

An investigation of young children's perceptions of teasing within peer relationships

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Abstract

The paper analyzed children's perceptions of teasing within their real world peer relationships through participants' drawings and accompanying narratives. The case study research was approached from an ethic of listening to children to discover and uncover children's perceptions and experiences with the phenomenon of peer teasing. Fifteen children from kindergarten to grade 2 participated in drawing and narrating their complex understandings of the multi-faceted aspects of peer teasing. The participants attended two 30-40 minute sessions of conversational interviews with the first session also involving drawing and narrating personal stories of teasing. The results of the study indicate the significance of teasing within the young peer relationship as well as several distinct perceptions and insights. Ultimately, these insights may help teachers to broaden curricular approaches within the school culture and enhance current theoretical conceptualizations of peer teasing.

Keywords: Teasing, early childhood, social-emotional development, visual methodology

Introduction

The perception of peer teasing as harmless play or a form of negative interaction is greatly debated in the literature. However, teasing as a social phenomenon has important implications for children's development as well as school culture. Teasing is a complex relational and social-emotional issue involving many elements such as social cognition, understanding of

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intention, pretense, non-literal communication, and emotional regulation (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). Yet despite the intent of the instigator, the impact of teasing is determined by the recipient (Drew, 1987) and how a child responds may directly impact subsequent teasing episodes. Thus, given the complexity and subtlety of teasing behaviour, such as the often nuanced intention of the instigator and the recipient's interpretation, it is no surprise that teasing is rarely addressed within educational research circles.

Exploring young children's perceptions of teasing within their real world peer relationships is a burgeoning direction for research. In this study, drawings and narratives provided the impetus for exploring the teasing experiences of the participating children. More importantly, the research team approached the project from an ethic of listening to children (Rinaldi, 2006) to illuminate children's thinking and experiences with the phenomenon of teasing within their peer relationships.

Defining Teasing

Young children's teasing incidents can range from prosocial affects (e.g., a game of 'king-of-the-castle') (Eisenberg, 1986) to more hostile and negative forms of social exchanges (e.g., name calling, tormenting, harassing, or verbal bullying) (Freedman, 2002). In previous studies, the definition of teasing has been closely aligned with antisocial forms of behaviour such as bullying (Aho, 1998; Lightner, Bollmer, Harris, Milich, & Scrambler, 2000). However, the *prosocial* aspects of teasing as evidenced in the research of Eisenberg (1986) (e.g. give-and-withdrawal games between a parent and their infant), and Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) may be discounted when the definition of teasing focuses solely on aggressive forms. And as Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, and Heerey's (2001) review of the teasing literature indicated, prosocial teasing may serve as an impetus for encouraging and fostering positive interpersonal encounters. Thus, to avoid limiting the potential definitions provided by the children themselves the researchers in this study adopted a broad conceptualization of *teasing*. We aligned our thinking with Keltner et al.'s, (2001) definition and conceptualized teasing as encompassing three constructs, intentional provocations, playful off-record markers, and relevance to the recipient (p. 234).

In general, off-record markers are the contextual cues within a teasing scenario that help discriminate a tease from other forms of behaviours (e.g., sticking out one's tongue, laughter, sing-song chants). In a study by Drew (1987), linguistic off-record markers such as humorous phrases rhythmically placed in social routines, provided the cues to the non-serious nature of the interactions between adolescents. Intentional provocations can be construed as both nonverbal behaviours (e.g., physical imitation, making faces, singsong chants) or verbal statements (e.g., name calling, explicit statements). The provocation of the recipient is deliberate and can include behaviours or verbal statements that are intended to annoy,

frustrate, or incite a reaction from the target. The relevance of the content of the tease is determined by the target. For example, a red-haired child may find little personal relevance to being called 'Red' but react when called 'Carrot Top'. Children appear to demonstrate a capacity for teasing at a young age, and the peer relationships may provide an intimate view into what annoys the other.

Thus, by identifying the specifics of what constitutes teasing behaviour within an encompassing definition, the research team was better able to achieve the research goal of *listening to children's drawings*. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) and Rinaldi (2006) advocate a 'listening pedagogy' means carefully and purposefully attending to the concerns and constructs of young children rather than imposing institutionally focused research goals (or agendas).

