



The Relationship Between Parents' Own Responses to Childhood Bullying and What Strategies They Would Recommend to Their Children

Emma Boddy¹ · Michael Johnston¹ · Katie Allan¹ · Tessa Jacobsen-Grocott¹ · Vanessa A. Green¹ 

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Abstract

Given the probable influence parents have on the development and maintenance of bullying and victimization in their children, there is potential for an intergenerational transmission of coping strategies in response to bullying incidents. Cross-sectional data is presented from an online anonymous questionnaire conducted in New Zealand. Parents gave responses about their own childhood experiences of various forms of bullying, how they responded, whether the responses were effective and whether they would recommend the response to their own children. The study had 104 parent participants (72 mothers and 32 fathers) with an average age of 40 years (range 21 to 62 years), and their children were aged between 5 months and 17 years; 93% resided in New Zealand. During childhood, the majority of participants had experienced verbal bullying (90%), 55% experienced relational bullying and 43% physical bullying. The strategies *tell someone else* and *ignore the bullying* were the most frequently recommended, and about half the participants had found them effective. *Talk to the bully about their behaviour* was recommended by almost a third of participants and had been used by a similar number. In contrast, although *retaliate* was not recommended by participants, it had been used by over 50%, half of whom found it effective in response to physical bullying. Overall, there was considerable variation with regard to which strategies parents had used, how effective they were for differing forms of bullying and whether they themselves would recommend a particular strategy to their child. Implications for how parents' own varied experiences may contribute to the conversations both at home and in school about what we should recommend to children are discussed.

Keywords Parents · Bullying · Victimization · Strategy · Recommendations

Bullying is a significant social issue that affects a large proportion of school-age children (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Slee et al., 2016; Smith & O'Higgins Norman,

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

2021) and is a subset of school violence, which encompasses all forms of aggression that happen in the school environment (Longobardi et al., 2017). Bullying is defined by three main characteristics: intent to cause harm, a power imbalance between the bully and victim, and repeated behaviour (Olweus, 1986) and can have a long-lasting negative impact on victims, perpetrators and witnesses (Vaillancourt et al., 2013), including socially withdrawn behaviour, difficulties in school and anxiety or depression (Currie et al., 2012). The different types of bullying are categorised as physical, verbal, relational (also called indirect) and cyberbullying (Casper, 2021). Globally, around a third of youth report experiencing bullying to some extent and an average of 8% of youth experience frequent bullying, as reported in OECD countries (Jang-Jones & McGregor, 2019). New Zealand, however, has a rate of frequent youth bullying nearly double the OECD average at 15% (Jang-Jones & McGregor, 2019) and has consistently had one of the highest rates of bullying compared to other high-income countries internationally (Kljakovic et al., 2015). The Pacific region as a whole also has notably higher than average rates of bullying associated with race and religion.

Although considerable attention has been given to the prevention of bullying through the development of anti-bullying programmes (Fraguas et al., 2021; Gaffney et al., 2021), another important body of bullying research has focused on the strategies victims use to cope with bullying incidents (Frisén et al. 2012; Kristensen & Smith, 2003; Smith et al., 2001) as well as which strategies are recommended by teachers and parents (Harcourt et al., 2014; Murray-Harvey et al., 2012; Navarro et al., 2021; Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017; Sawyer et al., 2011). Although the strategies suggested by teachers and parents on how to manage bullying incidents should be both effective and consistent across contexts (O'Brien, et al., 2023), there is still some uncertainty about what the best immediate response should be to a bullying incident and whether the response should differ depending on the type of bullying. Given that most parents have themselves been either bullies, victims or witnesses during their own years at school, it is likely that their recommendations to their children about how to respond to bullying may be influenced by their own experiences. However, to date little is known about how parents' own experiences with the use of particular strategies in response to different forms of bullying, and the perceived effectiveness of these strategies may influence what parents would suggest to their own children.

Children must often rely on adults to help them resolve conflict and are often taught to seek out adults' assistance should they have an issue that they cannot solve. However, there appears to be considerable uncertainty and inconsistency amongst adults about how best to respond to bullying incidents (Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017). In an early study, 229 adults aged 18 to 70 years who recalled being verbally bullied during childhood or adolescence often recounted that the adults in their lives had not responded to their victimisation with any strategies (Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002). This led to feelings of anger and distrust that lasted long after the bullying had ceased (Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002). The uncertainty even amongst professionals about how best to respond was highlighted in a study by Murray-Harvey et al. (2012) where they found inconsistencies between what is considered effective by professionals and what is actually used by children. In their study 82 practitioners

(i.e. teachers, counsellors and academics publishing in the bullying field) were asked their professional opinion of the effectiveness of 26 strategies that students had identified as using to cope with or minimize the bullying they had experienced. Practitioners rated non-productive avoidance strategies, such as ‘hoping the bullying will sort itself out’ and ‘shut myself off from the problem’ as the most ineffective. Students rated their use of these strategies as ‘use sometimes’ or ‘very little’. Strategies such as ‘talking to trusted others’, ‘using the schools anti-bullying policy to support themselves’ and generally ‘gaining support from others in a position to help’ were rated by the professionals as the most effective strategies. Students stated that they either never used those strategies or only used them sometimes. Interestingly, the practitioners could not unanimously decide on the effectiveness of the following strategies: ‘improve my relationship with the bully’, ‘fight back’ and ‘stick up for myself.’

Through their practices and behaviours parents can influence whether or not their children become victims or bullies (Karga et al., 2021; Navarro et al., 2021; Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017; Smokowski & Kelly, 2005), help to buffer negative side effects of bullying (Conners-Burrow et al., 2009; Konishi & Hymel, 2009) and build resilience (Greeff & Van den Berg 2013). Parents also have a significant influence on a child’s coping strategies in response to bullying, and given the potential for differing opinions amongst practitioners, it is perhaps not surprising that many parents are also unclear about how to help their children respond to bullying incidents (Karga et al., 2021; Navarro et al., 2021). They often do not have the expertise or resources to instruct their child on how to cope with bullying in the most effective way (Fekkes et al., 2005; Navarro et al., 2021). In this respect, considerable attention has been given to what strategies parents have used in response to bullying incidents involving their child and what strategies they have suggested to their children. The strategies for dealing with an incident have included talking to their child about the incident and helping them to cope with the experience, contacting the parent of the other child, asking a teacher for more information, moving the child to another school and talking to the principal (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Harcourt et al., 2015; Sawyer et al., 2011; Stives et al., 2019, 2021; Waasdorp et al., 2011). However, even when parents try to bring up the issue at school the response is often ineffective or non-existent (Brown, 2020; Harcourt et al., 2014, 2015; Young et al., 2021).

In addition, studies have investigated how parents think they would respond when presented with hypothetical scenarios and what strategies they would recommend to their children (Brown, 2020; Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Harcourt et al., 2014, 2015; Karga et al., 2021; Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017; Sawyer et al., 2011). Harcourt et al. (2014) reviewed 13 qualitative studies and found that the most frequently recommended strategy was to tell a teacher. More recently, in their study of 50 parents, Stives et al. (2021) found that over 63% of respondents said that they would tell their child to report a bullying incident to a higher authority. However, there is evidence to suggest that when children do tell authorities about a bullying incident, it is frequently overlooked or dismissed (Boulton, 1997; Boulton et al., 2017; Green, 2021). There is also evidence to suggest that some parents believe bullying is a normative part of growing up (Lovegrove et al., 2013), and therefore they may also opt to dismiss the incident (Waasdorp et al., 2011; Greeff & Van den Berg, 2013).

