Bullying has been defined broadly as the “systematic abuse of power” (Rigby, 2002). Its prevalence in schools has been confirmed in many countries (Due et al., 2009; Molcho et al., 2009). In Australia, it has been estimated that one child in four is bullied in some way every several weeks (Cross et al., 2009). The harm it can do has also been widely investigated (Rigby, 2003). Not only has it been reported that children who are bullied at school have significantly poorer mental health than others, but they are also significantly more likely than others to experience mental illness as adults.

In a study conducted in Finland a sample of 2,713 eight-year-old schoolboys were identified as being repeatedly bullied and/or bullying others at school, based on reports from teachers, parents and the children themselves (Ronning et al., 2009). Their mental health status was assessed some 10 to 15 years later when they were examined psychiatrically on registering for compulsory national service. Those boys who were identified as being involved in bullying at school were approximately three times more likely than others to be rejected as mentally unfit, commonly displaying high levels of anxiety, depression and personality disorder. A further longitudinal study of schoolchildren (N = 6,437) in England produced comparable results (Schreier et al., 2009). These researchers concluded that peer victimisation in childhood, especially if it is chronic or severe, is associated with psychotic symptoms in early adolescence.

It could be suggested that children who become involved in bully–victim problems are mentally less well than most students to begin with, and would be mentally unwell as adults, regardless of whether they had become involved in bullying at school. However, some findings strongly suggest that the mental health of children is, in fact, affected negatively by their involvement in bullying. A study reported by Rigby (1999), involving 78 secondary school students in South Australia, indicated that the level of self-reported victimisation in Year 8 significantly predicted a deterioration in both mental and physical health in the period leading up to Year 11. Bond, Carlin, Thomas,
Rubin, and Patton (2001) subsequently reported similar findings for Victorian schoolchildren, using a larger sample ($N = 2,680$). They reported that being victimised in Year 8 predicted high levels of anxiety and depression in Year 9. A recent study in South Australia, drawing upon retrospective accounts of being bullied, further suggests that those experiencing being bullied at school are at risk of significant long-term mental health problems (Allison, Roeger, & Reinfeld-Kirkman, 2009).

Bullying can best be conceived as a relationship problem to which many factors contribute. There is evidence that some children are genetically predisposed to act aggressively; some others are more inclined towards timidity and find it hard to be assertive (Ball et al., 2008). Wide discrepancies in peer victimisation between schools suggest that the nature of the school environment and how schools respond—proactively and reactively—to the problem of bullying may also affect the prevalence of bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). It is unclear in the general picture how important the influence of parents, parenting and family life can be on bullying behaviour, but there is now considerable evidence suggesting that they too can have a significant effect. This paper examines what is known about how parents and families may contribute to the problem of school bullying and how they can assist in addressing it more effectively.

**Parental awareness of bullying**

Studies have shown that parents are commonly unaware that their children are involved in bully–victim problems at school. In the study conducted in Finland by Ronning et al. (2009), parents were much less likely to identify that their child was involved in such a problem (see Table 1), a finding confirmed by Holt, Kaufman, and Finkelhor (2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reported by parents (%)</th>
<th>Reported by teachers (%)</th>
<th>Reported by children (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequently victimised</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently bullied others</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Ronning et al. (2009)

Unlike children and teachers, parents are rarely present at schools to observe how their children are being treated by peers. They must therefore rely to a large extent on what they are told by teachers and by their own children. Notably, teachers are often unaware that a child is being bullied, as only about one-third of students who are being bullied report to teachers that they are being victimised (Rigby, 2002). In addition, many students do not inform their parents if they are being bullied. According to Smith and Shu (2000), in England only $45\%$ of those bullied have told anyone in their family (most commonly a parent). Hence, parents are largely dependent upon their own children reporting to them any bullying they experience. Where parents are believed to be supportive and capable of providing practical help, one would expect children to disclose if they were being bullied at school.

