspect of the Pahlke et al. (2012) study by focusing on an alternate complex social issue (i.e., bullying). We investigated what parents naturally discuss with their preschool aged children when asked to read a storybook about a challenging social topic or issue. We provided parents with a specifically designed developmentally appropriate storybook that explicitly presented bullying behaviours and included bystander characters. However, the text did not mention the word bullying or provide any prompts.

The first aim of this observational study was to determine whether parents spontaneously talk about the moral underpinnings of a story depicting bullying behaviours. This aim was based on the findings that typical early socialization practices include the encouragement of prosocial attitudes. In addition, it was also based on the findings from the Pahlke et al. (2012) study where half the parents talked about diversity in the book about zebras losing their stripes. Furthermore, the parents self-selected into a research study about the prevention of bullying and so it was likely they would be interested in this topic. However, the literature suggests there is some uncertainty amongst parents about both the definition of bullying and what behaviours constitute different types of bullying. Therefore, although we predicted that most parents would provide additional commentary on the moral underpinnings of the story, we made no prediction about whether parents would use the term bullying or refer to or identify the behaviours in the book as examples of bullying.

The second aim was to determine whether parents would spontaneously discuss the bystander characters (i.e., adult and child witnesses) and what these characters could potentially do to help the victim. There is evidence that defending behaviour is rarely observed in early childhood and is only performed

by a minority of children. This would suggest that defending behaviour may not be a topic typically discussed as part of socialization practices. Finally, in the Pahlke et al. (2012) study the authors noted that although half the parents mentioned diversity in the book about zebras losing their stripes, they did not go one step further to discuss the social issue of discrimination with their preschool children. Therefore, we predicted that any discussion of bystanding behaviour and the use of strategies related to defending or helping the victim would be unlikely; potentially because of the complexity of the social dynamic being presented.

A subsidiary aim was to determine whether parents' own role in school bullying and victimization was related to their discussions when reading a storybook with their child that depicts bullying behaviours. There is some evidence from a study by Cooper and Nickerson (2013) that parents who were themselves victims or witnesses of bullying are more likely to offer their child suggestions for coping, however their study was with parents of school age children in a prompted survey, so it is unclear whether this relationship would be evident in an unprompted observational situation with preschool aged children.

## 2 | Method

### 2.1 | Ethics

The study was approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee (approval number: 29429). It is important to note that the participants were informed about the general purpose of the project. In particular, the recruitment flyers and information sheets included statements such as 'Our project explores bully-like behaviour in early childhood and aims to improve methods of bullying prevention ...'. However, there was no mention of the specific topic of bystanding or defending behaviours and related terminology in any of the materials provided before participation. Participants were debriefed to the full purpose of the study after their participation was completed.

#### 2.1.1 | Recruitment

Participants were recruited via online platforms (e.g., Facebook parenting groups, Playgroup email lists), early childhood education centres, and via community spaces and businesses. For example, flyers were placed in playgrounds, community centres, libraries, sports centres, small businesses such as cafés, and local cultural centres. The flyers included a dedicated email address, and a QR code linking to a website providing full details of the project, along with the opportunity to sign up or ask further questions via an online form. If interested, participants were directed to provide their contact information and details to facilitate arranging a reading session for them and their child.

#### 2.1.2 | Participants

Data were collected from 102 parent-child dyads as part of a larger project. Three of these parents did not complete the demographic information; one additional parent spoke a language other than English throughout the interaction and therefore we were unable

to accurately translate the session. An additional parent did not begin by reading the assigned storybook. Therefore, the usable sample included ninety-seven parent (85 mothers) and child dyads (49 girls and 48 boys). Parents ranged in age from 28 to 67 years ( $M = 37.45$ ,  $SD = 5.62$ ). Most participants reported their ethnicity as European (93.81% of parents and 95.88% of children). While the remaining 7% included Māori, Pacific Islander, Indian, South African, South American, and Asian. The children ranged in age from 24 to 60 months ( $M = 37.95$ ,  $SD = 9.82$ ). The families lived in a range of socioeconomic areas within an urban centre, with a mean decile of 3.37. Decile scores range from 1 to 10, with 1 representing the *least* economically deprived 10% of the population.