Thus from this 'listening pedagogy' perspective, understanding children's experiences with teasing as well as how they resist and internalize teasing messages in various contexts is noticeably absent from the research literature. The present study explored children's perceptions of teasing through the analysis of drawings and accompanying narratives. As Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, and Monarch (1998) emphasized, "teasing lies on a perilous boundary between aggression and play and can increase intimacy and integrate members into groups or through subtle changes of form become a vehicle of victimization and ostracism" (p. 1244). Thus, understanding how children construct their own conceptions (thoughts and feelings) of this complex relational phenomenon is important in furthering the theoretical and curricular approaches specific to teasing.

Complexities of Teasing

Previous research on perceptions of teasing has traditionally targeted older elementary children in self-report studies (Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991; Warm, 1997). Physical appearance tends to be cited most often as the common content of teasing across several studies conducted with older children (Martlew & Hodson, 1991; Mooney, Creeser, & Blatchford, 1991; Scrambler, Harris, & Milich, 1998; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991; Warm, 1997). Additionally, school age children tend to name reciprocation and playing or joking around most often as reasons for *why teasing occurs*' (Shapiro, et al., 1991).

Older school age children engage in more symbolic forms of teasing (e.g. calling a tall girl the green giant) while younger children tend utilize hurtful and physical forms of teasing more often (e.g. tying another's shoe laces together) (Warm, 1997). These hurtful forms of teasing tend to escalate between grade 1 and grade 6, reaching its peak during the final year of elementary schooling (Warm, 1997). Moreover, teasing that is focused on norm violations (e.g., cross-gender play) also increase in prevalence as children mature (Keltner et al., 2001). In previous research with young pre-school age siblings, hurtful teasing was found to occur most often and

involve taunting behaviours (e.g., frightening another, taking away possessions, spitting) (Harwood, 2008). Perhaps, as children become increasingly aware of the subtleties of the social context and expected behaviour within that context, so too does their ability to focus the content of teases on norm deviations. It is important to note that not all school age children report greater frequencies of antisocial teasing in school and home (Barnett, Burns, Sanborn, Bartel, & Wilds, 2004).

In Barnett et al.'s (2004) study of fifth- and sixth-grade children's perceptions of antisocial and prosocial teasing among peers, children reported experiencing and observing more prosocial teasing than antisocial teasing in the home and school. Here, children were able to differentiate and categorize teasing as hurtful, embarrassing teasing (antisocial), playful, or kidding around (prosocial). Additionally, children were rated as prosocial teasers more often by both peers and teachers. Thus, prosocial teasing may be more prevalent in children's lives than what is currently assumed. By focusing research attention solely on antisocial forms of teasing (i.e., as a form of bullying) the ways in which playful teasing manifests and contributes to positive interpersonal relations will remain unrequited.

Another important facet complicating the research on teasing is the role of the recipient's response. How an individual responds to teasing appears to be impacted by both personal teasing history and personality traits (Bollmer, Harris, Milich, & Georgesen, 2003). Additionally, it remains unclear whether gender differences exist. For example, did the girls of Barnett, Burns, Sanborn, Bartel, and Wilds (2004) study experience more antisocial teasing at school or "merely perceive the teases they receive at school as especially more aversive and antisocial" (p. 304)? Further research is needed on connections between other socialization processes (including various sociometric measures) on how one responds and perceives the efficacy of those response strategies.

Regardless, the *quality* of the response strategy appears to directly impact subsequent teasing episodes. Previous research has highlighted that children counter teasing with a variety of response strategies (Mooney, Creeser, & Blatchford, 1991; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991) but the effectiveness of those responses is impacted by various aspects of the peer relationships such as social status (Irvin, Walker, Noell, & Singer, 1992; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995) and personal history of both instigator and recipient (Scrambler, Harris, & Milich, 1998).

Additionally, considerable differences have been found between parental and child perceptions of the efficacy of various response strategies (Lightner et al., 2000). Lightner et al. found that children tended to evaluate the efficacy of responses to teasing based on their own teasing experiences. Additionally, children tended to report greater frequencies of teasing scenarios as occurring in their own lives than what was described by their parents. Conversely, parents tended to favour the *just ignore it* response and

were generally more lenient in their evaluation of the teaser. Previous research on teasing response strategies is limited to a few studies of videotaped teasing scenarios. Possibly the potentially artificial videotape staging of teasing constrains the evaluated effectiveness of response strategies that children identify and utilize within more naturalistic settings such as the school yard at recess. And given that a recipient's response may have a direct impact on the teasing scenario and the potential limitations of previous research, exploring how a child responds to peer teasing within natural contexts is an important aspect of this research.