**Early child development**

Following John Bowlby (1969), emphasis is often placed upon the role of attachment or bonding in the early years of infancy as the primary factor in determining the capacity of individuals to relate positively to each other. Attachment has been defined broadly as a strong affectional tie we feel for special people in our lives that leads us to feel pleasure and joy when we interact with them and be comforted in times of stress (Berk, 2000).

There is now evidence that insecure attachment by infants, as assessed through behavioural observation (see Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), is related to involvement in bully–victim problems years later at school (Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998; Troy & Sroufe, 1987; Williams & Kennedy, 2012). The early pioneering work by Ainsworth et al. suggested that the insecurity may take either of two forms: avoidant, in which case the child appears emotionally detached from the caregiver; and resistant or ambivalent, in which case the child seems to want to have a close relationship with the caregiver but at times stubbornly resists any overtures from the caregiver. Both conditions appear to be precursors to having poor or inconsistent relations with peers at school. Avoidant insecurity has been reported as being correlated with a lack of concern for the feelings of others, resulting in bullying behaviour; resistant/ambivalent insecurity is associated with a need to please, which may result in being victimised by others (Williams & Kennedy, 2012). The failure to establish a close emotional relationship with a caregiver as a baby appears to have serious implications for relationships with others later in life, including the likelihood of bullying others and being victimised in the school environment.

A further line of inquiry relating to early childhood development has suggested that some children can be psychologically harmed if they are left in preschool care centres for long periods, and that the effects of such
experiences become evident later in disturbed relations with others at school (Biddulph, 2006; Manne, 2005). Support for this view has been derived from a longitudinal study of the social development of American children ($N = 1,364$) between the ages of four and a half years to the end of grade six (Belsky et al., 2007). After controlling for the quality of parenting in the early years—the most predictive of all the factors examined—time spent in child care centres independently predicted externalising behaviour, as reported by teachers. The measure of externalising behaviour included a measure of the extent to which children hit other students. The authors concluded that “children with more experience in centre settings continued to manifest somewhat more problem behaviours through sixth grade” (p. 697). It remains unclear whether this association persists into adolescent years. Neither is it clear whether the association is due to a loss of attachment to a primary caregiver during early childhood or a result of being closeted with other students whose behaviour is relatively unregulated for long periods of time; conceivably it could be affected by both.

**Family functioning**

Family functioning has been identified as a factor that is associated with how well or badly a child interacts with peers at school. One Australian study made use of the Family Functioning Adolescence Questionnaire designed by Roelefse and Middleton (1985). This is a 42-item Likert-type scale of high internal consistency assessing the quality of family life as perceived by adolescents. The questionnaire was administered to 856 adolescent students in South Australia (Rigby, 1993, 1994). The students also reported on the extent to which they had bullied others and/or had been bullied by others at school. For both boys and girls, family dysfunction was greater for students who reported bullying others. For instance, children who reported that they bullied others at school were significantly more likely to disagree with these statements: “My family sympathises and understands when I feel sad” and “Members of my family are encouraged to work together in dealing with family problems”. Notably in this study, girl victims were likely to come from dysfunctional families, but this was not so for boys.

Victims of bullying, in both sexes, have been reported as coming from families that are too “enmeshed” for the good of the children; that is, families may be too self-contained, limiting the opportunities for family members to interact with others and develop the social skills necessary for establishing and maintaining good relations with their peers (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1992). This claim was based on the outcome of an experimental study undertaken with middle school children in England. Students who were identified from self-reports as victims of bullying were compared with a control group on a Family Relations Test in which participants were asked to place figures representing themselves and family members on a board according to their perceived positions in relation to each other. The victimised children grouped the figures significantly more closely together. This finding was interpreted as consistent with the claim that victims of school bullying are more likely than others to have been overprotected by well-meaning family members, especially, according to Olweus (1993), by their mothers. The Olweus study was based upon interviews with parents of schoolchildren in Norway and reports of teachers regarding which children were being victimised by peers. High levels of parental protection of children—for example being restricted from taking part in activities with other children outside the home—were found to be associated with children being victimised at school.

