

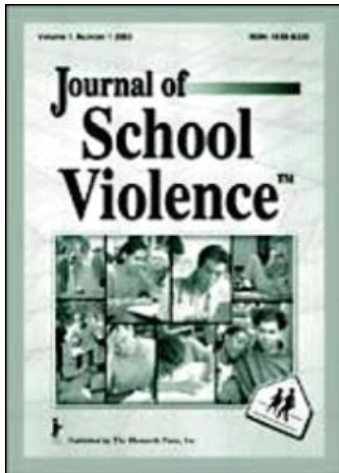
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### Parent/Child Concordance about Bullying Involvement and Family Characteristics Related to Bullying and Peer Victimization

Melissa K. Holt <sup>a</sup>; Glenda Kaufman Kantor <sup>a</sup>; David Finkelhor <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Family Research Laboratory and Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, USA

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## **Parent/Child Concordance about Bullying Involvement and Family Characteristics Related to Bullying and Peer Victimization**

MELISSA K. HOLT, GLENDA KAUFMAN KANTOR,  
and DAVID FINKELHOR

*Family Research Laboratory and Crimes Against Children Research Center,  
University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, USA*

*This study examined parent perspectives on bullying, parent/child concordance about bullying involvement, and family characteristics associated with bullying perpetration and peer victimization. Participants were 205 fifth-grade students and their parents. Students attended an urban, ethnically diverse school district in the Northeast. Youth completed self-report measures about bullying involvement, attitudes toward and responses to bullying, and victimization in the home. Parents responded to self-report survey questions about attitudes toward and responses to bullying, perceptions of their child's involvement in bullying, and family characteristics. Bullying perpetration and victimization rates were higher when reported by students than parents, and parents were particularly unaware of their children bullying others. Family support was related to students telling their parents about peer victimization and youth getting in trouble at home for bullying perpetration. Finally, victims' homes were characterized by higher levels of criticism, fewer rules, and more child maltreatment; bullies' homes were characterized by lack of supervision,*

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Address correspondence to Melissa K. Holt, Family Research Laboratory and Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, 10 West Edge Dr., Suite 106, Durham, NH 03824, USA. E-mail: melissa.holt@unh.edu

*child maltreatment, and exposure to domestic violence. Findings highlight the need to increase parental awareness about bullying and to include parents in school-based bullying prevention programs.*

**KEYWORDS** *bullying, family characteristics*

Research has documented that bullying victimization and perpetration are associated with deleterious psychological and educational outcomes for youth (Espelage & Holt, 2001; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelae, & Rantanen, 2001; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1993a). Accordingly, policies to counteract bullying are becoming increasingly widespread; as of 2005, 17 states had enacted anti-bullying legislation (Dounay, 2005). Given evidence that bullying prevention programs can reduce bullying, some of these state statutes mention the benefit of implementing such programs within schools (Limber & Small, 2003). From a research perspective, the most effective programs are ones that take a multi-systemic perspective under which multiple groups are targeted for prevention efforts, from students to teachers to parents (Limber, Nation, Tracy, Melton, & Flerx, 2004; Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). This is consistent with the social-ecological model of bullying which posits that bullying involvement is determined by the multiple systems in which youth are embedded (Espelage & Swearer, 2004).

Because parents may influence their child's bullying involvement, they should be included in prevention efforts, and toward that end, more needs to be understood about parent attitudes toward and awareness of bullying. This information is essential for parental components of bullying programs to be best tailored to parent needs. In particular, it may be important to examine the concordance between parent and child reports of children's bullying involvement. The degree to which parents are aware of their own children's bullying involvement is unclear, and if parents are to be involved in prevention efforts it is critical to ascertain their awareness. Also, substantial evidence suggests that family characteristics are associated with bullying involvement but most studies have relied on only child or only parent reports. Using a combination of parent and child reports may lead to a richer understanding of these associations. This study adds to the literature on bullying through assessing parent attitudes toward and awareness of bullying, evaluating parent/child concordance about bullying involvement, and examining family characteristics associated with bullying and peer victimization using reports from both fifth-grade students and their parents.

## PARENT AWARENESS OF AND RESPONSES TO BULLYING

Bullying is an area of concern for both students and parents. In fact, when asked what concerns parents had about their child transitioning from

primary to secondary school, the most common answers among parents were bullying and peer relationships (Zeedyk et al., 2003). However, parents tend to report lower rates of youth bullying involvement than youth do (Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002), although to date few studies have matched parent reports to their children's.

It is likely that parents are not aware of youth bullying involvement in part because youth do not always divulge their experiences with bullying to their parents (Mishna, 2004; Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001). For instance, in a study of middle school students 40% reported that they did not tell an adult about being bullied (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). An investigation of Dutch children provided analogous results; 53% of youth told their teachers about bullying victimization and 67% told their parents (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005). This is consistent with previous research indicating that youth are more likely to tell their parents than their teachers about being bullied (Whitney & Smith, 1993). Children report various reasons for not telling someone about being bullied including a fear of retaliation, the assumption that telling an adult will not help the situation, and the perception that the incident is not serious enough (Newman & Murray, 2005; Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998).