### 2.1.3 | Materials: Storybook

In their content analysis study Oppliger and Davis (2015) presented a list of 100 children's storybooks that discuss bullying. In addition to those listed, we sourced an additional 40 storybooks and cross-checked them against the following criteria: whether they accurately portrayed bullying that met Olweus' (1993) definition, whether there were passive bystander characters present, whether they were age appropriate for 2- to 5-year-olds, and whether a positive resolution was reached in the story. Nine books were identified as meeting at least some of the aforementioned criteria. To ensure face validity of the materials, a small study was conducted (i.e., Scarrow 2021) where these books were presented to five parents of young children and three early childhood educators. None of the books were found to meet all the criteria. There was consensus from the group that two books met most of the criteria and that one of them would be acceptable for this study provided adaptations were made (i.e., Llama Llama and the Bully Goat). The book met the criteria of accurately portraying bullying, containing passive bystanders, and having a positive resolution to the story.

The original book contained cartoon style anthropomorphic animal characters including two main characters (i.e., Gilroy Goat and Llama Llama). The adapted book used the original images, including Gilroy Goat and Llama Llama along with some of the original wording, but was set in a new fictional play area (Toyrama). The new adapted book was renamed Llama Llama goes to Toyrama. The adaptation involved creating a short and focused storyline within the text; maximizing the number of critical (i.e., bullying) incidents and creating an ending that was in keeping with our ethical requirements. The book adaptation fits within the fair use principles, as it was created for private use only and will not be distributed or profited from in any way.

The storyline was re-written to ensure that parents were given optimal opportunity to refer to the witnesses/bystanders and this was done by introducing these characters both visually and through the story content from the start of the book (i.e., all the characters were identified and were seen playing together). Furthermore, the story format was specifically designed to create three intentional critical incidents that were developmentally appropriate (i.e., would be typical within this age group), but were not so severe as to cause undue stress to the child participants. The use of repeated incidents by the same character helped to demonstrate intentionality and repetitiveness, in keeping with at

least two of the three definitional characteristics of a traditional bullying definition. In particular, Gilroy Goat engaged in mean and inappropriate behaviour toward Llama Llama, including name calling, pulling faces, mocking, and stomping on Llama Llama's belongings. This happened repeatedly and in front of several witness characters, who remained as passive bystanders throughout the story. Although the story ended with a positive resolution, whereby the characters parted as friends as they each left the play area, there was no intervention from preschool aged or adult witnesses. The story script included 240 words and took approximately 5 min to read.

#### 2.1.4 | Instruments

Participants were directed to an online survey link after the session and provided responses to demographic questions (i.e., gender, ethnicity and age), along with completing a battery of survey measures as part of the larger study. One of the measures participants completed was either an adapted or original version of the Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire (RBQ; Schäfer et al. 2004). These two versions were being compared as part of another research project. There was very minimal direct overlap between these two versions of the RBQ, meaning the data could not be used interchangeably. However, all participants answered one question about whether they had any involvement in school-based bullying. In particular, the participants ticked the box that best described their experiences. The choices were: (a) I was not involved, and I never saw it happen, (b) I was not involved, but saw it happen sometimes, (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.

#### 2.1.5 | Procedures

In order to increase the ecological validity of the observations, the setting for the study was within each participant's home. To ensure that the procedures were suitable, a pilot session was conducted with a parent and their young child. After arriving at the participant's home, the research team (always two individuals) began by briefly getting acquainted with the participating parent and child and gathering information about the environment (e.g., other children or adults present in the home, what else was happening on the day). Once everyone was settled, the researchers ran through consent protocols with the parent and child and set up recording equipment, after which instructions were given to the parent. A small action camera was used to record video, and a lapel mic worn by the parent, was used to record audio. The consent protocols involved parents signing a consent form which covered the recording and confidentiality of the data they provided, as well as their right to withdraw from the study during or after their session. Children were also taken through a consent form, guided by their parent, to indicate their happiness to take part in the study, and it was clearly explained to the child that they could stop participation at any point.

All parents were given identical instructions and a copy of the storybook that had been created for this project. Parents were