**Parenting style and parent characteristics**

There is much agreement that an authoritarian—as opposed to an authoritative or democratic style of parenting—is more likely to give rise to bullying by children; for example reports from studies conducted in Australia (Rigby, 1994), in Italy (Baldry & Farrington, 2000) and in the United States (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000) have each indicated significant associations between authoritarian parenting and the relatively high involvement of school children in bullying others at school. According to Baumrind (1966), authoritarian parents are obedience- and status-oriented, and expect...
their orders to be obeyed without question. Failure to do so usually results in punishment, which tends to be physical and is accompanied by an angry, emotional outburst (Roberts, 2000). Authoritarian parents fail to explain the reasoning behind these rules. They impose high demands, but are not responsive to their children. In one recent study (Lee & Song, 2012), authoritarian parenting was inferred from South Korean children in grades 7 to 9 agreeing to these statements: “My parents use physical discipline for punishments” and “I think my parents want to have control over almost every aspect of my life”. However, unlike studies conducted in Australia, Italy and the United States, Lee and Song found that in South Korea, authoritarian parenting was not significantly associated with bullying behaviour by children. It appears the relationships between style of parenting and bullying behaviour may vary cross-nationally.

According to Ahmed and Braithwaite (2007), children who bully believe that their parents would not forgive them if they did something wrong. Arguably, they learn from their parents to be unforgiving towards others, and feel justified in acting aggressively towards those they believe may have offended them. Generally, where adolescents report that they dislike or have negative relations with one or both parents, they are more likely to bully at school (Rigby, 1993). Further, Flouri & Buchanan (2003) found that where adolescents report that either one or both their parents are constructively involved in their lives, they are significantly less likely to engage in bullying. Parental involvement was inferred from respondents in this study agreeing that their mother and/or father “talk through your worries with you” and “help with your plans for the future”. Different explanations for these findings are possible. Frustration on the part of children who have negative relations with parents who treat them badly or fail to provide support may result in them directing the aggression they feel towards their peers. It may also be the case that children who behave aggressively towards other students also behave aggressively towards their parents who, as a consequence, treat them in a generally negative and unsupportive manner.

It has been suggested that highly permissive parenting can also lead to bullying behaviour. For instance, children who report that their parents often do not know their whereabouts are more prone to engage in bullying (Georgiou, 2008). Arguably, this is more likely to be true in relation to children who are more inclined to act aggressively and require close surveillance. With respect to being victimised, significant gender differences have been reported. For boys, having negative relations with parents...
apparently does not affect their victim status. By contrast, girl victims at school tend to have poor relations with their mothers and are apt to feel over-controlled by their parents, especially by their fathers (Rigby, Slee, & Martin, 2007).

Some studies have focused upon the role of parents who seek to bolster the self-esteem of their children by praising them. An important distinction should be made between praising a child for things done well and/or for the effort made, and the giving of indiscriminate or excessive praise regardless of what the child has done. It has been suggested that the latter may give rise to a state of narcissism in which the child may feel that anything he or she does is praiseworthy—including bullying others (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996). However, high self-esteem (as distinct from narcissism) appears to have a positive effect in rendering a child less vulnerable to bullying. Studies have shown that victims of school bullying tend to have relatively low self-esteem (Egan & Perry, 1998; Slee & Rigby, 1993). Low self-esteem in family relations has been reported as being more prevalent among boys (though not girls) who are cyberbullied (Brighi, Melotti, Gali, & Genta, 2012). Feeling positive about themselves may result in children exhibiting more confidence and more assertive behaviour that prevents them from being viewed as an “easy target”.