Research suggests that both individual and contextual factors are related to telling someone about bullying involvement. Specifically, girls and chronic victims are more likely to report being bullied (Fekkes et al., 2005). Conversely, youth who perceive the school climate to be tolerant of bullying and who live in homes in which parents use coercive discipline are less likely to tell someone about being bullied (Fekkes et al., 2005). Child age also appears to play a role in help-seeking behaviors related to bullying; younger children are more likely to tell someone about bullying experiences than older children (Smith et al., 2001). Finally, a study of Greek youth found that victims were more likely to tell a parent about being bullied than bully-victims (i.e., youth who both bully and are bullied) (42% vs. 20%) (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001).

Limited research has addressed what role parents play in discussing bullying involvement with their children and trying to intervene. It appears that parents are more likely to talk to their children about being victimized than about bullying others (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001). This is consistent with other research indicating that parents of bullies do not talk to them often about their behaviors (Fekkes et al., 2005). There is some evidence that gender influences whether parents discuss bullying involvement with their children; parents of victimized girls were more likely than parents of victimized boys to talk to them about their experiences (Houndoumadi & Pateraki, 2001). With respect to the degree to which parents try to actively intervene when aware of bullying involvement, according to a sample of Dutch elementary school students when parents were aware their child was being bullied they had varied responses: 24% of parents did not try to stop

it, 4% tried to stop it but the victimization became worse, 16% tried to stop it and the victimization stayed the same, and 17% tried to stop it and the victimization became less frequent (Fekkes et al., 2005).

### Family Characteristics Associated with Bullying Involvement

Parents are important contributors to the development of their children's peer relationships, through both direct (e.g., helping children develop peer relationship skills) and indirect (e.g., parent attitudes) pathways (Ladd, 1992). It therefore follows that parents likely have some influence over their children's bullying involvement. As delineated by Duncan (Duncan, 2004), multiple theories offer explanations for how the family environment influences youth bullying involvement, from attachment theory to social learning theory to family systems theory. Further, studies coming out of these theoretical frameworks have consistently found differences in family characteristics between youth without significant bullying involvement and children identified as bullies, victims, and bully-victims (i.e., youth who both bully others and are bullied).

With respect to bullies, bullying behavior is associated with low maternal and paternal involvement (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). In particular, youth who spend more time without adults are more likely to bully peers (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000). Further, bullies are more likely to come from families with authoritarian parents who condone fighting back (Baldry & Farrington, 2000). Families of bullies have also been described as lacking warmth and structure (Oliver, Oaks, & Hoover, 1994; Olweus, 1993b), having low family cohesion (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1992; Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Van Oost, 2002), and being high in conflict (Stevens et al., 2002). In terms of family structure and income, an investigation of school children in England found that whereas youth from non-intact families reported more bullying there was no link between income and bullying (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Conversely, findings from a study of U.S. middle school students found no link between family structure and bullying behavior (Espelage et al., 2000). Finally, there is some evidence that bullying behaviors can be transmitted across generations; one study showed that fathers who had bullied their peers at school were more likely to have sons who bullied their peers (Farrington, 1993).

A unique set of family characteristics exist for families of victims. In this case, families of victims often have high levels of cohesion (Bowers et al., 1992). Further, victims are more likely to have less authoritative parents (Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998) and live in families in which there are low levels of negotiation (Oliver et al., 1994) and high levels of conflict (Baldry & Farrington, 2005; Mohr, 2006). Some evidence suggests that family structure and income are associated with being victimized by peers. In particular, in a study of Nordic children, both living in a single-parent home and having

a low SES family were associated with increased odds of being bullied (Nordhagen, Nielsen, Stigum, & Kohler, 2005). Finally, as summarized by Duncan (Duncan, 2004) there appear to be some family characteristics of victims that vary by the child's gender. For instance, whereas male victims often have overly close relationships with their mothers, female victims are more likely to have mothers who withdraw love.

Less research has focused on the family environments of youth who both perpetrate bullying and are victimized by peers (i.e., "bully-victims"). Existing research suggests that parents of bully-victims tend to be less warm and more overprotective than parents of uninvolved youth, and provide inconsistent discipline and monitoring (Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997; Smith, Bowers, Binney, & Cowie, 1993). In addition, bully-victims families are characterized by low levels of cohesion, although not as low as cohesion levels in families of bullies ((Bowers et al., 1992).

Research has documented that family violence is associated with bullying perpetration and victimization. In general, such studies have found that family violence is associated with greater difficulties in peer relations (Jacobsen & Straker, 1982; Nugent, Labram, & McLoughlin, 1998). More specifically, maltreated children are more likely to be victimized by their peers (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001), and girls exposed to domestic violence are more likely to bully their peers, even after controlling for the effects of child abuse (Baldry, 2003). One recent study of elementary school students revealed that bullies, victims, and bully-victims were more likely than others to experience victimization across multiple domains, including child maltreatment and witnessing/indirect victimization, than uninvolved students, with strikingly higher differences for bully-victims (Holt, Finkelhor, & Kaufman Kantor, in press).