Thus, the goal of this research was to explore children's perceptions of teasing more fully by *visualizing voice* through illustrations (Diaz Soto, 2005). As researchers we sought to understand how children 'experience the world' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of teasing by providing participants the opportunity to express their experiences and understandings through a visual and narrative methodological approach (Sanders-Bustle, 2003). Images can provide an important conduit in making children's ideas explicit. The study provided a forum for children to express their understandings of the relational phenomenon of teasing both through drawings and conversations. The drawing aspect of the research project and the accompanying narratives that occurred during the drawing serve as the focus of this article.

Method

Pedagogy of Listening

In this study, children's perspectives were gathered utilizing a methodological approach of *listening*. Informed by children's rights discourse and the sociology of childhood, an *ethic of listening* recognizes the aptitude of the young child as competent "experts of their own experiences" (Clark, 2005, p. 508). Thus, *listening* is considered an active and dynamic participatory process of communicating, hearing, constructing and interpreting meanings through multiple sense making systems (Clark, 2005). As children can be afforded a 'hundred languages' to communicate (Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998), researchers and teachers can embrace approaches that foster a 'hundred ways of listening' (Clark, 2007).

Aligned with previous research of children's perspectives as expressed through drawings (Dockett, & Perry, 2005; Einarsdottir, Dockett, Perry, 2009), this study utilized children's illustrations as a means to access their perceptions and experiences with peer teasing. By providing familiar tools and materials (markers and paper) as well as a context where children could assume control (drawing), a non-confrontational atmosphere was created where children's preferences to communicate through various mediums (i.e., drawing and talking) was respected (Einarsdottir, Dockett, Perry, 2009). The following discussion details the specific strategies that were utilized.

Participants and Setting

Twenty-two children from grades kindergarten to grade two participated in this case study. The children ranged in age from 5 to 8 years ($M=6.5$; $SD=1.1$). Two separate school locations were utilized in a middle socio-economic class neighbourhood in a city in eastern Canada. All the participating children were bilingual and attended Francophone before or after-school programs where they met with the primary researcher and a research assistant in small groups (the groups ranged in size from 2 to 7 children).

The before and after-school programs operated within a dedicated and purposefully built space within the two participating schools (although one program shared the school's gymnasium and library facilities). The programs provided care, play activities, homework tutoring, and guidance for multi-age groupings of children (kindergarten to grade 5). The programs were staffed by two or three licensed Early Childhood Educators (depending on attendance numbers). A variety of activities and play materials were provided and included art materials, snack, puzzles, books, building blocks, balls, dramatic play props, and assorted board games. Children were free to choose both their activity and playmates (one program upheld a policy of providing homework tutoring prior to self-chosen activities and free play).

All the children who participated in the study attended two 30-45 minute sessions with the researchers on two separate occasions. All sessions with the children were audio recorded and transcribed immediately following. The invitation to draw was made during the preliminary meeting with 15 children opting to do so (two 7-8 year old boys; four 7-8 year old girls; four 5-6 year old boys; five 5-6 year old girls). The second session was intended as a *member checking* meeting and the children were read summaries of the transcripts from the first session as well as provided with their original drawings and asked to provide any additions, deletions, changes, or clarifications. None of the children made any changes to their original drawings, but provided additional verbal examples of teasing, and added information on how a recipient should respond (e.g. the response "asking a friend to help" with teasing arose from the second session). In general, there was a consensus that the summaries accurately captured the children's perceptions elicited in the first visit. Moreover, children expressed a genuine enjoyment in participating in the second session by excitedly approaching the researcher, taking credit for statements read from the summaries, expressing pride in their drawings, and voicing to other children (who had not participated) "she's here to talk to me".

Throughout the study, children were afforded the "maximum freedom of choice" (Evans & Fuller, 1996, p. 17). Thus, the decision to participate in any of the conversations or the drawing aspects of the study was made by individual children (parental consent was also obtained prior to the onset of data collection). A verbal assent statement was read at the beginning of each session and again when the drawing activity was introduced. As other

activities were occurring simultaneously to the research session, the seven children who opted not to draw chose to return to these activities after the invitation to draw was made (these children opted to play in organized games in the gymnasium, eat snack, or engage in block building).

As researchers our goal was to explore children's perspectives of teasing, accordingly a drawing activity and guided conversational approaches were both utilized. The primary researcher conducted all conversations in English with the invitation for the children to respond in French if so desired. On four separate occasions children utilized French terminology for lunchroom (*sale à diner*), bullying (*taxage*), teasing (*taquinage*), and consequence (*conséquence*).