We should recognise the role of parents and families of acting as “shock absorbers” when their children are hurting, whether the pain is related to being bullied or is independent of being bullied. For example, in Australia, Rigby and Slee (1999) reported that suicidal ideation—which is commonly associated with chronic victimisation—is significantly lessened among children who receive social and emotional support. A study conducted in Italy revealed that psychological distress accompanying bullying is significantly less among children who have positive relations with their parents (Baldry, 2004; Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Rigby, 2000).

Parents’ beliefs about peer victimisation of children

Although many parents are deeply concerned about the effects of peer victimisation on the wellbeing and mental health of their children (see Rigby, 2008), a substantial proportion hold that peer harassment is a natural and common part of growing up and has no significant effects upon children’s socio-emotional development. In fact, as Troop-Gordon and Gerardi (2012) demonstrated in a longitudinal study of 3rd- and 4th-grade school children and their parents in the United States, parents holding such beliefs significantly predicted increased victimisation of their children and an increase in their social withdrawal and depression. The authors concluded that “parents who view peer victimization as normative may fail to provide their children with needed emotional and instrumental supports and may not intervene to prevent further peer harassment” (p. 47).

A consequence of the belief that bullying is an inevitable part of growing up is the conviction that schools are unable to do anything about it. Research has shown that this is a false belief. Contrary to what the media often assert, bullying in schools on a world scale is reducing (see Rigby & Smith, 2011), arguably due to the thoughtful work of an increasing number of schools in adopting both proactive and reactive strategies that bring about reductions in bullying. There has been a notable growth in policies and programs addressing what schools can do, with some evidence indicating that some anti-bullying programs can reduce the prevalence of bullying in schools by around 20% (Tofl & Farrington, 2011). Moreover, some strategies for dealing with cases of bullying have been evaluated and shown to be at least moderately successful (Rigby, 2010; Thompson & Smith, 2011). Among the most successful are the Support Group Method pioneered by Robinson and Maines (2008) and the Method of Shared Concern (Rigby & Griffiths, 2011). Hence, effective action can be taken by schools to reduce bullying among school children and address the concerns that parents have when their child is being victimised by peers.

Implications for parent education about bullying

There is a need to increase the general awareness among many parents of the prevalence and potential harmfulness of peer victimisation of their children, both short- and long-term.

It needs to be more widely recognised that parenting style and the quality of relations between parents (and families) and children may affect the likelihood of children becoming involved in bully/victim problems at school and suffering serious socio-emotional consequences.

Improving one’s knowledge and understanding of the nature of a child’s relations with other children at school can lead to the early detection of problems associated with bullying. This can more readily be achieved by cultivating supportive and trusting relations with one’s
children so that they are more likely to disclose any problems.

Parents need to be aware that being bullied at school is not an inevitable part of a child’s social experience, and that schools can take steps to reduce the prevalence of bullying and deal effectively with most, if not all, cases of bullying among school children.

Collaboration between parents and schools is desirable in order to deal effectively with bully/victim problems of school children. According to research conducted in the United States, about a third of the parents did not think that they should work in conjunction with school staff to deal with bullying (Holt et al., 2009).

Responsibility for educating parents about bullying lies in part with schools, which need to keep parents informed about what policies and practices they are adopting to counter bullying, and the opportunities they are providing for meetings with parents to discuss issues and cases. In addition, further advice and interventions are needed to assist families and parents in preventing and dealing with problems associated with school bullying. Over the past decade, a number of articles and books have sought to provide such assistance (see, for example, Orpinas & Horne, 2006; Rigby, 2008; Roberts, 2007).

As research continues to throw more light upon the causes and consequences of school bullying, parent training courses progressively need to incorporate what is being discovered, and especially identify specific components that contribute to the reduction of peer victimisation in schools and the promotion of more harmonious relationships among children at school.

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**Dr Ken Rigby** is Adjunct Professor (Research) at the Hawke Research Institute and School of Education, University of South Australia. www.kenrigby.net. This article is based on a paper presented at the 12th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, 26 July 2012, Melbourne.