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Using Systems Theory to Understand and Respond to Family Influences on Children's Bullying Behavior: Friendly Schools Friendly Families Program

This article addresses Systems Theory as it applies to school-age children's bullying behavior. It focuses on the interrelationships, mutual influences, and dynamics of relationships within the family, and how these may affect children's behavior toward their peers. The theory helps to explain the ways family patterns are reflected in children's negative interactions with peers, particularly bullying behavior. As such, Systems Theory was used to guide development of the content and strategies that formed the family component of Friendly Schools Friendly Families, a whole-school bullying prevention interven-

tion. The intervention was designed to systematically target parenting factors identified as protective of bullying behavior and other problem behaviors, including parent–child communication, parent modelling, parenting style, parent bullying attitudes and beliefs, normative standards about bullying, family management techniques, connectedness, and cohesion. This whole-school program thus actively engaged and enhanced the self-efficacy of both parents and teachers, and was found to be effective in reducing bullying behavior.

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BULLYING AND AGGRESSION among young people are no longer perceived as problematic individual behaviors, but are instead understood to be complex behavioral patterns that emerge in the context of various environmental, social, community, and familial factors. Thus, theoretical approaches that address these factors are crucial for enhancing understanding of bul-

lying and aggressive behaviors and determining the best ways to intervene and prevent them.

One of the earliest theoretical models to identify a familial link to young people's bullying behavior was Systems Theory. The central assumption of this group of theories is that the individual develops within a family system and can only be understood in this context (Hammer, 1998; Minuchin, 1985). Family systems theorists, therefore, have a similar approach to social-ecological theorists, but focus more intensely on family contexts.

Key patterns of behavior are seen to emerge within the family context, with family members influencing and reacting to each other in complex ways, which may then influence their behavior beyond the family circle (Hammer, 1998; Minuchin, 1985). This article describes the key elements of family systems theories and their relevance for the study of young people's bullying behaviors, and provides an overview of the research addressing the influence of family dynamics on these behaviors. We then describe how family systems theories can inform the development of bullying prevention and intervention strategies.

Key Elements of Family Systems Theories

Family systems theories operate from the assumption that the family system is key to understanding the behavioral patterns of individuals, because family members are necessarily interdependent (Hammer, 1998; Minuchin, 1985). This interdependency occurs not only to meet family needs, but in the way behavioral patterns develop among family members. Family members interact with an individual child at a number of levels—the nuclear family; the extended family; work colleagues and service-providers who may influence family functioning; and, at the outermost level, socio-cultural influences that affect family attitudes, values, and behaviors (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988; Hammer, 1998). Some theorists also refer to family *subsystems*, such as the parent-child, sibling,

grandparent-grandchild subsystems; in which individuals may have “simultaneous membership” (Minuchin, 1985, p. 291). For all family members, change is inevitable, and the family system is subject to various stressors that may occur within and between each of these levels or subsystems. These may emerge at the center of the family system itself, such as with the birth of a new baby, loss of a family member, or change of home circumstances. Other *vertical stressors* include attitudes, expectations, and perspectives that are passed between layers or subsystems, from previous family generations or cultural influences (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988; Hammer, 1998). Such stressors—or alternatively, positive influences on family functioning—occur because the boundaries of the family system are open rather than closed to external influences (Bavelas & Segal, 1982).

Family systems theorists emphasize the circular nature of behavioral patterns within family systems; arguing that “direct cause and effect relationships do not exist” in this context (Hammer, 1998, p. 6). This is because family interactions involve “a spiral of recursive feedback loops” in which individual family members' behaviors both respond to and evokes responses from other family members in complex ways (Minuchin, 1985, p. 290). As described by Minuchin (1985):

It is an epistemological error to state that an overprotective mother is creating anxieties in her child. Rather, mother and child have created a pattern in which (starting anywhere) the child's fears trigger concerned behavior in the mother, which exacerbates the child's fears, which escalates the mother's concern, and so forth. (p. 290)

Importantly, this approach emphasizes that blaming particular family members for the behavior of other individuals is not likely to be useful (Minuchin, 1985). The question of what behavioral patterns have emerged, and how they can be adjusted, is seen to be more relevant to the process of behavioral change than the question of why these behavioral patterns have emerged (Hammer, 1998).