Materials and Procedure

Empowering children to speak of their own experiences and perspectives through the act of drawing can be an important aspect of research with young children. Although guided interviews with the participating children also occurred (discussion of the results of the interviews are beyond the scope of this article), it was the drawing aspect of the research that tended to free the children to express themselves from a personal perspective. As previous research has indicated, children's understandings and experience of world events as depicted in drawings (e.g. the events of 9/11) can be far different from adult perspectives, providing both an impetus for varied interpretations and new research directions (Diaz Soto, 2005).

Visual methods in research can also level the playing field and offer "accessible, flexible, and inclusive tools" (Burke, 2008, p. 25) that validate young children's voices in research foci of interest to their lives. This methodological approach proved meaningful such that children's feelings, personal histories, and experiences were interwoven into illuminating *stories of teasing*. Children were provided with art materials and invited to draw pictures about teasing. During the drawing activity, the primary researcher conversed with individual children as the visual representations unfolded.

The drawing aspect of this research invited children to become both the participant and co-researcher in the process. We believed it was important that the children maintained ownership of the direction of their drawings, thus no attempt was made to influence the drawing process. The initial instructions were kept simple and open-ended with the invitation made by the researcher for the children to *draw something about teasing*. Children were free to opt out of drawing or spend as much time as they wished engaged in the activity. Additionally, access to the resources was not limited and children could chose to draw multiple pictures and change their choice of drawing instruments frequently (multiple sets of primary colour washable markers were provided).

During the drawing sessions, the primary researcher conversed with the children and asked for clarifications and explanations of their drawings.

Often this helped to elucidate the researcher's interpretations (and misinterpretations) and identify aspects of the drawings such as context, gender, and whom the figures represented. The questions that guided the conversation during the drawing task included:

1. Tell me what is happening in your picture? Or what story is your picture is telling?
2. In your picture, how do you think the person doing the teasing feels?
3. What is the teaser thinking?
4. How do you think the child being teased feels?
5. What is he/she thinking?
6. Why is that girl/boy being teased and not someone else?
7. What do you think they are saying to themselves in their mind?
8. How would (your friend) feel if she/he were teasing you – what do you think they would be thinking in their mind?
9. What should he/she do?

Given the context of the drawing scenario that unfolded not all questions were utilized with each child. And regardless of the questions, we feel it was the ability to create empathetic and harmonious relationships with young children in a non-threatening context that was essential in encouraging children's talk and drawing about teasing within their peer relations. Previous experience as teachers of young children proved beneficial in establishing rapport and creating an atmosphere of trust with the result being uninhibited conversations during the school visits. The pictorial representations and narrations during drawing were added to the data set.

Response Coding of Drawings

Two sets of data were analyzed. The first set involved the narrative account of the participants' responses to a guided conversational interview. The second set, and focus of this article, involved a thematic analysis of the visual images the children created and accompanying stories. We employed an inductive process in analyzing the children's drawings, identifying common themes and elements in the drawings. Coding of the children's drawings combined Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul's (1997) *themed* approach and methods more consistent with previous investigations of children's drawings (e.g. Tamm, 2000). By combining approaches, the research team sought to provide both a descriptive analysis of peer teasing as well as a snap shot of the "...close-up reality and 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for a situation" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 182). From this perspective, we thought of themes as "brief statements that describe the content of individual units of data text" (Tesch, 1987, p. 231).

Individually, each of the three research members read and re-read the narratives and analyzed the drawings, identifying emerging themes. Aligned with Ely et al.'s (1997) approach, research team meetings were held

periodically throughout the analysis phase to discuss emerging themes and create links in the data. Once consensus among the three team members was reached and 14 themes were accorded, a manual was devised to guide the coding process that ensued. The coding manual clearly defined each theme as well as set parameters on the processes to be used during coding (e.g., including facial expressions of the children's drawings and the depiction of a sun, grass, clouds, trees as indicators of the context of where teasing was occurring within the drawing).

Separately, the primary investigator and a research assistant coded the drawings and narratives (stories) with the use of NVivo. The third research member acted as a consultant in the coding process and would have assumed a role as an arbitrator should disagreement ensue between the two primary coders. However, the Kappas for the various categories of codes for the drawings were averaged and resulted in $K = 0.89$, suggesting relatively high inter-rater reliability. Thus, the third researcher was not actively employed in the NVivo coding process.

