

Children's bullying behaviour impacts teacher and parent wellbeing

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Some parents are not coping with their young children's challenging behavior, and even experienced teachers are struggling, according to Dr. Cara Swit from the University of Canterbury's (UC) School of Health Sciences.

Dr. Swit was to be the keynote speaker at the New Zealand Bullying Prevention Conference at UC this month; the conference was canceled due to COVID-19 level 2 restrictions. She intended to share her research on teachers' and parents' perceptions of bullying behavior and ask whether young children's behavior is "aggressive" or "bullying," which she defines as repetitive behavior with a power imbalance and the intention to harm.

Surprisingly, given the awareness of bullying in schools, Dr. Swit is one of the few researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand focusing on young children's bullying behavior and effective early intervention strategies. She is also the only New Zealand representative on an international consortium of 15 countries on parental burnout.

She has been spending time with parents and

teachers as part of the pilot for a new three-year [longitudinal study](#) to gather evidence on how young children's behavior impacts on the health and wellbeing of parents and teachers. The study was sparked by some worrying trends Dr. Swit observed in classrooms.

"Anecdotally what we hear is that young children's challenging behaviors are causing stress and burnout to teachers and parents, but we are just starting the research that may link children's challenging behavior to teacher and parent health and wellbeing," she says.

"It seems that parents are really stressed. They're saying, 'the strategies that worked before don't work anymore and I'm at a loss—what do I do?' I work in the early intervention space and most of the educators I work with are very experienced and they are just not coping. They are at a loss."

While parents need to model pro-social behavior for their children, parents also need to practice greater self-compassion, Dr. Swit says.

"Let's be realistic, we are trying to juggle a lot; full- or part-time work, parenting, extra-curricular activities, [social events](#), day-to-day chores, while being the best parents we can be. We need to have conversations about the challenges that come with these expectations. What is really interesting and sad is how many parents are going to sleep at night feeling guilty; feeling like they could have done more that day as a parent. I have the pleasure of watching them interacting with their kids and they are great parents."

Part of the problem, she says, is that parents compare themselves and their children to others, a tendency that doesn't lessen as children get older—and may even get worse.

"Parents tend to put on a brave face. But if you sit down and speak to them, they are very open about

their feelings. We need to start talking about the challenges of parenting, normalizing it and recognizing that parenting is hard."

The good news, however, is that when parents use the interventions recommended by Dr. Swit, they see positive change. "They have a sense of efficacy, they think, 'I can do this.'"

What can [parents](#) do about bullying towards their child, or by their child? Dr. Swit recommends resources she has created for the Education Hub such as What is bullying?

"Parents need to be clear on what bullying is, what the signs are, and take the time to dispel any myths they have learnt about bullying," she says. "Bullying can be physical, verbal, social or online. Parents need to take action in an appropriate way by talking with their child, reporting bullying behavior if necessary and following up to ensure that interventions have been effective. Bullying is a serious problem, and potentially very harmful. All children deserve to feel safe and protected in their learning environments and communities."

More information: Early childhood educators' and parents' perceptions of bullying in preschool. www.psychology.org.nz/journal-...-Childhood-educators%E2%80%99-and-Parents%E2%80%99.pdf

Provided by University of Canterbury

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