not given the opportunity to read the book beforehand. The research assistant introduced the task by saying 'Please read this book how you normally read books together, as if there was no research going on.' Written instructions were also provided in case the parent wished to refer to them during the session ('We encourage you to read the story as if it were any other story you would normally read to your child'). In keeping with the naturalistic setting, parents were not given a time limit on how long it should take them to read the story. As this study was part of a larger project, the parents were also given further verbal and written instructions about a following task they completed with their child (not reported here). To further increase the ecological validity of the activity and in response to the pilot session, the research team waited outside the house or in a separate room while the session took place and returned once it was finished (parents called or texted if the researchers were outside the home). This procedure of leaving the room was one adopted by Grasseti et al. (2017) and allowed the parents and children to read the story together in a more naturalistic manner. Each home visit took around 30 min to an hour in total. Directly after the storybook reading task, the parents were asked to complete an additional activity called the Preschool Caregiver Advice Measure (PCAM – Green and Jacobsen-Grocott 2023). This dataset was part of a larger project and is reported elsewhere. At the end of the session the parents were directed to an online questionnaire (see instruments) to complete in their own time. Children received stickers for their participation and parents were posted out a debriefing letter along with a \$50 voucher. Any participants who chose to withdraw or didn't complete the questionnaire still received the debriefing letter and voucher. To ensure procedural integrity, checks were carried out for each session by a second research assistant who was present during each session.

#### 2.1.6 | Observational Coding of Storybook Reading Activity

Videos were transcribed by five trained postgraduate research assistants who were also involved in data collection. To ensure accuracy, 75% of the transcripts and accompanying videos were then cross-checked by a sixth postgraduate research assistant who was blind to the purpose of the study. There was no evidence of missed/misunderstood verbal behaviour. A novel coding scheme that included three codes was developed for the purpose of the study by the first author and two postgraduate students. The research team developed the codes using a modified analytic induction technique (Bogdan and Biklen 1992) based in part on a priori hypothesis and the content of the video transcripts.

The first code was called 'critical' and related to the plot (i.e., the three critical incidents). It involved identifying any use of the word bullying (or related terms), referring to the repeated nature of the incidents, as well as comments that highlighted the inappropriate or mean behaviours being exhibited by the protagonist. It also included comments about emotions or feelings associated with the bullying incidents and the importance of friendship and kindness. A second code that was used alongside the first code involved identifying whether parents mentioned bystander behaviour or related words (e.g., witnessing, watching, defending,

**TABLE 1** | Comments made by parent participants while reading a story to their young child that depicted bullying behaviours.

Comment type	No. of parents	No. of comments	M (SD)
All types (combined)	97 (100%)	1,767 (100%)	18.22 (16.32)
Surface level comments	97 (100%)	1,153 (65.3%)	11.89 (10.35)
Critical incident comments	72 (74.2%)	614 (34.2%)	6.24 (8.65)
Bystander comments	5 (0.05%)	9 (0.01%)	0.09 (0.43)

standing up to the bully, helping the victim, providing comfort, telling an adult). It is important to note that by design these terms/potential behaviours were never mentioned in the story script, however the potential 'bystanders' (e.g., adult characters and the friendship group) were illustrated and named, and therefore present throughout the book. Thus, if parents mentioned bystander or any related terms, this would represent new information being inserted into the storyline by the parents. The critical comments (including the bystander comments) were further divided into statements that were 1) related to the story characters and content (e.g., 'That was mean of Gilroy, he has a frowny face', 'Llama looks sad') and 2) comments that went beyond the story and were related to the child (e.g., 'Are children mean in your preschool sometimes?', 'You also like being a good friend'). A third code was the identification of surface level comments that were not connected to any of the critical incidents (e.g., related to aspects of the story content, such as the characters baking a cake or going on a playdate).

One of the two trained postgraduate research assistants who helped develop the coding scheme coded all 97 transcripts against the three codes listed above. A second trained postgraduate research assistant coded 50% of the 97 transcripts for inter-rater reliability. Each comment was individually coded and agreements on each were calculated as follows;  $\text{Agreement}/(\text{Agreements} + \text{Disagreements}) \times 100$  (item agreement = 95.5%). This initial layer of coding revealed that critical comments including bystander comments were split into story-related and child-related comments. As such, those transcripts that included critical comments' and bystander comments ( $n = 72$ ) were then subjected to a further layer of coding for story-related and child-related comments. A third trained postgraduate research assistant coded a random sample of 30% of these 72 transcripts for a further measure of inter-rater reliability (item agreement = 88.53%).

### 3 | Results

The first aim was to determine whether parents spontaneously discuss the moral underpinnings of the story by mentioning the inappropriate behaviours and/or the potential emotional impact on the victim displayed in the book, and whether the parents referred to the behaviours as examples of bullying. As can be seen in Table 1, there were 1767 comments made about the story by the 97 parents over and above what was written in the script. The majority of comments (1153, 65.3%) were classified as surface level. Although all 97 parents made surface level comments, there were only 72 of these parents (74.2%) who made 614 comments

about the critical incidents in the story (i.e., the plot) including comments about the witnesses (bystanders) (see second aim). The vast majority of the critical comments (i.e., 605) were related to the inappropriate behaviour being portrayed by the protagonist and the emotional impact on the victim. The comments included identifying that the protagonist was being 'a bit mean' or 'not a very nice friend', the emotional impact on the victim, and the importance of friendship. There were no comments made by parents that specifically included the term bullying; nor were there any comments describing the behaviours as examples of bullying. In addition, no parents referred to the repetitive nature of the inappropriate behaviours toward the victim.

