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Bullying, Discipline or Authority? Parents' and Teachers' Understanding and Interpretation Examined

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Abstract

Bullying research has predominantly focused on interactions among peers, while harmful behaviours by adults towards children are more often conceptualised as abuse, maltreatment, violence, or inappropriate discipline. This study explored how parents and teachers understand bullying when adults are involved, focusing on how they distinguish bullying from discipline, interpret adult authority and intention, and understand the influence of adult behaviour on children's peer relationships. Five focus groups with parents and teachers were conducted in Hungary and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three overarching themes were identified. First, participants negotiated the boundaries of adult-to-child bullying, with behaviours interpreted differently depending on their severity, repetition, intention, and whether they were perceived as legitimate expressions of adult authority. Second, participants understood bullying as embedded within wider relational and social systems, describing connections between children's experiences at home, at school, and with peers and recognising adults as behavioural models. Third, recognition and intervention were complicated by the normalisation of some adult behaviours, institutional dynamics, and barriers to disclosure and help-seeking. The findings suggest that restricting bullying primarily to peer relationships may obscure harmful relational dynamics involving adults. Broadening bullying research and prevention to consider how adults exercise power, model behaviour, and define acceptable conduct may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of bullying within children's social environments

1. Introduction

1.1 Bullying as a Relational and Social Phenomenon

Bullying is widely recognised as a major concern for child and adolescent development, with substantial evidence linking victimisation to emotional distress, poorer academic outcomes, and adverse psychosocial adjustment (Olweus, 1993; Arseneault et al., 2010; Hong & Espelage, 2012). More recent research has further documented the emotional consequences of traditional and cyber victimisation, including symptoms of post-traumatic stress in cases of long-term victimisation (Sjursø et al., 2016, 2019). Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that these consequences often persist into adulthood, with individuals who experience bullying in childhood facing increased risks of poorer mental and physical health, reduced educational and occupational attainment, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships (Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

Despite this extensive evidence base, bullying has traditionally been conceptualised as a phenomenon that occurs primarily between peers. Influential definitions describe bullying as repeated aggressive behaviour involving an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim (Olweus & Limber, 2010; Smith, 2019). While these characteristics continue to underpin much of the field, aspects of the traditional definition have increasingly been debated. In particular, the requirement of repetition has been questioned in the context of cyberbullying, where a single online act may be repeatedly shared, viewed, and experienced, resulting in sustained harm (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Smith et al., 2008). These

developments suggest that traditional definitional criteria may not fully capture the complexity of bullying across different contexts and relationships.

The predominance of peer-focused conceptualisations has shaped both research and practice. Most empirical studies, prevention programmes, and intervention strategies continue to focus on student behaviour and peer relationships, with considerably less attention given to the broader relational environments in which bullying develops (Gaffney et al., 2021; Kärnä et al., 2011). As a result, harmful behaviours enacted by adults have often been examined through related but separate constructs, such as harsh parenting, child maltreatment, or teacher aggression, rather than within bullying frameworks. Some exceptions do exist, though (Gusfre et al., 2023).

The ecological perspective became increasingly prominent in bullying research during the 2000s and was further developed during the 2010s, reflecting a growing recognition that bullying needs to be understood within the wider social contexts in which children develop (Swearer & Doll, 2001; Swearer & Espelage, 2003; Swearer et al., 2010; Hong & Espelage, 2012). Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, children's experiences are shaped through interactions across multiple, interconnected systems, including families, schools, and the wider social environment. Within these systems, parents and teachers occupy positions of authority that enable them to influence children's everyday relational experiences, behavioural expectations, and understandings of power. Viewing bullying through this ecological lens therefore highlights the importance of examining not only peer interactions, but also the potential contribution of adult behaviours to the relational contexts in which bullying is learned, experienced, and reproduced.

1.2 Adult-to-Child Bullying

Although adults are typically positioned as protectors and intervention agents within bullying frameworks, emerging evidence suggests they may also be direct sources of harm. Research on teacher-to-student bullying has documented behaviours including humiliation, verbal aggression, exclusion, unfair punishment, and misuse of authority (Twemlow et al., 2006; Datta et al., 2017; Gusfre et al., 2023; Strohmeier et al., 2024). These behaviours can have significant consequences for students' emotional well-being, school engagement, and behavioural adjustment.

Similarly, family-based harmful behaviours, including emotional degradation, harsh verbal discipline, coercive control, and physical punishment, have been associated with negative psychosocial and behavioural outcomes (Baldry, 2003; Gershoff, 2013; Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2016). While these behaviours are often examined under frameworks such as maltreatment or harsh parenting, they share important relational features with bullying, particularly when they involve repeated harm within unequal power relationships.

In the Hungarian context, high rates of peer victimisation, teacher bullying, and family-based bullying were identified among adolescents, with teacher-perpetrated bullying showing particularly high prevalence and a significant association with peer bullying perpetration (Laszlo et al., under review).