Further, many of these behavioral patterns may emerge from the tendency for families to strive for predictable patterns of behavior in the face of change or obstacles (Minuchin, 1985). Over time, family systems develop patterns of behavior and strategies that tend to be used in response to crises or challenges, and that may be alternatively healthy and supportive or maladaptive and harmful (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000; Minuchin, 1985). For example, some family systems may develop a high value for family cohesion, which is seen to enhance family functioning (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). In other cases, family systems, particularly when communication skills are poor, may struggle to maintain stability during challenging situations (Golish, 2003). Some families may try to avoid change altogether (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000). Families may also develop problematic approaches for managing the boundaries between family layers or subsystems, and the types of interactions that are most appropriate for each (Minuchin, 1985).

Further complicating family dynamics is the fact that behaviors within the family are highly subjective and involve multiple perspectives (Hammer, 1998). That is, individual members within the same system may each ascribe very different meanings to their own or to others' behaviors. In addition, family members may understand the lack of a particular behavior in differing ways (Hammer, 1998). In family therapy settings, this means that family members' own perspectives of behavioral patterns are seen as key starting points to work with to promote behavioral change (Hammer, 1998).

Thus, family systems theories perceive a family as being more than the sum of its parts. Rather than defining a family simply as a collection of closely related individuals, each of whom must be studied and understood in their own terms, the family is also viewed as a dynamic, interactive, interdependent system with all members contributing to patterns of behavior (Bavelas & Segal, 1982; Purves & Phinney, 2013). Each individual must, therefore, be considered in the context of the family system that shaped them (Bavelas & Segal, 1982), particularly when studying issues relating to communication pat-

terns, strategies for dealing with conflict and stress, and tensions between autonomy and connectedness (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000).

Relevance to Peer Aggression and Bullying

The focus of systems theory on the interrelationships and mutual influences within a family has relevance for studies of aggression in general and peer aggression in particular. Systems-theory-based approaches to violence within the family have emphasised aggression as "a systemic product rather than a product of individual behavior pathology" (Straus, 1973, p. 105). Although some individuals may be predisposed to aggression, violence as a method for coping with obstacles may emerge when positive feedback (e.g., the perception of a successful resolution of a stressor) establishes and reinforces this pattern of behavior. Responses displaying fear, submission, or aggression by other members of the family system may provide cues or motivation for this behavior to continue (Straus, 1973). Further, these learned roles and patterns of behavior may be applied to settings other than the family. In relation to bullying, systems theories suggest that family relationship dynamics are likely to influence children's behavior in other contexts. This is useful when considering how family patterns can contribute to bullying behavior.

As outlined previously, family systems may develop patterns of behavior to deal with obstacles or situations that threaten family functioning. Children who learn these behaviors may believe them to be normal or desirable, and apply them in other settings. Hence, if families deal with stressors or uncertainty in an aggressive way, young people may learn and extend these strategies beyond the family system into their relationships with peers. Minuchin described this process as carrying "templates of the patterns of which [the individual] has been part ... these provide the repertoire for input into new systems" (Minuchin, 1985, p. 293). In addition, relationship dynamics within the family may cause children to adopt roles such as *scapegoat* or *bully*, which they

have found to be useful for meeting their needs in family contexts (Minuchin, 1988, cited in Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1994). These roles are likely to affect the way young people behave with peers and others in various contexts.

As family systems theories suggest, young people's strategies for coping with challenges are likely to be shaped by the way their family system has coped with challenge. If children have learned to respond aggressively to protect themselves and their interests, they may extend these behavioral patterns to school and peer systems. At the same time, a challenge like school transition is likely to place added pressure on families, with the family system needing to adapt to the changing attitudes, values, needs, and responsibilities of adolescents (Minuchin, 1985). If the family system is unable to cope adaptively with these changes, this may further reinforce the use of maladaptive behaviors among young people experiencing difficulty in coping with school transition and new peer interactions.