The second aim was to determine whether parents discussed the bystander characters (i.e., witnesses) and what the characters could potentially do to help the victim (i.e., defending, helping, telling an adult). Of the 614 critical incident comments there were just nine comments made by five parents related to bystander, witnessing or defending behaviour. For example, one parent referred to the 'cat' witness by saying 'The cat doesn't look very impressed' and 'The kitten as well is looking a bit worried. Hmm I wonder what he is worried about?'. Another parent referred to the witnesses by saying 'What do you think the others are thinking?'. While another parent referred to the cat (witness) by saying she is 'laughing and having fun', perhaps misinterpreting what was happening in the story. Of these five parents just one parent suggested a strategy. The parent said that if her child was a witness he could teach the protagonist how to behave appropriately and be a good friend. A more detailed analysis of the comments made by the 72 parents showed that most ( $n = 553$ ) were focused on the characters (i.e., the protagonist and the victim) in the book, while a smaller proportion of comments ( $n = 61$ ) involved extending the discussions by making a connection for the child between what the protagonist was doing to the victim and their child's own life experiences (e.g., 'Are kids mean in your preschool?').

Given the range in children's ages (24–60 months), bivariate correlations were calculated to examine whether child's age explained variance in the number and type of comments parents made while reading the storybook. The number of comments parents made in each of the surface, critical, and bystander categories were compared with children's age in months. As the raw data for child age did not meet linearity assumptions based on a Shapiro-wilk normality test ( $p < 0.001$ ), Spearman's correlations were calculated. No significant correlations were found between child age and the number of parents comments in any of the categories.

The third subsidiary aim of the study was to investigate whether the propensity to discuss bullying/victimization and in particular

bystander-related behaviour with their children while reading a storybook was related to the role parents may have played in their own school bullying incidents. Participants' responses to a question about their childhood/adolescent experiences of bullying and victimization were categorized into six types. The results from the 97 participants revealed that there were 40 adults who indicated they had been a victim of bullying (41.2%), 29 who had been bully/victims (29.9%), 21 who had seen bullying but didn't get involved (21.6%), four defenders (4.1%), two who identified as bullies (2.1%) and one who didn't see any bullying (1.03%). Given the sample size, number of coding categories and bullying experiences, a Fisher's test was conducted on the full set of variables ( $p = 0.3698$ ). A Chi-square test was also conducted after collapsing the six categories of past bullying experience into two (involved vs. not involved in bullying) and the story comment coding into two categories (surface level comments only vs. surface level plus critical incidents and bystander),  $X^2(1, N = 97) = 1.4472, p = 0.229$ . Neither the Fisher's test on the full set of categories nor the Chi-square test on the collapsed categories were significant, indicating that parents' own bullying experience doesn't appear to have a significant impact on the type of comments they make when reading a book that portrays bullying incidents.

#### 4 | Discussion

This systematic observational study of parents reading an adapted storybook to their young child found 95% of parents did not mention the bystanders and did not provide any suggestions about what could or should happen when bullying incidents are witnessed. In addition, none of the parents mentioned the word bullying, nor did they mention or discuss the repetitive nature of the inappropriate acts against the victim, (despite the protagonist engaging in three verbally and physically aggressive acts toward the same victim). Most parents ( $n = 72, 74.2\%$ ) did make at least one comment during the storybook reading activity that pertained to the critical incidents in the book by referring to, the inappropriate behaviours on display, the emotional impact on the victim and/or the importance of friendship. However, the number of comments still only represented approximately a third of all story-related comments made during the observation period. Furthermore, on average parents made more surface level comments compared to comments related to the critical incidents. The findings in the current study are similar to those found in the Pahlke et al. (2012) study. During the reading of the first book, which didn't mention race but depicted a racially diverse set of characters, most parents (93%) made no comments about race, ethnicity or intergroup contact. While during the reading of the second book (about zebras losing their stripes) they found that although over half the parents had 'discussions of diversity without mentioning people' (p. 1171), parents rarely discussed discrimination even though this was the overarching theme in the book.