Despite this, adult-to-child bullying remains under-recognised within bullying scholarship. One reason may be that harmful adult behaviours are often framed through socially legitimate roles such as discipline, caregiving, or educational correction, making them less visible as bullying. At the same time, growing attention has been given to how bullying is experienced and interpreted by those involved, alongside its definition through observable behavioural criteria (Skrzypiec et al., 2023). Actions intended as humour, discipline, or correction may nevertheless be perceived by children as humiliating, degrading, or bullying, particularly within relationships characterised by unequal power. This highlights the importance of examining not only adult intentions but also the ways in which adult behaviours are recognised, interpreted, and experienced.

1.3 Adults as Role Models and Social Learning

The role of adults in children's experiences of bullying can be further understood through the Social learning theory (Albert Bandura, 1977, 1986). Social learning theory suggests that children acquire behaviours through observing, imitating, and internalising the actions of significant others, particularly those in positions of authority. The theory has been used extensively in the bullying literature to explain the mechanism behind such proactive aggressive behaviour (Fandrem et al., 2009; Gusfre et al., 2026; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002)

Authority is also important when considering how children interpret and learn from adult behaviour. In schools, teachers hold formal authority through their professional role, including control over rules, discipline, assessment, and aspects of children's everyday school experience. Within families, parental authority is embedded in relationships of care, attachment, dependence, and responsibility. Although these forms of authority differ, both create a substantial power imbalance between adults and children. Adult behaviour may therefore carry particular weight: children are not only observing the behaviour of significant adults, but of people whose actions help define what is acceptable within relationships. When aggression, humiliation, intimidation, or the misuse of power comes from an adult in such a position, it may consequently shape children's understanding of how authority and power can legitimately be exercised.

Within family and school environments, parents and teachers function as powerful behavioural models. Through repeated interactions, children observe how adults exercise authority, manage conflict, and communicate emotions. Exposure to aggression, humiliation, or coercive behaviour may therefore shape children's own understanding of relational power and acceptable conduct (Hymel, 2021; Merrin et al., 2018).

Research increasingly supports these associations. Studies have identified links between experiences of adult-perpetrated aggression and children's involvement in peer bullying, both as victims and perpetrators (Baldry, 2003; Lucas et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017). These findings suggest that adult-to-child victimisation may function not only as harm in itself, but as part of the wider social learning processes through which bullying behaviours are reproduced.

1.4 Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing recognition of adult influences, significant gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing research has focused on prevalence, behavioural outcomes, and statistical associations, offering important evidence of occurrence but limited insight into how these behaviours are understood in everyday life.

In particular, there remains limited research examining how adults themselves interpret behaviours that may constitute bullying when enacted by parents or teachers. This is a critical gap, as adult interpretations shape both the recognition of bullying and the responses that follow. Perceptions of acceptable adult behaviour are influenced not only by individual beliefs but also by broader social and cultural norms regarding discipline, authority, and child-rearing. Consequently, behaviours framed as discipline, stress responses, humour, or forms of care may be normalised, minimised, or justified, even when children experience them as harmful. Examining how adults construct and interpret these behaviours is therefore essential for understanding why some forms of adult-to-child bullying remain difficult to recognise.

There is also a limited understanding of how parents and teachers make sense of adult-to-child bullying in relation to their own social roles and responsibilities. This is especially relevant given the central role adults play in modelling behaviour and establishing relational norms for children.

To date, qualitative research in this area remains scarce. Greater attention to adult sense-making is necessary to understand how harmful behaviours are socially constructed, negotiated, and sustained within family and school contexts, thereby preventing adult-to-child bullying.

1.5 Study Aim and Research Questions

Building on previous quantitative findings and addressing these interpretive gaps, the present study explores how parents and teachers understand bullying, including behaviours enacted by adults. Using focus group discussions conducted in Hungary, the study examines how adults make sense of bullying within family and school contexts, and how they position themselves in relation to children's experiences of harm.

The main research question guiding this study is:

To what extent and in what ways do parents and teachers recognise and interpret behaviours as bullying, including those enacted by adults?

This is explored through the following sub-questions:

1. How do adults distinguish between discipline and bullying?
2. Which behaviours are normalised, minimised, or justified?
3. How aware are adults of their role in modelling behaviour for children?

2. Methods

2.1 Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, using focus group discussions to explore how parents and teachers interpret and make sense of bullying, including adult-enacted behaviours. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the study's interest in participants' interpretations, negotiations, and social constructions of bullying.

The study forms the qualitative phase of a broader mixed-method doctoral project examining bullying across peer, teacher, and family contexts. It was designed as a follow-up to earlier quantitative findings, to provide deeper interpretive insight into how adults understand the prevalence and relational dynamics of bullying.

Focus groups were chosen because they allow participants to collectively reflect on and negotiate meanings around socially complex issues, making them particularly useful for examining contested concepts such as discipline, authority, and harm (Morgan, 1997; Kitzinger, 1995).