Avoiding the bullies has been recommended by parents (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Honig & Zdunowski-Sjoblom, 2014; Stives et al., 2019) and used by some victims of bullying (Kristensen & Smith, 2003). This strategy is, however, considered ineffective (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012) because if the child remains at the same school this can lead to additional stress (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). Another frequently used strategy by victims of bullying is retaliation or fighting back (Black et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2001). For example, in their study of 2615 bullied school students, 63% reported using fighting back as a coping strategy. While Smith et al. (2001) reported that 21–24% of 10–14 year old victims used this strategy. It is also a recommended strategy by a significant number of parents with 37% of the 205 parents in a study by Holt et al. (2009) suggesting this approach. It is, however, a controversial strategy given that in the Cooper and Nickerson (2013) study, there was an even split between those who would sometimes tell their child to fight back (42.3%) compared to those who would not recommend this strategy (44.1%). It is concerning that parents would encourage their children to fight back because it may put the child at risk for the negative long-term outcomes (Mahady-Wilton et al., 2000) and could unintentionally worsen the bullying situation (Brown, 2020; Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017).

Parents' recommendations are also influenced by the type of bullying being experienced (Bonnet et al., 2011; Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017; Waasdrop et al., 2011). Offrey and Rinaldi (2017) found that parents suggested more assertive solutions when considering physical bullying, while verbal bullying generated more passive solutions. In their qualitative study with 20 parents, Sawyer et al. (2011) cited one parent who advised her child to ignore all bullying that was not physical.

Why parents recommend one strategy over another may be related to their own childhood experiences of bullying and victimisation (Brown, 2020). Considerable attention has been given to adults' recollections of their own bullying experiences and the long-term outcomes (Fox & Harrison, 2021; Jantzer et al., 2006), including parents' experiences and how this influences their current attitudes to bullying and victimisation (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Duncan, 1999; Sawyer et al., 2011; Stives et al., 2019). For example, Cooper and Nickerson (2013) found that in their study of 238 parents from the USA, fear was a common theme that participants were struggling with. This was presented as fear for others that may be being targeted or bullied or fear that they would continue to be bullied throughout their lives (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Malaby, 2009). Some studies have focused on recollections from those who have bullied others (with predominately male samples) where the respondents did report turning to bullying others as a strategy to cope with their own victimisation (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007; Malaby, 2009; Rivers, 2004). In another study with 11 male participants, those who were parents expressed concerns about their children being bullied. As a result of this fear, several parents stated that they would encourage their children to stand up for themselves, "never back down" and to respond with aggression (Malaby, 2009). However, this was found to be an ineffective way of coping. An effective strategy mentioned was telling an adult, as long as the adult intervened. Lack of intervention by any adult led to feelings of anger towards those that could have prevented the bullying from continuing but did not (Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002; Malaby, 2009).

In order to extend the current literature, we investigated the relationship between parents' own recollected experiences of the strategies they used to address childhood and adolescent bullying with the strategies they would recommend to their children. We anticipated that when asked to consider what they would suggest to their child when confronted with different types of bullying situations, parents would draw from their own experiences of addressing bullying. This may potentially create an inter-generational pattern of behaviours and responses.

Thus the first aim of this study was to ask parents about their own experiences of using a particular set of strategies to address different forms of bullying and to ask them how effective the strategies were. The chosen strategies were based on the findings and theories put forward by previous literature in the field (e.g. Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Harcourt et al., 2014; Murray-Harvey et al., 2012; Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017). We wanted to ensure that the specific strategies chosen differed in terms of their reported use by parents in the literature and whether they were considered to be appropriate for addressing bullying. The first strategy, *tell someone else*, was assertive, considered to be effective and was the most frequently recommended strategy by parents (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012). The strategy of *talking to the bully about their behaviour* was chosen because it was assertive and considered to be effective (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). *Retaliation* (i.e. fought back, insulted, and excluded) was chosen because there is evidence that parental opinion is divided on the effectiveness of this strategy; it is aggressive and not recommended. *Ignore the behaviour* was chosen because it is passive and has been classified as ineffective (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012). While the fifth strategy, *changing schools*, was the most drastic measure and considered to be relatively rare (Ingersoll et al., 1989). The second aim was to see if there was a relationship between parents' childhood and adolescent use of these strategies, their perceived effectiveness of strategies and the likelihood of them recommending a particular strategy to their own children when trying to address three different types of bullying.

Method

Recruitment

Ethics approval was obtained through the Victoria University of Wellington Ethics Committee (reference number: 0000021801) and a gateway website including a link was set up so that potential participants could access the online survey anonymously. Adult participants for this study were recruited via relevant non-government organisations (NGO's) and parent groups from the Greater Wellington region within New Zealand (population ~5,000,000). The adult population with children under 18 years represent ~2,434,630 individuals. The organisations shared the project website in their newsletters and social media pages. In addition, the researchers used snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) to recruit parents through social media accounts. Although this method of sampling has come under critique for producing biased samples (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), it is also an extremely useful sampling tool when researching sensitive topics (Browne, 2005) such as bullying. It has been suggested that sensitive topics

can be more difficult to find samples for (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). By advertising the questionnaire through a range of parenting agencies and on social media, a larger, more diverse population of potential participants was contacted, and the risk of creating a biased sample was reduced. The criteria for participation required the individual to be a parent or caregiver of at least one child aged 18 years or under.

Survey

Drawing upon previous literature in the field (i.e. Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Harcourt et al., 2014; Murray-Harvey et al., 2012; Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017), a questionnaire was developed consisting of 19 questions. The first domain included questions about whether they had experienced bullying during their childhood and adolescence and if so, what types. In particular, as previous research had shown strategy use differs depending on the type of bullying encountered, we included a series of questions that asked about individual forms of bullying (i.e. verbal, physical and relational). Cyberbullying was not included, as this is a more recent issue that, based on the retrospective nature of this study, may not have occurred when the participants were at school. The second domain focused on strategy use and recommendations. To ensure we included strategies that had been previously investigated we referred to the extant literature to ascertain which strategies parents' had indicated they had either used with their child and/or would recommend to their children (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Harcourt et al., 2014; Murray-Harvey et al., 2012; Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017). To fully explore the domain we provided a range of strategies from those that were typically recommended (i.e. tell someone else) to those that are rarely recommended (i.e. change schools). We presented the five strategies and asked participants to tick one of three options (i.e. never used, used but ineffective, used and was effective) for each strategy across each type of bullying. Participants were then asked to indicate which of the same five strategies listed they would recommend to their child if they were a victim of the *same* form of bullying (i.e. "If *your child* told you they were experiencing (verbal, physical and relational) bullying; what would you recommend to them?"). The final part of the survey included two open-ended questions about the long-term outcomes of bullying and victimisation (reported elsewhere). Prior to releasing the questionnaire, a pilot trial was run in order to ensure that it was easy to follow and did not take an excessive amount of time. Three participants responded and were parents enrolled in a first year education course. They were asked to provide any feedback. Minor edits were made to a small selection of questions to improve clarity. The three pilot participant survey responses were excluded from the final sample.

Results

Participants

There were 115 responses; however, 10 were removed from further analysis as they were not from parents of a child under 18 years, and a further response was

removed as only the initial question and last question were answered. The remaining 104 participants had an average age of 40 years and ranged from 21 to 62 years. Participants reported which country they currently resided in, with 97 (93%) reporting they lived in (New Zealand) and 7 (7%) reporting they lived in another English-speaking country (6 from [Australia], 1 from [USA]). Most participants were female (72), and 32 were male. All participants reported their child's gender (39% male and 61% female), and 99 participants (95%) also reported their child's age, ranging from 5 months to 17 years, with an average age of 8 years.