Although both the current and the Pahlke et al. (2012) studies were investigating complex social issues, the Pahlke et al. study was designed to measure the development of racism and they were able to demonstrate through post-test interviews that this avoidance was intentional. The European American mothers avoided any racial discussions with their children because they

tended to abide by the misguided theory of colour-blindness. However, as there was no post-story interview conducted in the current study, it is unclear why the parents in the present study were able to discuss the emotions and mean behaviour, but didn't situate the behaviours within the context of bullying and discuss what if anything could be done to help the victim.

The participants understood they were involved in a bullying prevention research study, and therefore through self-selection would have been unlikely to oppose the notion of discussing bullying and victimization with young children. One explanation could be that it was simply an oversight—parents just never thought of it. An indication that the absence of bystander-related comments may be an oversight on the part of the parents, rather than an intentional omission, comes from related research by Grasseti et al. (2017) (2021) who found that, *when prompted*, parents were forthcoming with advice for their school aged children who may witness bullying incidents, and the majority suggest active bystander strategies. In the current study, despite the infrequency of active bystander suggestions made by parents, most made at least once reference to the emotions, feelings and mean behaviour being portrayed, which suggests an interest in discussing challenging topics with their young children. However, the fact that very few parents linked what was happening in the story back to their child's own experiences suggests there may be some hesitation. According to the content analysis of 100 storybooks about bullying conducted by Oppliger and Davis (2015), the majority of books were written from the perspective of the victim, with bystanders remaining as outsiders who rarely get involved. As the authors noted 'The status quo appears to simply prepare potential victims for the inevitable, that there will always be bullies' (p. 522). This suggests that even if parents are reading stories about bullying to their young children, they are not necessarily getting messages from the text about what anyone else can do to help. Future research regarding how frequently parents seek out storybooks about bullying and what messages these books have conveyed would be informative.

Another possible explanation for the findings is that most parents in the present study didn't recognize that the repeated inappropriate and intentional behaviour being exhibited by the protagonist was bullying. Previous literature suggests that there is some uncertainty amongst parents with regard to both the definition of bullying and how it may differ from aggressive behaviour. Also, considering the children's age, parents may have chosen to minimize the protagonist's behaviours (e.g., 'he is being a little bit mean, isn't he?'), so as not to concern their child and may have believed their child was too young to learn how to intervene. Another possible explanation for the limited responses from parents is that one reading of the storybook was insufficient to elicit in-depth commentary and that upon several readings the parents may have begun to elaborate on their discussions about the behaviour and eventually mentioned the bystanders. Future studies could allow for multiple readings. Furthermore the use of targeted materials that explicitly describe bullying incidents along with prompts to discuss what witnesses could do would likely elicit more strategies.

One of the limitations of the current study is that due to time constraints we weren't able to interview the parents directly after their story-reading activity. In particular, the storybook

reading session was the first component of a larger project and including an interview stage would have influenced the parent responses to the remaining tasks. Also, the naturalistic setting (i.e., participants' own home) meant that the participants were typically the only carer available and so could not feasibly engage in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. Future studies that include post-session interviews could help to reveal why parents themselves think they overlooked this aspect of the bullying scenarios that were presented in the story.

Although the roles parents played in their own school experiences was not linked to defender-related comments, their experiences of using particular strategies and finding them wanting may have contributed to the minimizing of the bullying behaviours portrayed in the story. Previous research has shown that parents' accounts of their own coping strategies during childhood often include either ignoring the bullying behaviour or telling an adult (Boddy et al. 2024). The strategy that involves 'ignoring the bullying behaviour' suggests that one possible explanation for the apparent oversight in the current study is that most parents have never been taught how to respond to bullying incidents and it is possible they have rarely witnessed anyone stepping in to defend someone else. Although there didn't appear to be a relationship between parents own experiences of bullying and the comments they made about the story, the use of only one question from the RBQ was a limitation. Future studies could include additional information about their childhood experiences of bullying, including the strategies they may have used and how successful they were (Boddy et al. 2024). It would also be informative to gather information about their experiences of witnessing bullying behaviours.