Familial Characteristics and Children's Involvement in Bullying

Numerous studies have linked dysfunctional relationships and maladaptive behaviors in the family to children and young people's involvement in peer aggression and bullying behavior (for review, see Duncan, 2004). In particular, a strong association has been found between parental disciplinary strategies and children's involvement in bullying situations (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). In particular, parental overprotection or permissiveness has been linked with victimization, and parental authoritarianism with bullying perpetration (Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2013). Adolescent children of fathers with authoritarian parenting styles are also more likely to have friends who frequently bully others (Knafo, 2003). These findings suggest that behavioural patterns learned in the family system are extended into peer contexts.

Other family traits that are closely linked to aggressive behavior among children include punitive parenting, parental hostility and lack

of warmth, exposure to aggressive adult role models, exposure to marital conflict (Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997), and exposure to interparental violence (Baldry, 2003). Moreover, children who bully are more likely to come from homes where aggression is used as a problem-solving method, where negative emotional attitudes are common, and where children are encouraged to fight back if harassed (Smith, Schneider, Smith, & Ananiadou, 2004). Low family involvement and lower parental education were also found to influence aggressive behavior for boys; and low income and single-parent status were predictors for girls (Harachi et al., 2006). Last, children who reported bullying others at school have also reported the highest frequency of sibling bullying (Duncan, 1999); those who are bullied by siblings are also more likely to be involved in bullying at school, compared to those who reported no bullying by siblings (Wolke & Samara, 2004).

Among kindergarten and first-grade students, child conduct problems at home and at school were associated with hostile attribution styles and ineffective/irritable discipline styles among their mothers (Snyder, Cramer, A Frank, & Patterson, 2005). The facilitation of conduct problems at home was also shown to be associated with conduct problems among children at school. Consistent with a systems theory approach, the relationship between parent and child behavior was not necessarily linear—mothers with children who displayed conduct problems were more likely to make hostile attributions for their behavior (for example, assuming misconduct was intentional), which can further impact their disciplinary strategies and children's behavior (Snyder et al., 2005).

Exposure to violence in the home is also associated with increased peer aggression and and/or increased victimization (Baldry, 2003; Bauer et al., 2006), with adolescents who have witnessed domestic violence being particularly likely to experience difficulty with intimate relationships (For review, see Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). The experience of child abuse and maltreatment by parents is also linked to young people being victimised by peers (Duncan, 2004).

Most recently, Georgiou and Stavrinides (2013) investigated the relationship between bullying behavior and three aspects of parent–child relationships: conflict between parents and children, parental monitoring practices, and child disclosure. High maternal monitoring was negatively associated with Greek adolescents' bullying perpetration; conflict with both mothers and fathers independently predicted children's involvement in bullying as victims or perpetrators (Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2013). Adolescents who more frequently disclosed their actions and activities to their mother or father were less likely to report having bullied others or being bullied (Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2013). A lack of ease in communication about problems between parents and children has also been associated with bullying involvement for American adolescents (Spriggs, Iannotti, Nansel, & Haynie, 2007).

Maladaptive relationships and patterns of behavior with more than one level of the family system—particularly when both parents and siblings are involved—have also been strongly linked to bullying and peer aggression (Duncan, 2004). Ingoldsby, Shaw, and Garcia (2001) have suggested that when more than one family subsystem experiences maladaptive behaviors and conflicted relationships, the extension of these behaviors and relationship roles to contexts beyond the family is even more likely.

Applying Systems Theory to Bullying Prevention and Intervention

The Friendly Schools Friendly Families (FSFF; 2002–2004) primary school research project, led by Cross et al. (2012), recognized that students' families, particularly the influence of family attitudes, expectations, and perspectives, are central to understanding students' bullying behavior (Hammer, 1998). The FSFF project focussed on the behavior patterns that may emerge from the family and how these could be enhanced or modified, such as problematic responses to bullying as a bystander, target, or perpetrator. During this project's intervention development, students were considered within the

context of their school and their families, the behavior patterns they learned at home, and the influence of these on their bullying behavior.