Types of Bullying Experienced by Participants

The participants were asked to recall any bullying incidents during childhood and adolescence. Of the 87 who could recall a time when they experienced bullying, verbal bullying was experienced by 77 of the participants (89%), while there were 37 participants (43%) who experienced physical bullying and 48 (55%) who indicated they had experienced social and relational bullying. The percentage total is greater than 100% because the participants typically experienced more than one type of bullying.

Most Commonly Used Strategies

Table 1 outlines the percentage of participants who used each strategy along with their perceived effectiveness of each strategy for all three bullying types. It also provides information on the strategies that parents did not use. Considerable variation existed across all three types of bullying in terms of participants' use of particular strategies. For verbal bullying, the strategy that parents used most during their childhood and adolescence was to *ignore the behaviour* (96%). This was also true for relational bullying (91.5%); however, for physical bullying the most used strategy was to *retaliate* (68.6%). The next most used strategies for verbal bullying were *retaliate* (53.4%) and *tell someone else* (52.6%). For physical bullying, the second most used strategy was *ignoring the behaviour* (62.9%), and for relational, it was *tell someone else* (47.6%). While the least used strategy across all three types of bullying was to *change schools*. Participants' perceived effectiveness also differed as a function of bullying type. For example, the most effective strategy for verbal and relational bullying was *ignoring the behaviour*; however, approximately the same percentage of parents who used the strategy found it to be ineffective. While for physical bullying, the most effective strategy was *retaliation*.

Parents' Recommendations

Participants are asked whether they would recommend each strategy to their children in relation to verbal, physical and relational bullying, and these results are presented in Table 2. The strategy that was recommended by the largest percentage of parents was *tell someone else*, and this applied for all three types of bullying. *Changing schools* was rarely recommended, and *retaliation* was also infrequent. A higher

Table 1 Parents' Own Use and Perceived Effectiveness of Strategies in Response to the Types of Bullying They Experienced

Use and effectiveness of strategies			
Strategies by type of bullying experienced	Did not use (%)	Used/ineffective (%)	Used/effective (%)
Told someone else			
Verbal ($n=75$)	47.30	23.70	28.90
Physical ($n=34$)	47.06	29.41	23.53
Relational ($n=42$)	52.30	23.81	23.80
Retaliated			
Verbal ($n=73$)	46.58	26.03	27.40
Physical ($n=35$)	31.42	22.86	45.71
Relational ($n=40$)	67.50	12.50	20.00
Ignored the behaviour			
Verbal ($n=75$)	4.00	48.01	48.00
Physical ($n=35$)	37.15	37.14	25.77
Relational ($n=47$)	8.51	48.94	42.55
Talked to the bully			
Verbal ($n=71$)	71.83	15.49	12.68
Physical ($n=32$)	75.05	9.38	15.63
Relational ($n=41$)	65.85	19.52	14.64
Changed schools			
Verbal ($n=71$)	91.55	1.41	7.04
Physical ($n=28$)	96.43	3.57	0.00
Relational ($n=36$)	91.67	0.00	8.30

Not all participants reported their usage of each of the five strategies. This is reflected in fluctuating sample sizes

percentage of parents recommended *ignoring the behaviour* when the bullying was verbal or relational bullying than when it was physical, while ~30-40% of parents across all types of bullying recommended *talking to the bully about their behaviour*.

Parents' Strategy Use and its Influence on Their Recommendations

To compare the proportion of parents who would recommend versus not recommend each strategy, z-tests were conducted (chi-square tests were not used due to small cell sizes). Separate comparisons were made for parents who had and had not used each strategy. For those who had used it, a further disaggregation was made for those who had found it effective and those who had not. The z-scores from these tests are reported, along with figures illustrating the group differences. These z-scores were computed to determine whether usage and effectiveness had an impact on whether a parent would or would not recommend that strategy to their children.

Table 2 Percentage of Parents Recommending Each Strategy as a Function of Bullying Type

Type of bullying	Percentage of parents
Verbal	
Tell someone else ($n = 75$)	71.0
Retaliate ($n = 73$)	6.85
Ignore the behaviour ($n = 75$)	52.00
Talk to the bully about their behaviour ($n = 71$)	29.58
Change schools ($n = 71$)	0.00
Physical	
Tell someone else ($n = 34$)	88.23
Retaliate ($n = 35$)	22.86
Ignore the behaviour ($n = 35$)	14.34
Talk to the bully about their behaviour ($n = 32$)	40.63
Change schools ($n = 28$)	3.57
Relational	
Tell someone else ($n = 42$)	64.28
Retaliate ($n = 40$)	7.50
Ignore the behaviour ($n = 47$)	38.30
Talk to the bully about their behaviour ($n = 41$)	42.12
Change schools ($n = 36$)	0.00

Not all participants reported their usage of each of the five strategies. This resulted in fluctuating sample sizes

Within each type of bullying, the results were divided into three groups based on participants' use of the strategy and its perceived effectiveness. The following analysis using z-tests is presented under the five strategy options provided to participants (i.e. *tell someone else*, *retaliate*, *ignore the behaviour*, *talk to the bully about their behaviour* and *change schools*) and then, within each of these, the three types of bullying are presented (verbal, physical and relational). For all the figures below, the parent data has been disaggregated according to their own experience with this strategy.

Strategy: Tell Someone Else

Figure 1 shows that for parents who had not used the *tell someone else* strategy for verbal bullying, the proportion who would recommend it is higher than the proportion who would not recommend it ($z = 4.71$, $p < 0.001$). Parents who found the strategy ineffective were still more likely to recommend it than not ($z = -2$, $p = 0.046$). For those who had found it effective, there was no significant difference in terms of recommendation, although a similar trend emerged ($z = -1.81$, $p = 0.07$). Figure 2 shows that a higher proportion of parents would recommend this strategy for physical bullying, regardless of their own use. This was true for parents who had not used the strategy themselves ($z = -4.95$, $p < 0.001$), had found it ineffective ($z = -2.68$, $p < 0.001$) and those who had found it effective ($z = -3$, $p < 0.001$). Figure 3 shows

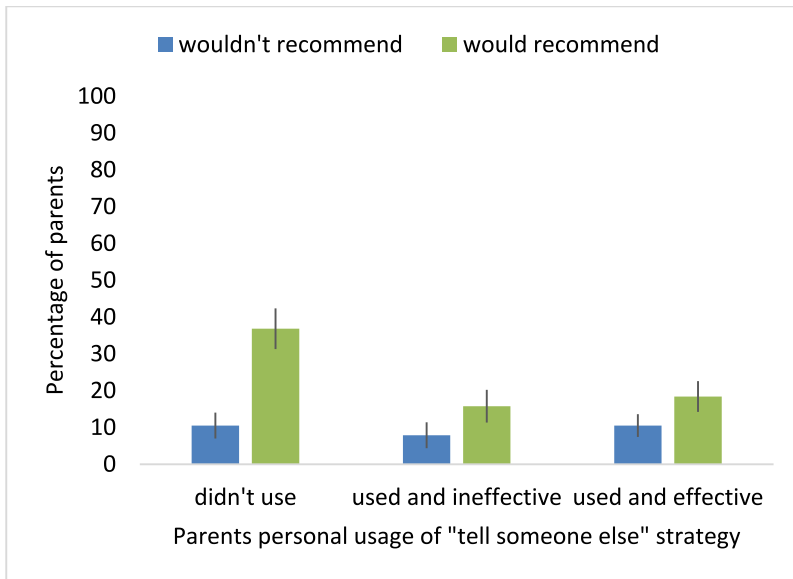


Fig. 1 Percentages of parents who would recommend “tell someone else”, when experiencing verbal bullying

that parents who do not use the strategy for relational bullying are more likely to recommend it ($z = -3.06$, $p < 0.001$). While for those parents who had used it, there were no significant differences in terms of likelihood of recommending the use of the strategy, both for those who found it ineffective ($z = -0.89$, $p = 0.37$) and effective ($z = 0$, $p = 1$).