2.2 Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through schools in Hungary using convenience sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recruitment was conducted through an established network of schools with which the research team had developed trusted relationships during previous research and collaboration. This approach was considered particularly appropriate given the sensitive nature of the topic, as existing relationships facilitated access to schools and supported participant engagement. Efforts were made to recruit schools from diverse geographic locations and socio-economic contexts to capture a broad range of experiences and perspectives. The study included both parents and teachers, allowing for the exploration of perspectives from two key adult groups within children's everyday relational environments.

A total of x participants took part across 5 focus groups. Of these, x were parents and x were teachers. The parent group consisted predominantly of mothers, while the teacher group included professional educators from different school contexts and levels of experience.

The inclusion of both groups was intended to capture a range of perspectives on adult-child relationships, disciplinary practices, and bullying-related experiences.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured focus group discussions conducted in Hungarian in four cases, and one was conducted in English. The focus groups were organised in school settings and facilitated by a researcher. Discussions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a flexible topic guide developed in response to the earlier survey findings.

At the beginning of each focus group, participants were presented with selected findings from the preceding quantitative phase of the project, including prevalence data on peer, teacher, and family-based bullying. These findings served as a starting point for discussion and provided a shared empirical

reference point for participants. To support engagement throughout the discussion, participants were also given a printed handout summarising the survey findings, which they could refer back to when reflecting on the results. This approach was intended to ground the discussion in the broader patterns identified in the dataset and to facilitate critical reflection on forms of adult-to-child bullying that may otherwise be overlooked, normalised, or dismissed. It also allowed participants to respond directly to the prevalence findings by offering interpretations, agreements, and challenges based on their own experiences and perspectives.

The topic guide focused on participants' understandings of bullying, perceptions of discipline and authority, reactions to the survey's prevalence findings, and reflections on adult roles in shaping children's social behaviour. Participants were also invited to discuss examples and scenarios, allowing for exploration of how bullying is interpreted in everyday family and school contexts.

All focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' consent, later transcribed using the AIrite tool, and then manually edited for text recognition errors. Hungarian transcripts were translated into English for analysis by the research team.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). This method was chosen for its flexibility and its emphasis on meaning-making, interpretation, and the active role of the researcher in knowledge production.

Analysis followed the six recursive phases of familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and writing—with initial coding combining inductive and deductive elements. While the broader research questions informed the analytic focus, coding remained open to unanticipated meanings and patterns across the dataset. Through the iterative development and refinement of codes, the analysis was organised around three overarching themes: negotiating the boundaries of adult-to-child bullying; bullying within relational and social systems; and barriers to recognition, disclosure, and intervention.

Coding was conducted manually by the first author, who then developed a coding protocol to support consistency across transcripts. The coding scheme was reviewed and discussed by all authors. The first author has a professional and research background in parental engagement, school–family relationships, and bullying prevention, including previous research on adult-to-child bullying. This background informed her familiarity with the topic and inevitably shaped the analytic lens through which the data were interpreted. Throughout the analysis, reflexive attention was therefore paid to how these prior experiences and assumptions might influence coding and theme development.

The final themes were developed through iterative engagement with the data and were shaped by both semantic and latent patterns across participant accounts. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, themes are understood not as objective discoveries but as interpretive constructions generated through the interaction between the researcher, the data, and the broader theoretical framework.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the internal ethics committee of the independent research institution conducting the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

To protect confidentiality, all identifying information was removed during transcription and reporting. Given the sensitive nature of discussing harmful adult-child interactions, particular care was taken to create a respectful and non-judgmental discussion environment during the focus groups. The participants were also reminded of the researchers' obligation to report to authorities if they disclose information during the focus groups that falls under that obligation.

3. Findings

Before discussing the themes, it is important to consider how the conversations unfolded. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were presented with findings from the preceding survey, including prevalence estimates for peer, teacher, and family bullying. Rather than functioning simply as background information, these findings became the starting point for discussion. Participants questioned the results, compared them with their own experiences, challenged one another's interpretations, and reflected on why some behaviours were recognised as bullying while others were not.

The prevalence of teacher bullying, in particular, generated strong reactions. Some participants questioned whether the findings could reflect their own schools, suggesting that such behaviours were more likely to occur elsewhere or arguing that some of the behaviours described were better understood as discipline than bullying. Others were less surprised by the findings, recognising the behaviours described in the survey as familiar and referring to similar practices they had witnessed in their own schools. Despite these different starting points, the discussions gradually shifted away from debating the prevalence figures themselves towards a broader question: how should harmful behaviour by adults be understood?

Across the focus groups, there were no straightforward answers to these questions. Participants approached them from different perspectives, drawing on their own experiences as parents and teachers and discussing where the boundaries between authority, discipline, care, humour, and harm should be drawn. Although the themes presented below are discussed separately, they were closely interconnected throughout the conversations. Participants moved continually between defining adult-to-child bullying, explaining why it occurs, and reflecting on the challenges of recognising and responding to it.