FSFF was the second group-randomised control trial conducted by Cross et al. to investigate ways to reduce the harms from bullying among primary school students (Cross et al., 2012). The FSFF project built on the first study called Friendly Schools (FS) by strengthening study schools' capacity to actively engage parents in actions to reduce student bullying behavior. Although the results of the first FS study were positive (Cross et al., 2010), the project's process data suggested that the FS program raised awareness among parents about bullying behaviors, but did not provide sufficient tools for parents to adequately support their children. The FS process also suggested that the program did not sufficiently address the ways that families can help their children to be positive and supportive bystanders, to stop bullying, or to support them if they are targeted. Further, these data showed that parents, particularly male caregivers, were neither engaging in parent education sessions offered at the school nor interacting with the materials sent home with their children.

Systems theory was the theoretical framework used for developing and testing the family-level component of the whole-of-school FSFF intervention. The development of the family education materials involved the active involvement of parents to systematically target parenting factors identified as protective against bullying behavior. These factors included parent–child communication, parent modelling, parent bullying attitudes and beliefs, normative standards about bullying, family management techniques and parenting style, connectedness, and cohesion. These resources used directed and self-help approaches to increase parents' self-efficacy related to providing emotional support, attention, warmth, and quality supervision, while also reinforcing the need for families to actively discourage aggressive behavior. This included reminding parents of the impact that their modelling of aggressive behaviors had on their children's behavior. Parents were also given simple strategies to use with their children if they were engaging in sibling

bullying. The educational materials focussed on helping parents to understand that bullying is not a normal part of growing up or *character building*, and that it can cause many harms for both perpetrators and targets. The resources also provided support and advice for parents if their child experienced bullying.

The key FSFF messages to parents were delivered in a variety of ways to maximize their exposure to the information. These included conducting family events, such as a weekend family fun day, at the school; communicating frequently using short newsletter items; initiating parent action through the school's Parents' and Friends' committees; involving parents in developing and disseminating the school's bullying policy; and motivating parents to be involved through student communication sheets where students completed tasks at home with their family, e.g., family interviews; and, last, via student performance. Parents were much more likely to attend an assembly or other event at school if their child was involved, so the FSFF project delivered bullying prevention messages through students' drama, music, and art.

Overall, the 3-year FSFF trial found that the high-intensity intervention (whole-school, capacity building support and active parent involvement) was more effective than the moderate-intensity intervention, which comprised whole-school and capacity building support only, and substantially more effective than the low-intensity intervention (the standard school program with no capacity support; Cross et al., 2012). Specifically, the results showed that the high-intensity intervention was more effective than the moderate- and low-intensity interventions for both grade 4 and 6 cohorts. Significant positive effects were found for being bullied between the high- and low-intensity intervention groups. The high-intensity intervention grade 4 cohort was significantly less likely to bully others frequently than the moderate-intensity intervention grade 4 cohort at posttest 2. Similarly, at posttest 3, the high-intensity intervention grade 4 cohort was less likely to bully others, compared to the low-intensity intervention group. The high-, compared to the low-intensity, intervention

condition among the year 6 cohort was significantly more effective at encouraging students to tell if they were bullied, at both posttest 1 and posttest 2 (Cross et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Family systems theories illustrate the importance of family relationships and behavioral patterns in the development of aggressive behaviors among children. This approach complements, and is implicit in, social ecological theories, which recognize that bullying is enabled and/or inhibited by the complex relationships between the individual, family, peer group, school, community, and culture. When addressing bullying in educational settings, it must be acknowledged that all members of the school system contribute to shared expectations and patterns of behavior, hence the need for a whole school approach.

As families are a key part of the whole-school community, school-based approaches to bullying prevention must both acknowledge the impact of family systems on children's relationships with their peers, and engage with families in their efforts to reduce bullying and aggression.

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