Although extant research clearly has documented that families of youth involved in bullying differ from families of youth not involved in bullying, these studies have been limited in some respects. In particular, as noted by Stevens and colleagues (2002), investigations on this topic link child *perceptions* of the family environment to bullying involvement, particularly when focused on elementary and middle school students. Few studies have included parent-report data when evaluating the extent to which family characteristics relate to bullying and peer victimization. The current investigation includes both child and parent report data. Also, many studies linking parental characteristics to bullying involvement have used samples from outside of the United States, and as such some of the findings might not translate to samples of youth in the United States.

## Summary and Research Questions

Despite a movement toward implementing prevention programs that involve parents in conjunction with students and school staff, there is

limited information available about parents' awareness of, attitudes toward, and responses to bullying. Further, to date few studies have matched student and parent reports to examine concordance about bullying involvement and the degree to which family characteristics are related to bullying and peer victimization. As such, the primary aims of this study were to: (1) Explore parent attitudes toward, awareness of, and responses to bullying; (2) Evaluate the degree of concordance between parent/child reports of bullying involvement and examine whether concordance varies based on individual and contextual factors; and (3) Assess relations between family characteristics and youth bullying involvement using reports from fifth-grade students and their parents/guardians.

Due to limited past research on parent attitudes toward, awareness of, and responses to bullying, our analyses in this area were exploratory. We were interested in obtaining general information on parent attitudes toward and awareness of bullying, and assessing whether individual (e.g., type of bullying involvement) and contextual (e.g., family characteristics) factors influenced if youth reported bullying experiences to their parents. Given prior research documenting that parents tend to report lower rates of bullying than students, we expected that parent/child concordance about bullying involvement would not be high. Further, based on past research we expected that parents would be more aware of children's victimization than their bullying perpetration. Finally, we hypothesized that family characteristics (e.g., degree of child supervision) would be associated with bullying involvement, with differential patterns for bullying and peer victimization.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 205 fifth-grade students and their parents/guardians. This is a subsample of youth from a larger study (Holt et al., in press), and reflects students whose parents/guardians elected to complete surveys. Students attended 22 elementary schools from one school district in a large, Northeastern city. There were 111 (54.1%) girls and 89 (43.4%) boys; 5 students did not report their gender (2.4%). Youth described themselves as White, non-Hispanic (31.7%,  $n = 65$ ), Portuguese (17.6%,  $n = 36$ ), Hispanic (9.3%,  $n = 19$ ), Black (5.8%,  $n = 12$ ), Native American (5.8%,  $n = 12$ ), Asian (2.0%,  $n = 4$ ), and Biracial or multiracial (27.8%,  $n = 57$ ). The mean age for the youth sample was 10.81 ( $SD = 0.59$ ) with children ranging from 10 to 12 years old.

Parents/guardians were predominantly female (91%) and mothers (88%). Given that the majority of adult respondents were parents rather than guardians, we will henceforth refer to the adult sample as "parents" rather than "parents/guardians." Most parents were married (57%), and the majority

had either completed high school/obtained a GED (31%) or had completed some college or a 2-year associate's degree (39%). Parents reported a median family income of \$35,000-\$49,000.

In terms of the community in which the students lived, it is an urban environment with a population of approximately 100,000. Seventeen percent of residents live below the poverty line according to data derived by the U.S. Census Bureau based on household size and number of children under 18 (e.g., for a family of 4 the poverty line is \$16,895). Crime statistics indicate that the violent crime rate in this community is approximately two times the national average.

Student surveys were offered in English and Spanish; all students included in this paper completed the survey in English. Parent surveys were offered in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Vietnamese, but all parents elected to complete surveys in English.

### Student Measures

Each student first completed a demographic questionnaire that included questions about his or her sex, age, grade, and race/ethnicity. In addition to the measures described below, students also reported whether they had been teased or picked on at school or had teased or picked on others at school, and they indicated their parents' responses to these behaviors. Throughout this paper we refer to the demographic questionnaire, study-derived questions, and the measures described below as the "survey."

#### UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS BULLY SCALE

The nine-item University of Illinois Bully Scale (UIBS; Espelage & Holt, 2001) was used to assess bullying behavior including teasing, social exclusion, name-calling, and rumor spreading. Researchers developed this scale based on interviews with middle school students, a review of the research literature on existing bullying measures, and extensive factor analytic investigations (Espelage et al., 2000; Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). Students were asked to indicate how often in the past 30 days they had engaged in each behavior at school (e.g., "I teased other students" and "I upset other students for the fun of it"). Response options included "Never," "1 or 2 times," "3 or 4 times," "5 or 6 times," and "7 or more times." Higher scores indicated more self-reported bullying behaviors. Espelage and Holt (2001) found a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .87 and the Bullying Scale was found to be moderately correlated ( $r = .65$ ) with the Youth Self-Report Aggression Scale (Achenbach, 1991), suggesting convergent validity. Further, the UIBS was found to converge with peer nomination data (Espelage et al., 2003). This scale was not significantly correlated with the Illinois Victimization Scale ( $r = .12$ ), providing evidence of discriminant validity (Espelage et al.,



2003). A Cronbach alpha coefficient of .86 for the UIBS was found for the current sample.