Strategy: Retaliate

Figure 4 shows that a higher percentage of parents would *not* recommend the *retaliate* strategy in response to verbal bullying, regardless of their own use. This was true for parents who had not used the strategy themselves ($z = -8.25$, $p < 0.001$), had found it ineffective ($z = 5.51$, $p < 0.001$) and even those who had found it effective ($z = 3.79$, $p < 0.001$). Similar results were found for physical bullying (see Fig. 5), although no significant difference was found for parents who had found the strategy ineffective ($z = -1$, $p = 0.32$). For those who had found it effective, there was a higher proportion who would *not* recommend it ($z = 3.54$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, for those parents who had not used the strategy, the proportion who would *not* recommend it was higher than the proportion who would ($z = 2.98$, $p < 0.001$). Figure 6 shows most parents would also *not* recommend *retaliate* when addressing relational bullying, and this is only marginally influenced by use. For those who had never used the strategy, there was a larger proportion who would not recommend it ($z = 7.35$, $p < 0.001$). The same pattern was found for parents who had found it ineffective. ($z = 3.16$, $p < 0.001$). No significant difference was found between proportions of parents recommending *retaliate* if they had used this strategy and found it effective ($z = 1$, $p = 0.32$).

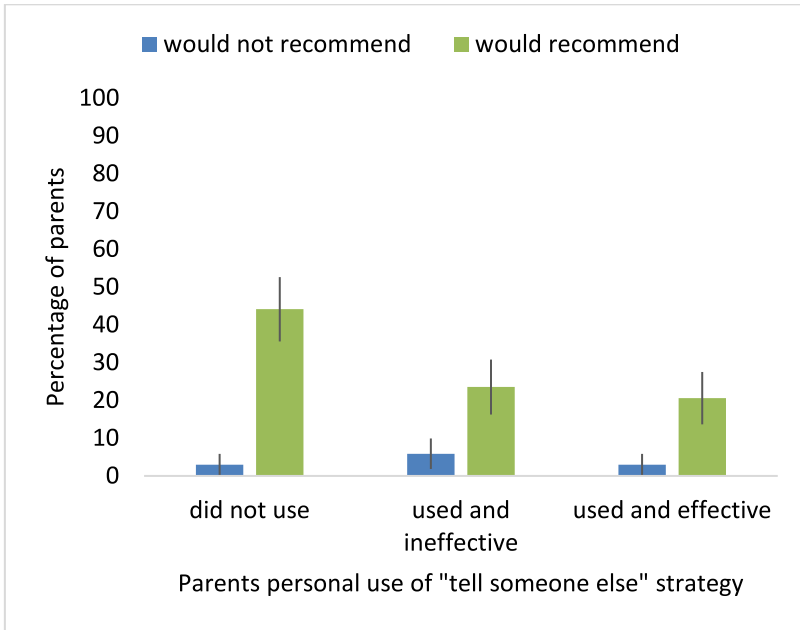


Fig. 2 Percentages of parents who would recommend “tell someone else”, when experiencing physical bullying

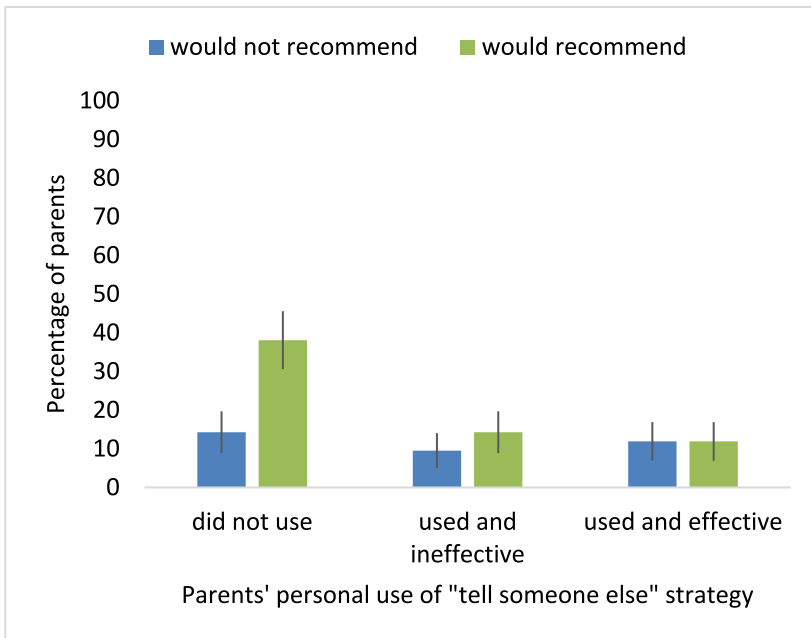


Fig. 3 Percentages of parents who would recommend “tell someone else”, when experiencing relational bullying

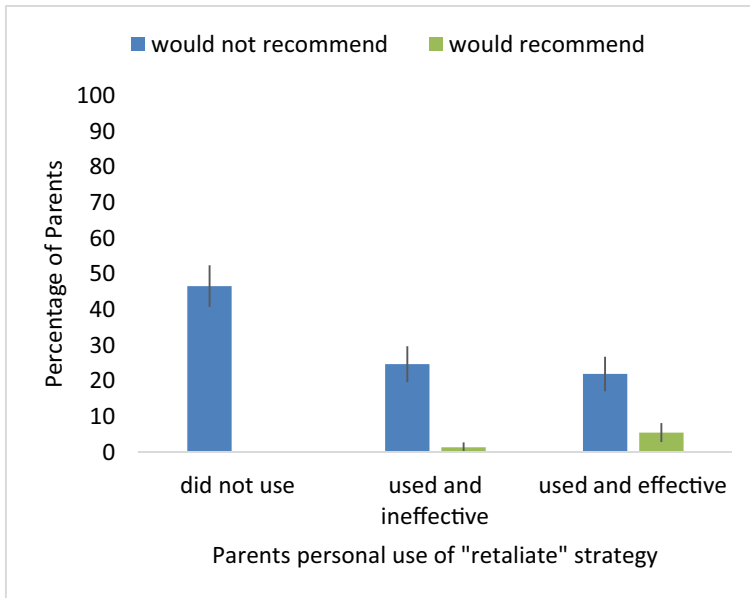


Fig. 4 Percentages of parents who would recommend “retaliate”, when experiencing verbal bullying

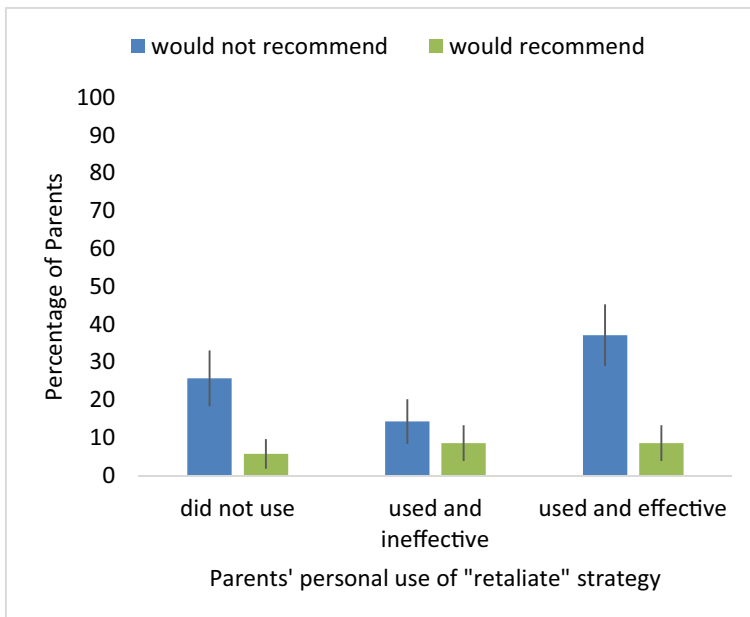


Fig. 5 Percentages of parents who would recommend “retaliate”, when experiencing physical bullying