3.1 Negotiating the Boundaries of Adult-to-Child Bullying

3.1.1 Defining Bullying: Repetition, Severity, and Power

One of the first issues participants grappled with was whether the behaviours presented in the survey should all be understood as bullying. Rather than accepting the questionnaire categories at face value, they questioned where the boundary between discipline and bullying should be drawn. Throughout the discussions, participants rarely treated adult-to-child bullying as a fixed category. Instead, they negotiated its meaning by considering the intention behind an action, the relationship between the adult and the child, the context in which it occurred, and how the child experienced it.

The discussions first centred on the definition of bullying itself. Several participants argued that repetition remained an essential characteristic, reflecting more traditional understandings of bullying. Others questioned whether repetition should remain a defining criterion when an adult holds authority over a child or when a single humiliating incident may have lasting consequences.

P3, FG1

"To my understanding, bullying is something that happens regularly... Even being victimised regularly is a very different sort of experience than something that happens only once."

P4, FG1

"I would have historically agreed with you. But I've seen someone who was bullied once, and it had a massive impact. I don't think it necessarily has to happen multiple times."

Rather than resolving the issue, participants reconsidered what should define bullying when adults are involved. The discussion reflected an ongoing tension between established definitions and participants' own experiences, with some prioritising repetition. In contrast, others emphasised the severity of harm and the power imbalance inherent in adult-child relationships.

3.1.2 Humour, Intention, and the Child’s Experience

As the discussion developed, participants moved beyond definitions to consider specific examples. Nicknames became one of the first situations through which they explored where the boundary between humour and bullying should be drawn. Rather than focusing on the words themselves, participants discussed how meaning depended on the relationship between those involved, the intention behind the behaviour, and the child's interpretation of it.

Participants repeatedly drew on the child's experience when deciding whether behaviour crossed the boundary into bullying. As one parent put it, “A joke is a joke as long as everyone participating finds it funny. The moment somebody doesn't find it funny anymore, it's not a joke anymore” (P2, FG2). Another parent described how a seemingly neutral nickname caused significant distress because of the way it was repeatedly used, further illustrating that the meaning of a behaviour could depend on how it was experienced rather than on the words themselves.

3.1.3 Discipline, Authority, and Harm

The distinction between discipline and bullying generated some of the richest discussions across the focus groups. Teachers generally described discipline as an essential part of their professional role and spoke openly about the challenges of managing increasingly complex classrooms. Several participants cited disruptive behaviour, limited institutional support, and growing pressure on teachers as reasons why interactions with students may sometimes become inappropriate.

T1, FG5

"Teachers don't have any tools. They simply have no means to deal with children who constantly disrupt the lesson... After a while they become desperate."

At the same time, participants recognised that professional authority did not justify humiliating behaviour. Public ridicule, exposing a child's work to classmates, or using authority to embarrass students were consistently described as crossing the boundary between discipline and bullying.

T1, FG3

"Showing a child's notebook to the whole class and laughing at it — that's bullying. You can talk to the child afterwards, but not humiliate them in front of everyone."

Participants generally accepted teachers' authority to manage student behaviour and maintain classroom order. What they debated was how that authority should be exercised and at what point disciplinary practices could become harmful or be experienced as bullying.

Differences were apparent in how participants approached the relationship between adult intentions and children's experiences. Those participating in a professional capacity as teachers more often referred to professional judgement, frustration, and the need to maintain classroom order, while those participating as parents more often focused on the emotional impact on the child. These perspectives were not mutually exclusive, particularly as some participants had experience of both roles. Across the discussions, there was recognition that behaviour intended as discipline, humour, or correction could nevertheless be experienced by a child as humiliating or intimidating.

3.1.4 Normalisation Through Past Experience

Participants also reflected on how their own childhood experiences shaped these interpretations. Harsh discipline, shouting, humiliation, and even physical punishment were frequently described as normal parts of growing up. Looking back, several participants recognised that these experiences influenced how easily adult behaviours were accepted or questioned in the present.

P3, FG1

"My dad was very strict and I found it normal."

T1, FG5

"They normalise it because they grew up in that."

Rather than producing a single definition of adult-to-child bullying, the discussions revealed the different ways participants made sense of the same behaviours. Whether an action was seen as bullying depended on how participants understood its purpose, its context, and its impact on the child. As a result, the boundaries between discipline and bullying remained open to interpretation throughout the focus groups.

3.2 Bullying Within Relational and Social Systems

3.2.1 Family Relationships and Learned Behaviour

Once participants had discussed what should be considered bullying, the conversation shifted towards a different question: why do these behaviours occur in the first place? Rather than focusing on individual children or adults, participants consistently explained bullying by referring to the wider environments in which children grow up. Family relationships, school culture, interactions with teachers, and broader social influences were all described as shaping how children learn to communicate, resolve conflict, and exercise power. In this sense, bullying was rarely viewed as an isolated behaviour but as something that develops through everyday relationships.