In line with previous research (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Haynie, Nansel, & Eitel, 2001), students were considered "bullies" if their scores were in the top 25th percentile on the bullying measure and not in the top 25th percentile on the victimization measure. This resulted in 27 (13.2%) youth categorized as bullies.

#### UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS VICTIMIZATION SCALE

Peer victimization was assessed using the four-item University of Illinois Victimization Scale (UIVS; Espelage & Holt, 2001), to which four additional items developed for this project were added to expand the scale. There therefore were eight peer victimization items in total. Researchers developed this scale based on interviews with middle school students, a review of the research literature on existing bullying measures, and extensive factor analytic investigations (Espelage et al., 2000; Espelage et al., 2003). Students were asked how often they had experienced peer victimization in the past 30 days at school (e.g., "Other students called me names," "I got hit and pushed by other students"). Response options included "Never," "1 or 2 times," "3 or 4 times," "5 or 6 times," and "7 or more times." Higher scores indicated more self-reported victimization. This scale was also found to converge with peer nomination data (Espelage et al., 2003). A Cronbach alpha coefficient of .89 for the UIVS was found for the current study.

In line with previous research (Demaray & Malecki, 2003; Haynie et al., 2001), students were considered "victims" if their scores were in the top 25th percentile on the peer victimization measure and not in the top 25th percentile on the bullying perpetration measure. This resulted in 33 (16.2%) youth categorized as victims.

#### JUVENILE VICTIMIZATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Participants completed the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (Hamby, Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2004), a 33-item screener measure that assessed a broad range of victimization. In this study, we used only two summary scores: child maltreatment (e.g., being physically abused) and exposure to domestic violence (e.g., witnessing domestic violence). Each question referred to a particular victimization form and respondents indicated whether or not it had occurred within the past year. It is important to note that child maltreatment items asked about both known *and* unknown perpetrators of physical abuse, emotional/psychological abuse, and neglect, differentiating this measure of child maltreatment from some other instruments in the field.

With respect to scoring, it is possible to consider item-level responses or to compute dichotomous scores for each module (i.e., a score of “1” would indicate that at least one form of victimization within that module was reported). The current study used the dichotomous scoring method. National norms exist for this measure, and preliminary evidence exists for the questionnaire’s construct validity and reliability (Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005). Specifically, JVQ items correlated with traumatic symptom items, providing evidence for construct validity (Finkelhor et al., 2005). Also, there was adequate test-retest reliability across a three to four week period (Finkelhor et al., 2005).

### Parent/Guardian Survey

Each parent first completed a demographic questionnaire that included questions about his or her sex, age, marital status, relationship to the fifth-grade child, educational attainment, and income. Next parents completed study-derived items across four domains: (1) Parent attitudes toward bullying (11 items), to which parents responded on a scale from ‘1’ (Strongly disagree) to ‘4’ (Strongly agree) (e.g., “A little teasing doesn’t hurt anyone.”); (2) Family characteristics and functioning (12 items), to which parents responded on a scale from ‘1’ (Never) to ‘4’ (Often) (e.g., “I do not know where my children are,” “Family members criticize one another”); (3) Parent awareness of child’s bullying involvement either as a bully or a victim (2 items), to which parents responded yes or no (e.g., “Have you ever suspected or found out that your child might be teased or picked on at school by other kids?”); and (4) Parent responses to bullying involvement (2 items) (e.g., if parents were aware their child had been involved in bullying, they reported what they did in response to this).

A principal axis factor analysis of the family characteristics and functioning items suggested the existence of three factors: fighting/hostility ( $\alpha = .47$ ), family support and shared time ( $\alpha = .67$ ), and family rules and supervision ( $\alpha = .27$ ). Given low alphas for the fighting/hostility and family rules/supervision scales, we elected to not use these scales in analyses but rather use individual items only.

### Procedure

#### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

Given the sensitive nature of this investigation, researchers worked closely with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the protection of participants’ rights and their safety. The IRB reviewed the survey and all other materials to be distributed to parents/guardians and participants (e.g., consent forms) prior to granting approval. Further, school officials reviewed all materials prior to granting permission to survey the district’s students.

## PASSIVE NOTICE AND STUDENT ASSENT

Parents/guardians of all fifth-grade students in the district ( $N = 884$ ) were sent letters informing them about the purpose of the study. Parents/guardians were also informed that students' responses to certain items would trigger reporting, but that responses to other items were confidential. If parents did not want their child to participate, they were asked to sign and return the form to the school; 6% of parents ( $n = 53$ ) returned forms. At the beginning of each survey administration teachers removed students from the room if they were not allowed to participate, and researchers also reminded students that they should not complete the survey if their parents had returned a form. In addition to passive parental consent, students were asked to assent to participate in the project through a standardized assent form read to students prior to survey administration. Only one child did not choose to complete the survey.

## SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

Surveys were administered to students in classrooms of approximately 25 children. Two researchers were present at each survey administration. At the majority of survey administrations a school adjustment counselor, whose role in the school was to counsel students, was also present should any children feel distressed. Students were first informed about the general nature of the investigation. Next, researchers made certain that students were sitting far enough from one another to ensure confidentiality. Students were then given survey packets and asked to answer all questions honestly.

One researcher read questions from the first two pages of the survey aloud to ensure that students understood how to complete the survey. After that, researchers were available to answer questions once students began responding to survey items. The grade-school level of the survey, as indicated by the Flesch-Kincaid readability index, was 3.8, and therefore appropriate for fifth-grade students to complete by themselves. Measures were not counterbalanced because: (1) we read the first two pages of the survey aloud to students to ensure comprehension, and this required that all students have the same items on these pages, and (2) given the sensitive nature of some questions, we designed the order of measures such that students did not answer highly sensitive questions at the beginning of the survey or the end of the survey. On average it took students approximately 40 minutes to complete the survey.

At the end of survey administration participants were provided with a list of phone numbers to call (e.g., community counseling agencies) should they experience an emotional reaction to the questionnaires. Last, a raffle was held in each classroom in which one student won a \$10 gift certificate to a local store. Students who did not complete surveys also were eligible

for this raffle because we did not want students to be penalized whose parents did not want them to participate in the study.

#### REPORTING OF ABUSE

Researchers are not mandated reporters of abuse in the state in which these data were collected. However, to best ensure the safety of student participants three survey items that asked about sexual abuse were flagged as reportable items. If a participant endorsed one or more of these items, the student was referred to the school adjustment counselor for immediate follow-up. The investigators' Institutional Review Board approved this reporting procedure. In the larger sample from which this subsample was selected, 20 students (2.9%) were referred for follow-up about sexual abuse.

#### PARENT SURVEYS

The schools mailed parent surveys to all parents of fifth-grade students within the district around the time of the student survey administration, and a reminder post-card was mailed to parents approximately 2 weeks after the initial survey packet distribution. Consent information was included as part of the survey packet. Parents were provided with a stamped envelope in which to return their completed surveys. For their participation parents were paid \$20. Two hundred forty-five parents returned surveys, reflecting a response rate of 28%. Given that not all of these parents' children completed student surveys, the final sample of matched parent/student data included 205 respondents.

## RESULTS

### Analyses

We first computed frequencies for parent attitudes toward bullying, parent/child communication about bullying involvement, and parent responses to bullying involvement. Second, we examined parent/child concordance using parent perceptions and child self-reports of bullying involvement. Finally, we evaluated the extent to which family characteristics relate to bullying involvement.

### Frequency Analyses

#### PARENT ATTITUDES TOWARD BULLYING

Most parents (88%) believed that teasing hurts kids. Further, the majority of parents (81%) indicated that schools should pay more attention to bullying.

When asked if their child was safe at school, most parents (88%) responded affirmatively. With respect to how parents/guardians responded about ways in which to deal with bullying, few parents (9%) indicated that parents and kids should work out bullying by themselves, but approximately one third (37%) responded that teachers and principals should deal with bullying without any parental interference. The majority of parents (82%) believed that kids should be strongly punished for bullying, and almost all parents (93%) indicated that the best way to deal with bullying is to encourage positive interactions. In terms of how parents thought kids should respond to bullying, approximately one third (37%) indicated that kids should fight back, and one-third responded that kids should stay out of bullies way (30%). The majority (88%) of parents felt that kids should stand up for themselves.

#### PARENT/CHILD COMMUNICATION ABOUT BULLYING VICTIMIZATION AND PARENTAL RESPONSES

Most students (86%) who indicated that they had been teased or picked on at school told someone about it, and of these students 61% told their parents. Somewhat fewer youth who had experienced physical bullying victimization told their parents about their victimization than youth who experienced other forms of bullying, but the difference was not significant at  $p < .05$  (81% vs. 93%; Chi Square (1, 114) = 3.35,  $p < .10$ ). Boys and girls did not report different rates of telling their parents about bullying victimization (Chi Square (1, 189) = 0.17, *ns*), and age was not related to telling parents about bullying victimization (Chi Square (1, 181) = 1.51, *ns*). Finally, children who reported being teased had families that tended to be characterized as more supportive ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 0.37$  vs.  $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = .60$ ;  $t = -2.29$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and as having family members who get along well ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = .76$  vs.  $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Among parents who suspected that their child was being teased or picked on at school, they responded in a number of ways. Most parents (79%) talked to their child about it; 45% told their child to stick up for him/herself; 44% talked to the child's teacher about it; 45% talked to the principal about it; 10% took their child to a counselor; 14% talked to the parent of the other child involved; 44% gave their child ideas about how to avoid being teased; and 27% told their child not to hit back.