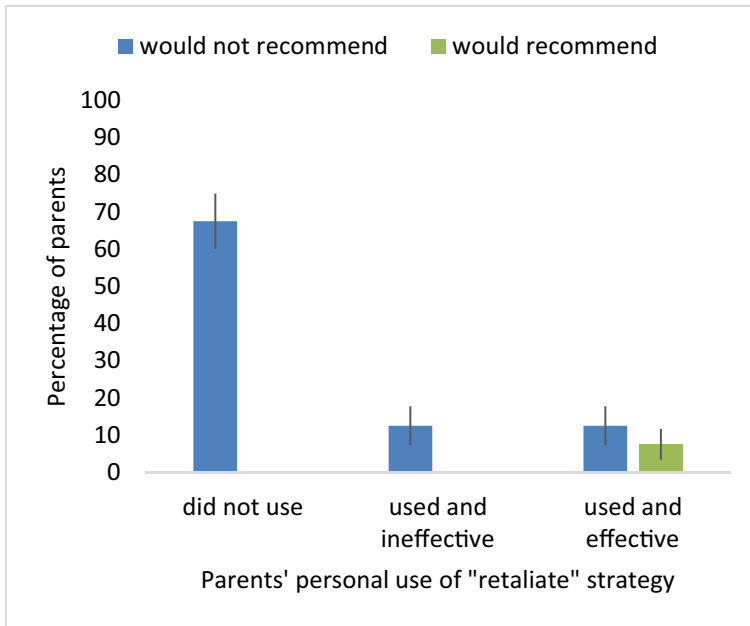


Fig. 6 Percentages of parents who would recommend “retaliate”, when experiencing relational bullying

Overall, in response to verbal, physical and relational bullying, a higher proportion of parents did not recommend this strategy, and this was mostly regardless of their own experience.

Strategy: Ignore the Behaviour

As seen in Fig. 7, for parents who found this strategy effective for dealing with verbal bullying, there was a higher proportion who recommend this strategy ($z = -2.36$, $p = 0.02$). For the parents who found it ineffective, there was no significant difference found between the proportions of those who would or would not recommend it ($z = 0.94$, $p = 0.35$). For the small number of parents who did not use this strategy, there was a higher proportion who would *not* recommend it ($z = 2.45$, $p = 0.01$). Figure 8 shows that a higher percentage of parents would *not* recommend the strategy for physical bullying overall. For those parents who had never used the strategy, there was a higher proportion who would *not* recommend it ($z = 4.31$, $p < 0.001$). Parents who had used the strategy and found it ineffective were also more likely to *not* recommend it ($z = -5.1$, $p < 0.001$), while there were no significant differences found for parents who had used the strategy and found it effective ($z = 0.47$, $p = 0.64$). Parents who did not use this strategy for relational bullying were more likely to *not* recommend it to their children ($z = 2.83$, $p < 0.001$), as shown in Fig. 9. Likewise, parents who had found it ineffective were more likely to *not* recommend it to their child ($z = 3.24$, $p < 0.001$). There was no significant difference found for parents who had used the strategy and found it effective ($z = -1.26$, $p = 0.21$). Overall, in response

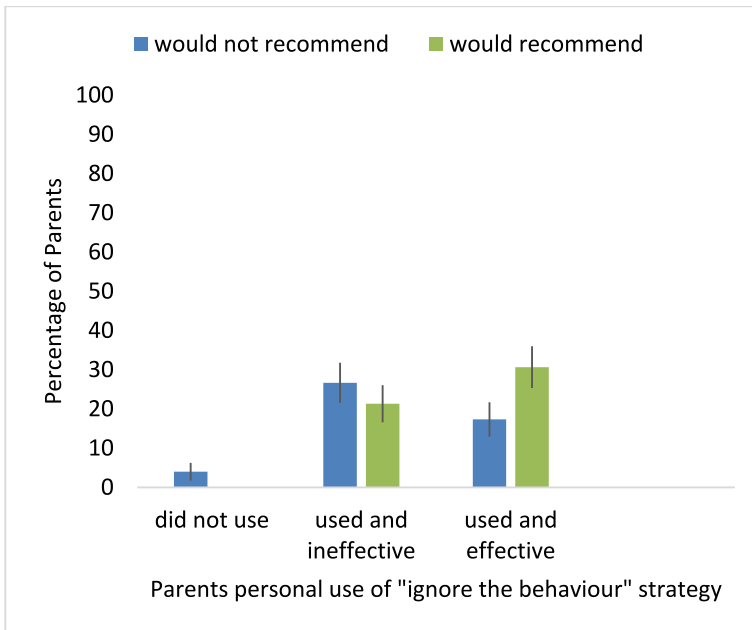


Fig. 7 Percentages of parents who would recommend “ignore the behaviour”, when experiencing verbal bullying

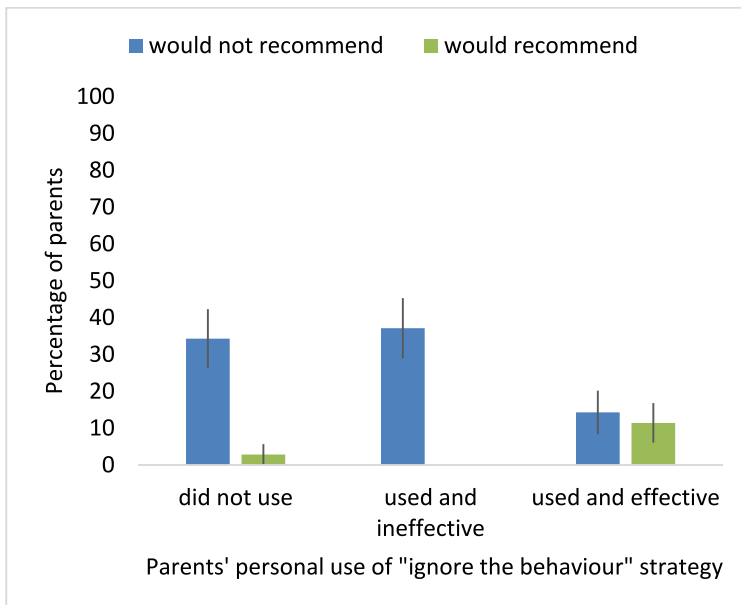


Fig. 8 Percentages of parents who would recommend “ignore the behaviour”, when experiencing physical bullying

to verbal bullying, it appears that previous experience influenced whether a parent would recommend this strategy, while this was not the case for relational or physical bullying.