Another limitation is that we were unable to obtain clearly distinguishable responses from the children within each dyad due to their young age (i.e., 3 years) and the position of the microphone on the parents' lapel. Although the setting (i.e., participants' own home) would have assisted in providing a more naturalistic environment, the participants were being video recorded, which may have influenced their behaviour. Finally, the self-selected sample may have reduced the likelihood of a relationship being found between parents' childhood experiences and the way in which parents read the book to their child. However, it is interesting to note that the sample did include a high proportion of adults who self-identified as either bully/victims or victims and these proportions were higher than would be expected in a typical population sample. It is also important to recognize the process of storybook reading between a parent and their young child can be influenced by a range of parent and child factors including socioeconomic status, child interest, and attachment (Fletcher and Reese 2005).

A strength of this study is that although the observational data collection procedures followed a strict protocol—the naturalistic environment may have engendered more typical storybook reading behaviour from the parents compared to a laboratory-based study. This is an important methodological contribution to our understanding of parents' role in the development and maintenance of bullying. Typically, parents are *asked* what they would do or say in a particular situation. However, the methods used in this study suggest that, even though the parents were in a study about the prevention of bullying, when parents

are *not prompted*, perhaps a more realistic display of parental socialization practices are demonstrated. In the current data-set, no parents mentioned the word bullying; nor did they refer to the behaviours being exhibited as repeated. In addition, there was an almost complete absence of strategies or comments made by parents about what could be done to help the victim of bullying in the story either by the child witnesses or the adults.

The findings from the present study suggest that upon the first reading of a storybook about bullying most parents were likely to mention the moral underpinnings of the story, however they were unlikely to discuss strategies for helping the victim. The findings from this study point to the possibility of early socialization practices contributing to the development of bystander behaviour amongst school age children. Further studies may reveal that this is an example of a socialization process that is important in part because of its omission and is similar to the development of racist attitudes among young children being partially attributed to the avoidance of conversations about discrimination amongst European American mothers. Studies have shown that prevailing social norms influence levels of defending behaviours amongst school age children (Salmivalli and Voeten 2004; Troop-Gordon et al. 2019), therefore when children enter school, they may be more likely to abide by the bystander behaviour being demonstrated by their peers, due to the absence of learning about defending in early childhood.

Given the malleability of young children's social development, early childhood is considered an ideal time to intervene to try to prevent the onset of bullying behaviour before it becomes entrenched (Alsaker 2004; Alsaker and Nägele 2008; Littlefield et al. 2017). This can be achieved by implementing class-wide programmes that focus on the development of social skills and emotional learning and bullying prevention (e.g., Aram et al. 2013; Beauchesne et al. 2017; Littlefield et al. 2017; McGoeys et al. 2023, 2022; Ostrov et al. 2009; Ostrov et al. 2015; Schapira and Aram 2020; Wee et al. 2022). Along these lines there have been some promising recent studies using storybooks as facilitators of moral understanding by Wee et al. (2022) and Rosen et al. (2025) which have shown that, with the addition of role-play activities, young children within an early childhood classroom environment can learn to be more empathetic and develop defending skills. If there is a significant increase in the number of children engaging in defending behaviour in preschool; whereby they represent the majority, there is potential for preventing the onset of bullying behaviours in school (Rosen et al. 2025). To complement these preschool initiatives, it is important that young children receive similar moral messages from within the home environment. As primary socialization agents, parents play a critical role in refining children's social and emotional learning through regular storybook reading. Werner et al. (2014) found that when mothers coached their 4-year-old children appropriately regarding how to manage relational aggression there was a reduction in this form of aggression. However, despite a myriad of storybooks that focus on bullying (Oppliger and Davis 2015), the findings from the current study suggest that parents will *not automatically* discuss defending behaviour with their young children when reading these stories. Therefore, it is important that they are given the tools to facilitate these conversations about bullying

(Beauchesne et al. 2017) and thereby will be more able to provide guidance and scaffolding to their young children about bystander responses within the home context.

## 5 | Conclusion

The way in which parents discuss stories that involve challenging social topics such as bullying with their young children could be framed as a type of 'silent socialization.' This study shows that parents rarely discuss the bystanders and what they could do, when reading a story that depicts bullying to their young children. Through parents' inadvertent omission their socialization practices may provide the foundation for the adoption of particular participant roles within a preschool context. That is, in the absence of being taught an alternative way to respond when witnessing bullying behaviour, once a child enters a preschool setting, it is possible that the prevailing social norms of the classroom take precedence and dictate the child's ensuing behaviours.

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### Ethics Statement

The methodology for this study was approved by the Victoria University of Wellington, Ethics Committee (Reference number: 29429). Informed consent was obtained by all parent participants, and an adapted version of consent was provided for the child participants who were under 5 years old.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

### Data Availability Statement

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

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