Family relationships were central to these discussions. Parents and teachers alike described children as bringing patterns of behaviour from home into their interactions with peers. Several participants reported children repeating behaviours they had observed in their families, particularly regarding aggression, conflict, and the exercise of authority. One teacher recalled a child who repeatedly his classmates and, when asked why, simply replied:

T2, FG4

"My daddy does."

For many participants, this illustrated how children learn not only specific behaviours but also broader ideas about what is acceptable in relationships. Participants' accounts reflected the established understanding of bullying as a relational phenomenon, with children's behaviour seen as shaped by their everyday interactions and experiences with significant adults (Pepler, 2006).

3.2.2 Adults as Behavioural Models

Participants extended this discussion beyond families to the role of adults more generally. Parents and teachers were repeatedly described as role models whose everyday behaviour influences children's understanding of respect, authority, and conflict. Participants argued that children observe how adults speak to one another, deal with disagreement, and respond to difficult situations, and that these interactions become reference points for children's own behaviour.

P3, FG2

"Parents and teachers are role models."

Participants did not limit role modelling to interactions with children.Several reflected on how adults' communication with colleagues, family members, and other parents also contributes to the social norms children observe. In this way, role modelling was understood as something embedded in everyday relationships rather than confined to deliberate teaching or parenting practices.

3.2.3 School Culture and Working Conditions

The discussion also highlighted the role of school culture. Participants described considerable differences between schools in how relationships were managed, how conflicts were addressed, and what kinds of behaviour were tolerated. While some schools were described as encouraging open communication and collaboration between teachers, parents, and students, others were characterised as more hierarchical, making it harder to question adult behaviour or raise concerns. Rather than attributing bullying solely to individual teachers, participants frequently described it as influenced by the school's wider culture.

As conversations continued, participants also reflected on the conditions under which teachers work. Increasing workloads, large classes, emotional exhaustion, and limited institutional support were commonly mentioned when discussing why some teachers might engage in harmful interactions with students. These factors were not presented as excuses for inappropriate behaviour. Instead, participants used them to explain how organisational pressures may influence everyday interactions between teachers and children, making respectful relationships more difficult to maintain.

3.2.4 Wider Social and Digital Influences

Finally, participants situated bullying within wider social changes. They described increasingly aggressive public communication, social media, and online interactions as shaping children's expectations of how people speak to and treat one another. Digital environments were seen as extending conflicts beyond the classroom and exposing children to patterns of communication that normalise hostility, ridicule, and public confrontation. Several participants suggested that schools and families were increasingly expected to respond to behaviours that reflected broader societal changes rather than to problems originating solely within the school.

Across the discussions, participants rarely explained bullying by focusing on individual children or individual adults alone. Instead, they described it as emerging from a network of relationships that spans families, schools, and wider society. Their accounts suggest that understanding adult-to-child bullying requires looking beyond individual incidents to the relational environments in which children learn about authority, conflict, and acceptable behaviour.

3.3 Barriers to Recognition, Disclosure, and Intervention

3.3.1 Authority and Recognition

As the discussions progressed, participants moved beyond defining and explaining adult-to-child bullying to consider what happens when it occurs. Although most agreed that harmful behaviour by adults can and does happen, many questioned whether children can recognise it, report it, or expect an effective response. Throughout the focus groups, participants repeatedly distinguished peer bullying and adult-to-child bullying, suggesting that the latter is considerably more difficult to identify and address within existing school structures.

One reason for this was the unequal power relationship between adults and children. Participants described teachers and parents as authority figures whose behaviour is often accepted without question. Several noted that children may not recognise harmful behaviour as bullying because it is presented as discipline, correction, or simply "how adults behave." Others suggested that even when children experience an interaction as harmful, they may assume that challenging an adult is neither appropriate nor possible.

3.3.2 Disclosure and Uncertainty About Reporting

Participants also reflected on the difficulties children face in disclosing bullying by adults. Fear of not being believed, concerns about possible consequences, and uncertainty about whom to approach were recurring topics across the focus groups. While participants described established procedures for responding to peer bullying, they were far less certain about how concerns involving teachers should be handled.

P2, FG3

"If it's another child, you know who to tell. But if it's the teacher... whom do you tell then?"

Several participants suggested that this uncertainty contributes to children's reluctance to report harmful adult behaviour. Others questioned whether schools are sufficiently prepared to respond when allegations involve staff members rather than students.

3.3.3 Institutional Culture and Professional Relationships

The discussions also highlighted the role of institutional culture. Participants frequently described schools as communities in which colleagues work closely together and where professional relationships can make it difficult to challenge the behaviour of other adults. Many teachers described supporting colleagues as part of professional relationships, while also acknowledging that these relationships could make it more difficult to raise concerns about inappropriate behaviour.