Strategy: Talk to the Bully About Their Behaviour

Figure 10 shows that parents who have never used this strategy were *not* likely to recommend this to their child when dealing with verbal bullying ($z=5.35, p<0.001$). The same result was found for parents who had used this strategy themselves but found it ineffective ($z=3.84, p<0.001$). However, parents who had found this strategy effective were more likely to recommend it to their children ($z=-3.3, p<0.001$). Figure 11 shows that a higher proportion of parents who did not use this strategy themselves for dealing with physical bullying would *not* recommend this strategy to their children ($z=3.46, p<0.001$). Conversely, a higher proportion of parents who had used the strategy but found it ineffective would recommend this strategy to their children ($z=-2.45, p=0.01$). While for those who found it effective, there was no significant difference found ($z=-1.9, p=0.06$). Figure 12 shows that parents who have not used this strategy for relational bullying themselves are more likely *not* to recommend it to their children ($z=3.54, p<0.001$). For those who found it effective, a higher proportion of parents would recommend the strategy to their children ($z=-2.3, p=0.02$). For those who found it ineffective, no significant difference was found ($z=-1, p=0.32$).

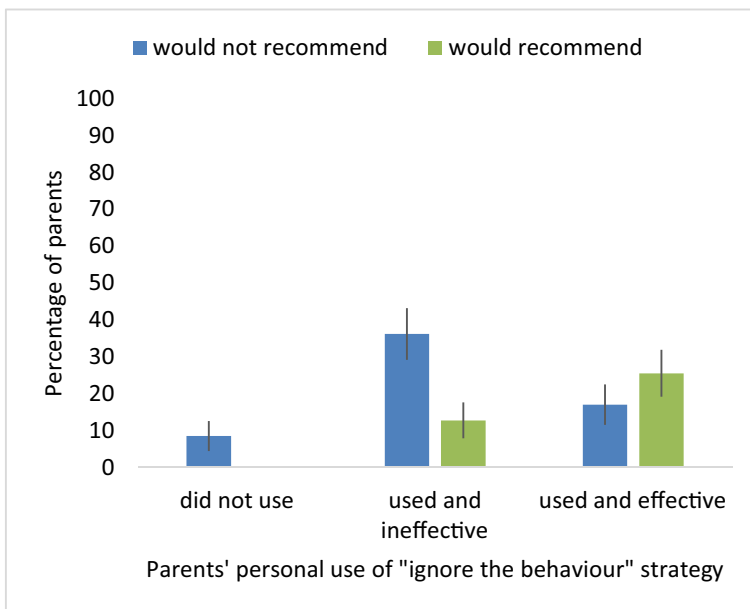


Fig. 9 Percentages of parents who would recommend "ignore the behaviour", when experiencing relational bullying

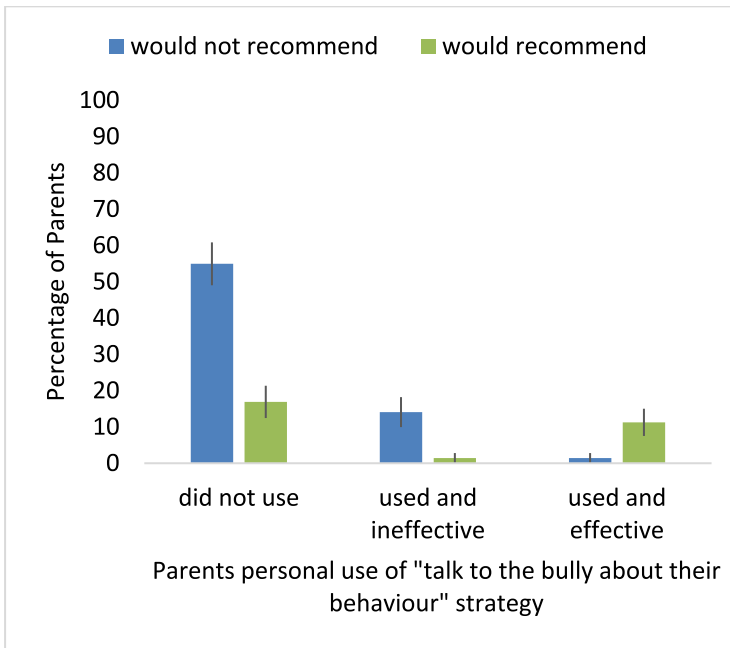


Fig. 10 Percentages of parents who would recommend “talk to the bully about their behaviour”, when experiencing verbal bullying

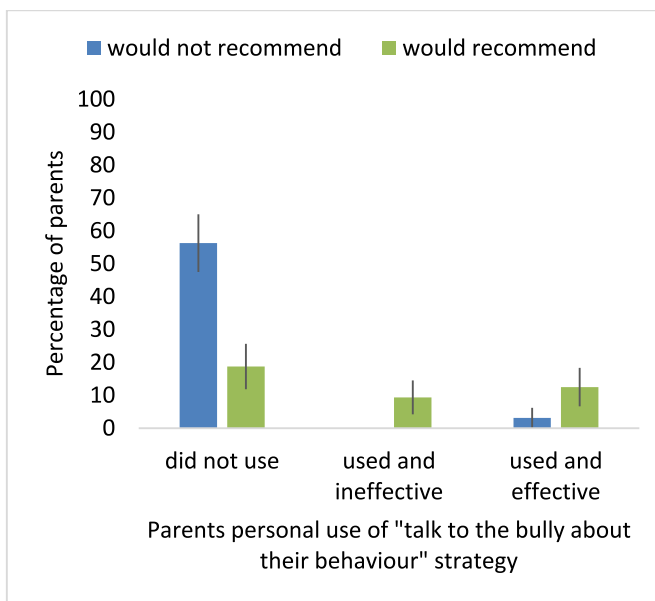


Fig. 11 Percentages of parents who would recommend “talk to the bully about their behaviour”, when experiencing physical bullying

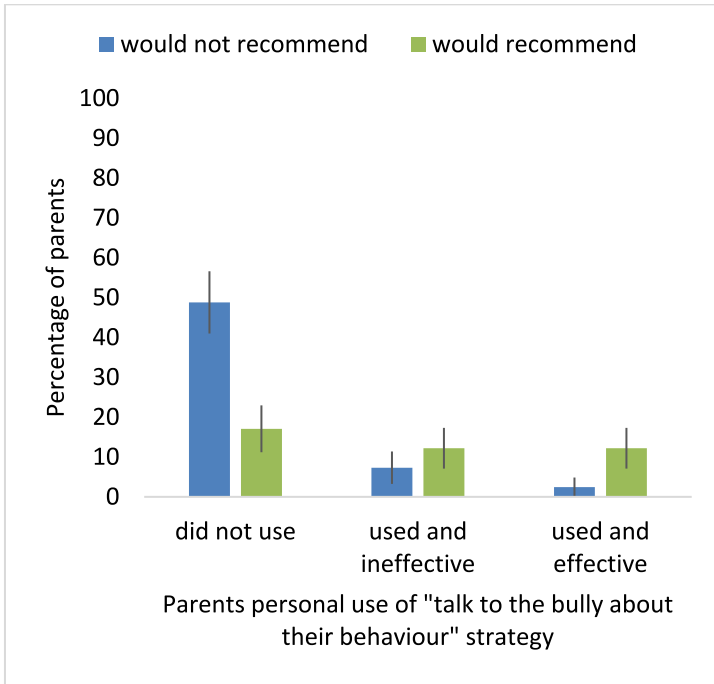


Fig. 12 Percentages of parents who would recommend “talk to the bully about their behaviour”, when experiencing relational bullying

These results suggest that parents’ perceived effectiveness of the strategy *talk to the bully about their behaviour*, and bullying type has an impact on whether a parent will or will not recommend it to their child. Only those parents who had used it themselves and found it effective were likely to recommend it for verbal or relational bullying. A more complex picture emerged with recommending this strategy for physical bullying with a higher proportion of parents recommending it even though they found it to be ineffective themselves. Parents who had no personal experience using the strategy were more likely to *not* recommend the strategy across all three types of bullying.