#### PARENT/CHILD COMMUNICATION ABOUT BULLYING PERPETRATION AND PARENTAL RESPONSES

The majority of children (69%) who reported teasing or picking on other children at school noted that they got in trouble for this at home. Boys and girls did not get in trouble at different rates (Chi Square = 0.28, *ns*), and child age was not related to getting in trouble at home (Chi Square = 1.09, *ns*).

Somewhat more youth who perpetrated physical acts of bullying got in trouble than youth who did not perpetrate physical acts of bullying, but the difference was not significant at  $p < .05$  (85% vs. 69%, Chi-Square (1, 69) = 2.71,  $p < .10$ ). Families in which the child got in trouble tended to be characterized as more supportive than families in which the child did not get in trouble ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 0.17$  vs.  $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ;  $t = -2.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Among parents who suspected that their child was teasing or bullying other children at school, most took some sort of action. The most common responses were to talk to the child about it (55%) and/or to tell the child to stop teasing other kids (52%). Other parental responses included punishing the child for teasing kids (24%); talking to the child's teacher about it (24%); talking to the child's principal about it (17%); and taking the child to a counselor (10%).

### Parent/Child Concordance

Overall, 59% of youth indicated they had been teased or picked on at school whereas 41% of parents thought that their child had been teased or picked on at school. When considering concordance rates for the entire sample, results indicated that for approximately 10% of the sample both the child and parent indicated that the child had been teased, and for 53% of the sample both the child and parent indicated that the child had not been teased (Table 1). In only approximately 5% of the sample did a child report being teased when their parents did not report that they had been teased. There was a tendency, however, for parents to think that their child had been teased when the child did not report this (31% of sample).

In terms of reporting teasing or picking on others, 31% of students indicated that they had teased or picked on others whereas only 11% of parents thought that their child had teased or picked on others. With respect to concordance, among children who reported teasing others only 2% of their parents also indicated that their child had teased others, whereas 11% of parents did not believe that their child had teased others (Table 2). In 9% of

**TABLE 1** Concordance Between Student Reports of Being Teased or Picked on and Parent Beliefs About Whether Their Child has been Teased or Picked on

	Parent beliefs	
	Parent believes child has been teased ( $N = 82$ )	Parent believes child has not been teased ( $N = 116$ )
Child reports		
Child reported being teased ( $N = 115$ )	10.5%	5.5%
Child reported not being teased ( $N = 79$ )	31%	53%

**TABLE 2** Concordance Between Student Reports of Teasing or Picking on Other Students and Parent Beliefs About Whether Their Child has Teased or Picked on Other Students

	Parent beliefs	
	Parent believes child has teased others ( <i>N</i> = 22)	Parent believes child has not teased others ( <i>N</i> = 176)
Child reports		
Child reported teasing others ( <i>N</i> = 57)	2%	11%
Child reported not teasing others ( <i>N</i> = 128)	9%	78%

the sample, however, parents reported that their child had teased others in cases in which their child did not report teasing others. Finally, for the majority of the sample (78%) both parents and children agreed that the child had not been involved in teasing others.

We also examined child self-reported level or intensity of peer victimization and bullying perpetration by parent perceptions of bullying involvement (Table 3). In general, when parents believed that their child had been victimized at school, children indicated more intensity of peer victimization than when parents did not believe that their child had been victimized at school. In cases in which both parents and youth reported student victimization experiences, results were even more striking; these youth had significantly higher peer victimization scores than youth who had not been identified as victims only through parent or self-report alone. Conversely, when only parent reports suggested that the child was a victim, child self-report peer victimization scores did not reflect high levels of victimization.

A somewhat different pattern emerged with respect to bullying perpetration (Table 3). Overall, there were not differences in child reported intensity of bullying perpetration between cases in which parents believed that their child had teased or picked on others at school and cases in which parents did not believe that their child had teased or picked on others at school. However, when both parent and child reports identified the child as teasing or picking on others at schools, bullying scores were significantly higher than when neither parent nor child identified the child as teasing or picking on others at school. Conversely, when only parent reports suggested that the child had teased or picked on others, child self-report bullying perpetration scores did not reflect high levels of bullying perpetration.