T3, FG5

"It's much more difficult if the teacher is the problem."

Participants did not suggest that schools deliberately ignore harmful behaviour. Rather, they described situations in which uncertainty, professional loyalty, and organisational hierarchies made recognition and intervention more complicated than in cases involving peer bullying.

3.3.4 Trust, Communication, and Collaboration

Trust emerged as another recurring issue across the discussions. Participants repeatedly argued that effective responses depended on strong relationships between schools and families. Open communication, mutual respect, and a willingness to listen were described as essential to addressing concerns about adult behaviour constructively. At the same time, participants recognised that trust can be fragile, particularly when parents and schools hold different interpretations of the same event.

P1, FG2

"The school knows education, the parent knows the child. If those two come together, there is a much better chance of solving the problem."

Participants did not argue for greater surveillance of teachers or parents. Instead, they emphasised the need for environments in which concerns can be raised safely, discussed openly, and addressed before relationships deteriorate. Several participants suggested that schools should place greater emphasis on reflection, communication, and collaboration rather than assuming that existing anti-bullying procedures are sufficient to address harmful behaviour by adults.

Across the focus groups, participants agreed that responding to adult-to-child bullying presents different challenges from responding to bullying between children. Discussions repeatedly returned to uncertainty about how concerns involving adults should be raised, who should respond, and whether existing school procedures were equipped to deal with these situations. As a result, recognising harmful adult behaviour was often seen as only the first step, with disclosure and intervention described as equally complex.

4. Discussion

This study explored how parents and teachers understand adult-to-child bullying and how they distinguish it from other forms of adult behaviour towards children. The findings show that harmful adult behaviour was recognised in two closely connected contexts: within families and within educational settings. In both, participants recognised that adults hold positions of authority, although the basis of that authority differs. Teachers exercise formal and professional authority, including responsibility for classroom management and discipline, while parental authority is embedded in relationships of care, responsibility, and dependence. Across both contexts, however, participants found it difficult to establish where legitimate adult authority ended, and bullying began.

Humiliation was particularly prominent in these discussions. Public ridicule, embarrassment, and behaviour that undermined a child in front of others were among the examples participants most readily identified as crossing an acceptable boundary. At the same time, humiliation and bullying were not

treated as interchangeable concepts. In addition to the criteria used in the definition of peer-to-peer bullying, such as repetition and intention (Olweus & Limber, 2010; Smith, 2019), participants also considered severity, context, and the child's experience when deciding whether harmful behaviour should be labelled as bullying. This raises a broader conceptual question about the extent to which definitions developed primarily around peer bullying can be transferred to adult–child relationships. In these relationships, a power imbalance need not emerge between the individuals involved; it is already present in differences in age, status, authority, and dependence. Similarly, discussions of individual incidents suggest that repetition may not always capture the full significance of harmful behaviour when an adult commits it in a position of authority.

Adult-to-child bullying therefore occupies a morally and conceptually ambiguous space. Participants did not generally dispute that adults sometimes behave in ways that are harmful to children. What was more difficult was deciding when those behaviours should be called bullying. Discipline, humour, correction, frustration, and care all provided alternative ways of interpreting adult behaviour. This is consistent with previous research showing that teacher bullying can be difficult to identify because behaviours may be embedded within legitimate educational practices and unequal teacher–student relationships (Twemlow et al., 2006; Whitted & Dupper, 2008). The present findings extend this discussion by showing how adults themselves work through these distinctions and how easily harmful behaviour may be explained or normalised without necessarily being denied.

An important part of this ambiguity lies in the gap between adults' intentions and children's perceptions of the same behaviour. Participants often referred to intention when deciding whether an adult's behaviour should be considered bullying, particularly when discussing discipline, humour, or classroom management. However, an adult may intend a behaviour as corrective, necessary, or harmless while the child experiences the same interaction as humiliating, threatening, or degrading. This distinction is particularly relevant in adult–child relationships because the power imbalance may leave children with limited opportunity to challenge the adult's interpretation of what occurred. Giving greater weight to adult intention may therefore contribute to harmful behaviour being minimised or normalised, even when it has a significant impact on the child. This also supports understanding bullying as a perceived and relational experience, rather than one that can be determined solely from the intention of the person carrying out the behaviour.

The findings also provide insight into why adult behaviour may matter beyond the immediate interaction between an adult and a child. Parents and teachers frequently described children as observing and reproducing ways of communicating, managing conflict, and exercising power that they encounter in their families and schools. This is consistent with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), which holds that children learn behaviours partly by observing significant others. Moreover, the adults being observed are also authority figures. Children may therefore be learning not only particular behaviours, such as shouting, humiliation, or aggression, but also broader lessons about when and by whom such behaviour is considered acceptable.