Strategy: Change Schools

As noted in Table 1, *change schools* is an infrequently used strategy for parents. In addition, only one participant stated that they would recommend this strategy across any of the three forms of bullying, and this was for physical bullying. Therefore, no additional analysis was conducted on this strategy.

Discussion

One of the aims of this study was to investigate parents' recollections of using particular strategies to stop bullying during childhood and adolescence and the perceived effectiveness of these strategies. While the majority of parents had used the strategy of *ignoring the behaviour* in response to verbal and relational bullying; they were more likely to use *retaliate* for physical bullying. The high frequency of these strategies is interesting to note as both of these strategies are considered to be ineffective (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012). Furthermore, despite previous literature suggesting that *tell someone else* is the most recommended strategy and one that is considered to be effective (Harcourt et al., 2014; Murray-Harvey et al., 2012), only half of the participants in the current study had used the strategy in their childhood, and this was the same across all forms of bullying. In addition, for those that had used the strategy, the participants were evenly split in terms of the perceived effectiveness of this strategy. These findings suggest that the parents themselves may have been using ineffective strategies in their attempts to address their own childhood bullying.

In contrast to what is recommended in the literature (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005), the majority of parents had not used *talking to the bully* as a strategy, and for those that did, there was a fairly even split on effectiveness. While *changing schools* was rare, when used it was considered to be effective. Although adults have been asked about their childhood bullying experiences (Fox & Harrison, 2021; Jantzer et al., 2006) and how it may influence their attitudes (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Duncan, 1999; Sawyer et al., 2011; Stives et al., 2019), parents' experiences of using particular strategies to address their own childhood bullying has not been investigated, and these findings suggest that childhood strategy use was not only highly variable and dependent on the type of bullying encountered, there was also considerable variation in terms of each strategy's perceived effectiveness.

Another aim of this study was to investigate what strategies parents would recommend to their child in order to see if the type of bullying had an influence. The most frequently recommended strategy across all types of bullying was *telling someone else*. Previous studies have also found that 'telling an adult' is the most frequently recommended strategy by parents (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Harcourt et al., 2014, 2015; Offrey & Rinaldi, 2017; Sawyer et al., 2011). While *ignore the behaviour* was often recommended by parents in the present study, this was less likely if the bullying was physical. Previous research has also found avoidance strategies to be frequently recommended by parents (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Stives et al., 2019) despite being an ineffective strategy. *Retaliation* was generally not recommended by parents; unless it was in response to physical bullying in which case 20% of parents recommended it. This percentage is less than what has been found with previous studies that have found retaliation or fighting back to be recommended by approximately 40% of parent participants (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Holt et al., 2009). The assertive strategy of *talking to the bully* was recommended by at least a third of parents across all three types of bullying. Offrey and Rinaldi (2017) also found that this was a strategy suggested by parents, but they were more likely to suggest an assertive strategy when considering physical bullying.

A further aim was to investigate the relationship between parents' own strategy use, its effectiveness and whether they would recommend the same strategies to their children. For four out of the five strategies (i.e. *retaliate*, *ignore the behaviour*, *change schools* and *talk to the bully about their behaviour*), parents who had *not* tried the strategy would *not* recommend it to their children. This finding suggests that there may be an intergenerational response which is based on parents' own strategy use. Furthermore, when parents *had* tried a strategy, their proposed recommendations were highly variable across the sample and differed depending on the strategy and type of bullying. Somewhat surprisingly the perceived effectiveness of the strategies *tell someone else*, *retaliate* and *change schools* did *not* appear to influence a parent's decision as to whether to recommend the strategy or not.

Did Parents Use and Recommend the Strategies?

Tell Someone Else

The finding that only half the parents had used the strategy of *tell someone else* themselves to try and combat bullying, and equal number of parents found this strategy effective compared to those who found it ineffective suggests that it may not be as effective as it is perceived to be in the extant literature. There are several factors that may contribute to these mixed results. For example, the relationship the child has with whom they are telling could impact their likelihood of speaking up. In the case of student–teacher relationships, if this is fraught, then the child may be less likely to confide in their teacher (Longobardi et al. 2017). If parents themselves have had poor relationships with their teachers, then they may be less likely to recommend this strategy.

Another factor that may explain the results for the *tell someone else* strategy concerns the fact that teachers are often ill-equipped to address bullying incidents, and the incidents are frequently overlooked or dismissed (Boulton et al., 2017; Green, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2023). Unfortunately, a high proportion of schools do not have bullying interventions or policies in place, and many teachers do not receive sufficient training to deal with bullying incidents (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2023). The recommendation from parents followed by a lack of response from school staff is likely to send a clear message to children and adolescents that adults are either uncertain about how best to address bullying or are unconcerned about the seriousness of it (Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002; Malaby, 2009; Rigby, 2011). As the majority of parents would still recommend this strategy to their children, even if they themselves found it ineffective, this perhaps suggests that they erroneously believe that schools are now better equipped to deal with bullying incidents than they were during their own schooling years. Teachers who feel more prepared to deal with bullying situations are more likely to get involved which highlights the importance of targeted training to address bullying and the provision of evidence-based information to teachers (Fekkes et al., 2005; Novick & Isaacs, 2010; O'Brien et al., 2023).

Ignoring the Behaviour

Although the strategy of *ignoring the behaviour* was the most frequently used strategy by parents, particularly to combat verbal and relational bullying, approximately equal number of parents found it either effective or ineffective. This may have been because it could be considered a passive strategy for dealing with the issue of bullying and therefore may have only worked in specific cases. Perhaps not surprisingly, parents who had not used the strategy and those who had found it ineffective did not recommend it to their children. However, those who had found it to be effective were equally likely to recommend or not recommend it to their children. This suggests that some parents may recommend this strategy to their children because of its effectiveness; while others may not recommend it based on whether they believe passive strategies are the correct way to deal with bullying. This may be especially true for the 48% of parents who had found this strategy effective for verbal bullying, as verbal bullying is often considered to be less concerning than physical bullying (Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002). However, passive strategies such as ignoring the bullying are considered to be ineffective at reducing bullying (Murray-Harvey et al., 2012) and recommending ignoring it to children who are experiencing verbal bullying may not be productive as they will still be able to hear and internalise the verbal bullying directed at them (Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002).

Retaliation

It was interesting to note that over a third of participants in each bullying category had previously used the *retaliation* strategy, with a high proportion finding it to be effective. This was especially true for physical bullying where it was the most used strategy as well as the most effective. However, the majority of parents would *not* recommend this strategy to their children. This finding is in line with previous research (Cooper & Nickerson, 2013; Holt et al., 2009) but highlights a potential mismatch or point of contention between what parents have experienced and what they would recommend to their children.

Talking to the Bully About Their Behaviour

Approximately, a third of parents stated that they had used the strategy of *talking to the bully about their behaviour*. For verbal and relational bullying, more parents found it ineffective than effective, whereas for physical bullying the opposite was true. This strategy was more likely to be recommended by parents who had found it effective than by those who had never tried it. Parents who had used the strategy and found it ineffective were also less likely to recommend this strategy to their children than to recommend it. This suggests effectiveness may have played a role in parents' decisions to recommend this strategy. As bullying often includes an imbalance of power between the victim and the bully (Juvonen & Graham, 2014), it can be a daunting task for the victim to confront or discuss the issue with the bully, especially for a child. Therefore, parents who had not used this strategy may have been hesitant to recommend this strategy to their child.