### Relations between Family Characteristics and Bullying Involvement

We first examined associations between SES, family structure, and bullying involvement. SES was not related to either bullying perpetration ( $r = -0.05$ )

**TABLE 3** Mean Peer Victimization and Bullying Scores by Parent Perceptions of Their Children's Involvement in Bullying

	Peer victimization score (Child self-report)
Total sample	
Child was identified as a victim by parent ( $n = 82$ )	8.12 (6.74)*
Child was not identified as a victim by parent ( $n = 116$ )	4.42 (5.51)
Parent perception matches with child report	
Child was identified as a victim by both parent and child ( $n = 21$ )	15.43 (4.97)**
Child was not identified as a victim by either parent or child ( $n = 104$ )	3.16 (3.71)
Parent perception does not match with child report	
Child was identified as a victim only by parent ( $n = 61$ )	5.61 (5.29)**
Child was identified as a victim only by child ( $n = 11$ )	16.27 (5.84)
	Bullying Score (Child Self-Report)
Total sample	
Child was identified as a bully by parent ( $n = 22$ )	4.23 (5.41)
Child was not identified as a bully by parent ( $n = 176$ )	3.39 (4.95)
Parent perception matches with child report	
Child was identified as a bully by both parent and child ( $n = 4$ )	11.75 (9.54)**
Child was not identified as bully by either parent or child ( $n = 154$ )	2.21 (3.40)
Parent perception does not match with child report	
Child was identified as a bully only by parent ( $n = 18$ )	2.56 (1.95)**
Child was identified as a bully only by child ( $n = 21$ )	11.29 (6.95)

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

or peer victimization ( $r = -0.10$ ). However, compared to other youth, bullies were more likely to live in homes with mothers only (33% vs. 15%; Chi Square (1, 203) = 5.65,  $p < .05$ ).

Next we evaluated whether family characteristics were differentially associated with either parent or child reports of bullying and peer victimization (Tables 4 & 5). As shown in Table 4, when children reported their own victimization, they indicated that their family members often criticized one another, their families had fewer rules, and the children were more likely to experience child maltreatment. By contrast, no family characteristics were associated with parent reports of child peer victimization.

With respect to child or parent reports of bullying, as indicated in Table 5, child self-reports suggested that bullies are more likely to live in homes in which parents often don't know where children are and in which child maltreatment and domestic violence are occurring. Again, parental perceptions of child's bullying involvement were not associated with any family characteristics.



**TABLE 4** Family Characteristics: Percent in Agreement by Youth Classification as Victims of Bullying Through Parent and Child Reports

	Parental perceptions		Child self-report	
	Victim ( <i>n</i> = 78)	Not victim ( <i>n</i> = 113)	Victim ( <i>n</i> = 33)	Not victim ( <i>n</i> = 166)
<b>Fighting/hostility</b>				
Fight a lot in family	33%	24%	36%	27%
Family members often criticize	29%	24%	42%*	23%
Fight frequently with partner	19%	14%	16%	15%
Call child names	9%	6%	3%	7%
<b>Family support &amp; shared time</b>				
Family members support each other	98%	97%	94%	98%
Activities are carefully planned	73%	79%	70%	79%
Family gets along well	92%	90%	97%	90%
<b>Family rules &amp; supervision</b>				
Don't like child to do much on own	44%	33%	32%	37%
Few rules in family	44%	53%	32%*	52%
Give child silent treatment	12%	11%	12%	11%
Often don't know where children are	1%	6%	3%	5%
Child maltreatment	N/A	N/A	39.4%**	11.4%
Exposure to domestic violence	N/A	N/A	16.1%	7.4%

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

**TABLE 5** Family Characteristics: Percent in Agreement by Youth Classification as Perpetrators of Bullying Through Parent and Child Reports

	Parental perceptions		Child self-report	
	Bully ( <i>n</i> = 22)	Not bully ( <i>n</i> = 176)	Bully ( <i>n</i> = 27)	Not bully ( <i>n</i> = 176)
<b>Fighting/hostility</b>				
Fight a lot in family	36%	26%	19%	30%
Family members often criticize	38%	25%	23%	27%
Fight frequently with partner	10%	17%	11%	16%
Call child names	14%	6%	7%	7%
<b>Family support &amp; shared time</b>				
Family members support each other	96%	97%	100%	97%
Activities are carefully planned	64%	79%	89%	76%
Family gets along well	86%	92%	85%	92%
<b>Family rules &amp; supervision</b>				
Don't like child to do much on own	38%	26%	41%	36%
Few rules in family	41%	49%	46%	49%
Give child silent treatment	5%	13%	11%	11%
Often don't know where children are	5%	4%	15%*	3%
Child maltreatment	N/A	N/A	25.0%*	13.9%
Exposure to domestic violence	N/A	N/A	23.1%**	6.5%

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined parent attitudes toward and awareness of bullying, parent/child concordance about bullying involvement, and family characteristics associated with bullying and peer victimization. Results suggested that there is weak concordance between parent and child reports of bullying involvement, particularly with respect to bullying perpetration. Certain family characteristics were related to bullying involvement — conflictual home environments and lack of supervision — but only when child self-reports (not parent reports) were used to identify youth as victims or bullies.