Previous quantitative research has identified a significant positive association between teacher victimisation and peer bullying perpetration, while the association with family victimisation was weaker (Laszlo et al., under review). The present qualitative findings cannot establish a causal pathway between adult behaviour and children's bullying of peers, but they provide insight into how adults understand these relationships. Participants frequently interpreted children's behaviour in relation to what they observe and experience in their everyday family and school environments. This interpretation is consistent with previous research identifying links between children's exposure to harmful or violent adult behaviour and subsequent peer bullying perpetration, although the available evidence remains limited (Laszlo et al., 2025).

Participants' accounts also support the broader social-ecological understanding of bullying (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hong & Espelage, 2012). More specifically, they emphasised the role of family relationships, classroom interactions, school culture, professional pressures, peer relationships, digital environments, and wider social norms. This shifts attention away from identifying individual "bullies" towards considering the relational environments in which children learn how power and conflict are managed (Salmivalli, 2010). Adult-to-child bullying, from this perspective, cannot be separated easily from the wider cultures of families, schools, and communities in which it occurs.

The discussions about teachers illustrate this particularly clearly. Participants recognised teachers' legitimate authority to manage student behaviour and maintain classroom order. However, they also described circumstances in which that authority could be exercised in ways that humiliate or intimidate children. At the same time, teachers cited workload, emotional exhaustion, challenging classroom behaviour, and limited institutional support as factors that may lead to inappropriate interactions. These accounts should not be interpreted as evidence that professional pressure causes teacher bullying or as justification for harmful behaviour. Rather, they indicate that adult behaviour needs to be considered within the organisational conditions in which teachers work. This underscores the importance of school climate, professional support, and relationships among staff in bullying prevention, alongside attention to individual professional conduct (O'Brennan et al., 2014; Washington-Nortey et al., 2024; Fischer et al., 2026).

A further concern relates to what happens when harmful adult behaviour is recognised. Participants were much more familiar with procedures for responding to bullying between students than with processes for raising concerns about adults. They described uncertainty about whom children or parents should approach, how allegations involving teachers would be handled, and whether concerns would be taken seriously. Professional relationships and hierarchies within schools could further complicate these situations. These findings point to an institutional blind spot in most countries within approaches that position adults primarily as those responsible for preventing or responding to bullying, without equally considering the possibility that adults may themselves be involved in harmful behaviour An exception can be found in e.g., the Norwegian Education Act (2023), Chap. 12, concerning pupils right to a safe and supportive school environment act, it imposes a specific duty to report when a member of school staff, including a teacher, subjects a pupil to abusive, harassing, or otherwise degrading behaviour.

This institutional issue is closely connected to trust. The preceding survey found very limited help-seeking from teachers and school leaders, and the focus group discussions help to place this finding in context. Participants described disclosure as dependent not simply on the availability of a reporting mechanism but on whether children and parents believe that they will be listened to and that raising a concern will lead to an appropriate response. This is particularly difficult when the person to whom a child would normally be expected to turn is part of the same institution as the adult whose behaviour is causing concern. Strengthening help-seeking therefore requires attention not only to reporting procedures but also to the quality of relationships and responses surrounding disclosure.

Taken as a whole, the findings suggest that extending bullying research beyond peer relationships requires more than adding adults as another possible category of perpetrator. Adult–child relationships differ structurally from peer relationships because of authority, dependence, care, and professional responsibility. These characteristics shape how behaviour is interpreted, whether it is recognised as bullying, and how children can respond. Understanding adult-to-child bullying therefore requires attention both to the behaviour itself and to the relational and institutional context in which it takes place. This broader perspective may help explain why harmful adult behaviour can remain visible in everyday practice while still being difficult to name, challenge, or address as bullying.

5. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study was conducted within the Hungarian context, and the findings are shaped by the cultural, institutional, and educational structures specific to this setting. While some patterns may resonate more broadly, the findings should not be assumed to be directly transferable to other contexts without consideration of local social and educational norms.

Second, the study relied on focus group discussions, which provide valuable insight into collective meaning-making but may also shape how participants express themselves. Group dynamics can influence disclosure, agreement, and contestation, and participants may have been less willing to openly discuss sensitive or socially undesirable behaviours, particularly when reflecting on their own roles as parents or teachers.

Third, the parent sample was predominantly composed of mothers, which may limit the diversity of parental perspectives represented. Fathers and other caregivers may hold different understandings of discipline, authority, and bullying. In addition, participation was voluntary, and recruitment was conducted through schools, meaning that parents who chose to participate may have been more engaged with their children's education and more willing to collaborate with schools than the broader parent population. These characteristics may have influenced how participants interpreted teacher behaviour, potentially making them more likely to contextualise, normalise, or seek explanations for harmful adult conduct than less engaged or more critical parents.

As a qualitative study using reflexive thematic analysis, the findings do not aim to establish prevalence or causal relationships. Rather, they offer interpretive insight into how adult-to-child bullying is constructed and understood by participants. Alternative interpretations remain possible, and both participant accounts and the analytic process shape the findings.