Change Schools

The strategy *change school* was the least used by parents for each type of bullying. This is perhaps not surprising, as there is research suggesting that changing schools is a major upheaval for a child and a family and is therefore often avoided because of the risks to academic achievement this change can cause (Ingersoll et al., 1989). Despite not being a highly used strategy, for some individuals in this study it was their last resort and proved to be an effective one. Eight participants in the present study had used this strategy and found it effective, despite not wishing to recommend it to their children. This could be because parents have a risk adverse approach when dealing with their children's bullying, as they do not wish to cause their child harm, especially as what worked for them may not necessarily work for their children. This suggests there are other mediating factors such as the intensity and potential problems of a strategy that influence a parent's decision to recommend a strategy more so than effectiveness.

Summary

Overall the findings from this study highlight that for each strategy the type of bullying, personal experience of using a strategy and its effectiveness influence what parents would recommend to their children. In addition, at least some parents are still recommending strategies that are either considered by some to be ineffective (e.g., ignoring the bullying behaviour and retaliation) or are thought to be effective in terms of the extant literature but in reality *are often* ineffective in practice (in part due to inaction on the part of schools).

These results suggest that there may be an inter-generational transmission of strategy use in response to bullying. While some parents do not recommend a strategy that they have not themselves used, perhaps more concerning is the recommendation by parents of strategies that they themselves found to be ineffective. In addition, parents who indicated that they had *not* used a strategy were also less likely to recommend it to their child. Therefore, if they did not recommend it to their children, their children in turn would be unlikely to use it; and may therefore be unlikely to recommend it, if and when they themselves become parents. This may contribute to the maintenance of bullying and harmful results, if the strategies parents had not used and therefore not recommended were in fact effective in stopping the bullying.

Limitations and Future Research

Given the approximate New Zealand adult population with children under 18 years of age is ~2,434,630, and with a 95% confidence interval; the ideal sample size would have been 385 participants. Thus, one of the limitations of this study is the small sample size and the reduced numbers of parents responding to some of the strategies. With this in mind, the findings from this study must be considered with caution. A

further limitation of an anonymous questionnaire is the inability to test recall reliability. With all retrospective studies, there is a risk of memory bias and as the participants in this study were recalling events from as long as 40 years ago, this risk is present in the current study. Rivers (2004) found in his study that bullying recollections were stable over a 12-month period, and it is believed that similar results would be found for the participants in this study. This study's results could, however, be strengthened in the future by a larger, more representative sample and the collection of more detailed demographic information including socio-economic status and/or educational background. Additional restrictions on the age range would have also ensured that only parents of current school-age children responded to the questionnaire. Additional information about the types of bullying experienced could include questions relating to the frequency and intensity of the bullying that parents experienced and the specific contexts of these experiences, as these factors could potentially influence strategy use and effectiveness. In addition, the limited number of strategy options could be expanded in future research to ensure that a greater range is captured including the use of assertive (but non-violent) strategies and/or the use of humorous responses that may serve to de-escalate the incident. Furthermore, future studies could incorporate the option of providing more details about how participants used a particular strategy, whether strategy use and recommendations made by parents changed over time (i.e. developmentally) and other contextual factors that may have influenced their strategy choices. For example, a qualitative narrative approach may be able to establish more clearly the process by which participants came to choose the strategies they used themselves. It may also be able to more clearly explain why they would or would not recommend a strategy to their child, potentially based on their own personal bullying narrative and the age of their child. Given that children's coping strategies differ across childhood (Smith et al., 2001), it is possible that parents may recommend different strategies to adolescents in comparison to younger children. As perceived effectiveness of strategies did not appear to be consistently linked to whether parents would or would not recommend a strategy, it is unclear the reasons why parents chose the options that they did. Potential reasons have been discussed above; however, it would be beneficial for future research to evaluate what other specific factors in an individual's life influence their decision around what to recommend to their child should they be bullied.

Implications

We know from previous research that positive and informed parental involvement that includes an open dialogue can significantly decrease the negative impact of bullying (Axford et al., 2015; López-Castro & Priegue, 2019; Van Niejenhuis et al., 2020). However, the variation across the sample both in terms of strategy use in response to different types of bullying and what parents recommend suggests that there is still considerable uncertainty amongst parents about effective responses to bullying incidents. This is particularly pertinent when considering the strategy of retaliation. Given that victims in previous studies report using the strategy (Black

et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2001) and some parents in the current study indicated it had worked for them, a more nuanced and careful evaluation of this strategy is needed.

This study highlights that there is a need for better communication between parents and schools on how to address bullying incidents. As part of schools' anti-bullying policies there needs to be a shared understanding of the consequences for a child of using a particular strategy. For example, if children are told to confide in an adult (whether that is a teacher or a parent) about a bullying incident, it must be made clear to all stakeholders that the incident will be addressed and dealt with appropriately. Without these assurances, it is more likely that parents will recommend *less* effective strategies to their children.

It is also important to note, however, that both the geographic location (Smith et al., 2016) and historical context will likely influence strategy use and recommendations from one generation to the next. They will also influence how schools respond, given that school anti-bullying policies may be updated in light of changing research evidence (Kidwai & Smith, 2024). The suggestion that there may be an inter-generational dimension to strategy recommendations provides an opportunity for mental health professionals to open a dialogue with parents about their experiences. If parents' own experiences can be acknowledged, it may be the catalyst for improved communication and may alter future recommendations. For educators, a recognition of the inter-generational nature of strategy recommendations could also provide a platform for a shared understanding with parents of bullying by having an opportunity to discuss what strategies they have suggested and why. This may help to establish a shared understanding of which strategies are actually effective for children to use based on teacher observations of peer group dynamics and the current school policies.

Conclusion

For many children, parents are often the first responders when a bullying incident arises; however, the findings from this study suggest that the current uncertainty amongst parents about how to help their children respond to bullying incidents is inter-generational and maybe based to some degree on the strategies they themselves used in their childhood. Therefore the uncertainty and the recommendation of potentially harmful or ineffective strategies will continue to be perpetuated unless an open dialogue between schools and parents is facilitated and specific targeted guidance is provided to parents. A partnership between schools and the communities they serve to help ensure that the strategies being recommended by parents are evidence-based — and likely to be effective — is a critical piece in the prevention of bullying.

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Author Contribution Conceptualization (Vanessa Green, Emma Boddy); methodology (Vanessa Green, Emma Boddy, and Katie Allan); formal analysis (Emma Boddy and Michael Johnston); writing (Emma Boddy and Vanessa Green); writing — review and editing (Vanessa Green and Tessa Jacobsen-Grocott); and supervision (Vanessa Green and Michael Johnston).

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Data Availability The raw data required to produce the findings cannot be shared due to time limitations, and the participants of this study did not give consent for their raw data to be shared publicly.

Materials/Code Availability A copy of the survey materials can be made available upon request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The questionnaire and methodology for this study was approved by Victoria University of Wellington, NZ Ethics Committee (Reference number: 0000021801).

Consent Informed consent was obtained by all the participants included in the study by their willingness to proceed with the survey after reading the information pages prior to the start of the survey.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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Authors and Affiliations

Emma Boddy¹ · Michael Johnston¹ · Katie Allan¹ · Tessa Jacobsen-Grocott¹ ·
Vanessa A. Green¹ 

✉ Vanessa A. Green
vanessa.green@vuw.ac.nz

Emma Boddy
emmaboddy@live.com

Michael Johnston
michael.johnston@nzinitiative.org.nz

Katie Allan
katieallan@gmail.com

Tessa Jacobsen-Grocott
tessa.jacobsengrocott@vuw.a.nz

¹ School of Education, Victoria University of Wellington, Kelburn, P. O. Box 600,
Wellington 6140, New Zealand