### Parent Attitudes toward Bullying

Most parents recognized that bullying is harmful to children, and the majority of parents indicated that bullying should be addressed to a greater extent within the schools. Thus, it appears that parents are aware of the negative consequences of bullying, which is a key component of parent education efforts (Lyznicki et al., 2004). However, despite a policy interest in including parents as part of the bullying prevention process (Limber et al., 2004; Olweus et al., 1999), about a third of the parents did not think that parents should work in conjunction with school staff to deal with bullying. This suggests that schools should work to educate parents about the utility and feasibility of including parents in efforts to stop bullying, both at the individual student level and at the broader school level (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004; Hudson, Windham, & Hooper, 2005; Mishna, 2004). Finally, approximately a third of the parents maintained the conventional stance that children should fight back when bullied. Based on previous research this perhaps is reflective of home environments in which means such as physical discipline are used to deal with problems (e.g., Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000), and points to the importance of teaching parents and children non-violent strategies with which to handle conflict or bullying victimization.

### Parent/Child Concordance about Bullying Involvement

There was a moderate degree of concordance between child and parent reports of peer victimization, consistent with previous research (Stockdale et al., 2002). Specifically, among youth who reported being victimized by peers approximately 10% of parents reported this same problem, whereas approximately 6% of parents did not report that their child had been victimized. Results were even more striking when concordance rates of bullying perpetration were considered. Among children who reported teasing others, 2% of their parents also indicated that their children had teased or picked on others whereas 11% did not believe that their child had done so. It is

likely that children are more inclined to tell their parents about being victimized than about bullying others, which would explain why parents are more aware of their children's peer victimization experiences. Parents are more likely to be aware of peer victimization when it is more intense. This might be because the school is also more aware of the child's victimization in these cases and informs the parents, or because the child's associated distress level leads him/her to tell a parent or the parent notices the child's distress level and inquires about it.

It is likely that parent/child concordance about bullying involvement is not high in part because students do not always tell parents about what is going on at school, particularly in cases in which peer victimization is mild or moderate. In fact, among students who told someone about being bullied, only 61% shared this information with their parents. Further, it appears that students who experience physical bullying are somewhat less inclined to tell their parents, which is worrisome given that these children are at greatest risk for injury. Given research evidence documenting that telling someone about peer victimization reduces the likelihood of subsequent victimization (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997), it is critical to promote help-seeking behavior among youth targets of bullying and to encourage youth to tell at least one adult about what is going on, whether it is a parent or someone else. Indeed, given findings from this study suggesting that children who do not tell their parents tend to come from less supportive homes, it might be that these children would obtain more supportive responses if they were to tell an adult in school or another trusted adult in their lives.

### Family Characteristics Associated with Bullying and Peer Victimization

Results contributed to our understanding of which family characteristics are related to peer victimization and bullying perpetration. SES was related to neither peer victimization nor bullying, supporting previous research in this area (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Further, bullies were more likely to live in homes with mothers only, adding to the previously mixed findings on family structure and bullying (Espelage et al., 2000; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Finally, there were significantly higher rates of child maltreatment for victims and bullies, and significantly higher rates of exposure to domestic violence for bullies. This adds to an increasing body of literature that highlights a substantial overlap between bullying involvement and family violence (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001; Baldrey, 2003), suggesting that prevention efforts and individual counseling need to consider the broad range of victimization experiences youth involved in bullying in any capacity might experience.

Importantly, for the other three primary components of family dynamics that were evaluated in this study—fighting/hostility, family support and

shared time, family rules & supervision—associations were found only when victim and bully status were determined by child self-report. Specifically, children who reported being victimized by peers had parents who described their homes as ones in which family members often criticized one another and there were few rules. With respect to children who reported bullying others, their parents characterized their homes as ones with a lack of supervision. These results not only support findings from previous studies (Baldry & Farrington, 2005; Espelage et al., 2000; Mohr, 2006), but also suggest that previous findings were not a result of method covariance. Further, the current results add support for the use of child self-report data to determine victim or bully status and counter some concerns raised about limitations of child self-report data (Juvonen et al., 2000).

### Limitations

This study was cross-sectional in nature, and therefore inferences cannot be made about causality or directionality. In addition, respondents were youth from only one school district, and therefore findings might not generalize to all fifth graders in the United States. Similarly, the sample included a large complement of minority urban youth, and accordingly the study should be replicated with other groups of youth. In addition, it might be that the parents who completed surveys were different from parents who did not complete surveys in ways that could have influenced study findings. For instance, a previous study suggested that parents of bullies had lower levels of participation (Stevens et al., 2002), although student reports of teasing others in this sub-sample were comparable to student reports of teasing others in the full sample. Further, this investigation did not address associations between parent attitudes and bullying involvement. Finally, the sample size was small overall, which in particular precluded analyses of bully-victims. Accordingly, future studies should focus on the unique patterns of this group with respect to parental awareness and associated family characteristics.

### CONCLUSIONS

This study represents an important first step in broadening our understanding of parent attitudes toward and awareness of bullying, parent/child concordance about bullying involvement, and family characteristics related to peer victimization and bullying perpetration. Findings highlight the importance of working to increase parent/child communication about bullying experiences at school, and continuing to educate parents about the critical role parents need to play for bullying prevention programs to be effective.

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