Finally, because the study focused on adult perspectives, children's own understandings of adult-to-child bullying remain outside the scope of this analysis. Future research would benefit from integrating children's voices alongside adult perspectives to provide a more comprehensive account of how these behaviours are experienced, recognised, and responded to.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to bullying research by examining how parents and teachers understand and interpret adult-to-child bullying. This area remains comparatively underexplored within predominantly peer-focused bullying frameworks. The findings demonstrate that adult-to-child bullying is not understood as a fixed or easily identifiable category, but as a contested relational phenomenon shaped by competing interpretations of discipline, care, authority, and harm, as well as by wider behavioural norms, organisational cultures, and professional expectations.

Across the findings, harmful adult behaviours were often normalised, justified, or minimised through socially legitimate roles, making them less visible within existing bullying frameworks. At the same time, participants recognised the importance of adult behaviour in shaping children's relational norms, highlighting the significance of modelling processes within family and school environments.

These findings extend earlier quantitative work by offering interpretive insight into how adults make sense of the very behaviours that may contribute to children's bullying experiences and perpetration. Together, the findings support a broader understanding of bullying as embedded within interconnected relational systems, rather than limited to peer interactions alone.

Addressing bullying effectively may therefore require a conceptual and practical shift: one that recognises adults not only as protectors and responders, but also as active participants in the social environments through which bullying is learned, normalised, and reproduced. Expanding prevention frameworks to include adult-to-child bullying may strengthen both safeguarding practices and the broader relational conditions necessary for bullying prevention.

7 Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this study suggest that preventing adult-to-child bullying requires approaches that extend beyond traditional peer-focused anti-bullying initiatives. While participants recognised bullying between children as an established area of school policy and practice, they consistently described greater uncertainty when harmful behaviour involved adults. The following recommendations build directly on the findings of this study.

7.1 Broaden Anti-Bullying Policies and Programmes to Address Adult-to-Child Bullying Explicitly

Many participants found it difficult to distinguish harmful adult behaviour from discipline or classroom management. Schools should therefore ensure that anti-bullying and safeguarding policies explicitly recognise that bullying may also occur within adult-child relationships. Clear guidance, supported by practical examples, may help teachers, school leaders, and parents distinguish between appropriate professional authority and behaviours that may be experienced as humiliating, degrading, or abusive.

7.2 Strengthen Professional Reflection and Training

The findings suggest that recognising adult-to-child bullying is not simply a matter of awareness but of reflection. Participants frequently discussed the role of professional judgement, emotional regulation, stress, and classroom management when interpreting teacher behaviour. Professional learning should therefore create opportunities for teachers to reflect on power relationships, communication styles, and the unintended impact of everyday interactions with students, rather than focusing solely on managing student behaviour.

7.3 Foster School Cultures that Support Open Dialogue and Accountability

Participants repeatedly described uncertainty about how to raise and address concerns about harmful adult behaviour. Schools should promote cultures in which professional reflection is encouraged, concerns can be discussed constructively, and appropriate procedures exist for responding to allegations involving adults as well as students. Such approaches should emphasise learning and accountability while maintaining trust within the school community.

7.4 Strengthen Partnerships with Parents

Parents and teachers consistently described collaboration as essential for recognising and responding to children's experiences. Building trusting relationships between schools and families may increase opportunities to identify concerns early and discuss them before they escalate. Schools should therefore create regular opportunities for meaningful dialogue with parents rather than limiting communication to incidents after they occur.

7.5 Recognise the Role of Adults as Behavioural Models

Across the focus groups, participants repeatedly described children as learning about relationships through observing adults at home, at school, and in wider society. Prevention efforts should therefore move beyond changing children's behaviour alone and also encourage reflection on the ways adults model communication, conflict resolution, and the use of power in everyday interactions.

Declarations

8. Consent to Participate

Participation in the study was voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence and were free to skip any questions. No identifying information was collected, and all responses were anonymous. Data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

Author Contribution

LL: Conceptualization; methodology; development of the study materials, including the participant handout and focus group guide; investigation, including conducting focus group discussions; review of the English translations of the transcripts; development of the analytical approach and coding scheme; formal analysis; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing, including incorporation of co-author feedback.ES: Conceptualization – supporting; methodology – supporting; review and feedback on the participant handout and focus group guide; participant recruitment; investigation, including conducting focus group discussions; transcription of focus group recordings; translation of transcripts into English; review and discussion of the coding scheme; writing – review and editing.JH: Conceptualization – supporting; methodology – supporting; review and feedback on the participant handout and focus group guide; participant recruitment; investigation, including conducting focus group discussions; review and discussion of the coding scheme; writing – review and editing.HF: Conceptualization, including contribution to the development of the initial research questions; methodology, with particular contribution to the analytical approach; review and discussion of the coding scheme; writing – review and editing.AK: Review and discussion of the coding scheme; writing – review and editing.

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Data Availability

The transcripts are available upon request from the first author.

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