Descriptive Results

Number of Characters

Primarily, the children's drawings depicted a teaser-recipient dyad (73%). Table 1 indicates that single-character depictions of teasing and multiple character depictions were less frequently portrayed. The number of characters depicted did not increase with age. Interestingly, it was the younger group of 5-6 year olds who were more likely to represent greater variability in the composition of characters with only 56% representing the dyad. The older group of 7-8 year old children consistently represented a teasing dyad (100%). This finding contrasts some of the bullying research which tends to suggest that bullying is a "complex social construct [that] incorporate other social and individual dynamics within the context of the school" (Cranham & Carroll, 2003, p. 128). Perhaps, teasing is more universal and not constrained by the same trajectories more inherent within bullying encounters.

Character Gender

In respect to the gender of the characters depicted in the children's illustrations there was a slightly greater tendency for the older group of children to depict same-sex teasing (83%) in their drawings than what was depicted in the younger children's drawings (75%). The male drawings were uniform in their portrayal of males as the instigators of teasing. Interestingly, regardless of age only the girls illustrated teasing scenarios as occurring between girls and boys with all three of these identifying a girl as the instigator of the tease. Overall, the girls identified females with greater frequency as the instigators of teasing (63%). This finding appears somewhat in contrast to previous research where males were identified as more frequent teasers (Barnett, et al., 2004) and may be more associated

with the distinct patterns of interpersonal behaviours for boy and girls (MacCoby, 1990).

Table 1. *Frequency distributions of number of characters represented in children’s drawings by gender and age group*

Age & Gender N = 15	Number of Characters			
	Zero	One	Two	Three or more
	0	2 (13%)	11 (73%)	2 (13%)
7-8 year old	0	0	6 (100%)	0
Boys (n = 2)	0	0	2 (33%)	0
Girls (n = 4)	0	0	4 (67%)	0
5-6 year old	0	2 (22%)	5 (56%)	2 (22%)
Boys (n = 4)	0	1 (11%)	3 (33%)	0
Girls (n = 5)	0	1 (11%)	2 (22%)	2 (22%)
Total Boys	0	1 (17%)	5 (83%)	0
Total Girls	0	1 (11%)	6 (67%)	2 (22%)

Note: Numbers are the frequencies of children. Percentages represent proportion of children in that particular category.

Character Size

Mixed results were found in the depiction of character size in the 13 drawings of a teasing dyad (one male drawing and one female drawing depicted single-character). While the majority (83%) of the 7-8 year old boys and girls represented characters as being the same size 71% of the children in the younger group drew the teaser character as larger.

Facial Affect-Teaser and Recipient

Girls and boys, regardless of age, were uniform in their depiction of the teaser as a happy individual. All of the children indicated teasers as being happy by portraying the character with a smiling face. The recipient of teasing was depicted as sad (i.e., tears or down-turned mouth) in 83% of the older children’s drawings. Younger children’s representations of the recipient’s facial affect was much more varied with 38% depicting negative affect, 12% a positive affect, 38% a neutral affect, and 12% where no facial affect was depicted.

Context of Drawings

All of the girls’ drawings illustrated specific cues as to where the teasing scenario took place (i.e. some depiction of grass, trees, sun, clouds, flowers, school building, tables, chairs, and lights were included in each of the nine

drawings). Eight of the girls' drawing scenarios took place outdoors (with six girls labelling the outdoor area as their school recess area, one girl labelling the outdoor area as a park, and one girl not specifying). The sole female drawing of an indoor teasing scenario was contextualized with the depiction of a table and chairs, a teacher's desk, lights, a book, and overhead lighting. Surprisingly, one of the youngest males provided the only contextual cues of the boys' drawings including a sky, sun, grass, and schoolhouse. Similar to the majority of the girls, this drawing depicted teasing outdoors and specifically in the school playground.

Forms of Teasing

Physical forms of teasing were depicted in both of the older boys' drawings. Similarly, among the younger group of children 86% represented teasing that was physical in nature (Figure 1). In keeping with Warm's (1997) categories of teasing the younger group of children depicted a form of teasing that involved the physical taunting of another. And while the younger girls drawings all depicted the taunting of another by limiting their access or use of a toy or object, the younger males depicted more aggressive forms of taunting (i.e. two depicted spitting, one illustrated hitting, and one depicted taunting with an object). Similarly, the two oldest males also depicted aggressive forms of teasing.



Figure 1. Male Depiction of Physical Taunting

Conversely, as Figure 2 highlights, three of the four older girls depicted aspects of character teasing, that is teasing that relates to a specific aspect of an individual's character, psychological trait, physical trait, or mental characteristic (Warm, 1997). Regardless of the form of teasing depicted, the

majority of the children self-represented themselves as the recipient of teasing in their drawings. Thirteen of the 15 drawings depicted a teasing dyad, where the illustrator identified themselves as the recipient.



Figure 2. Female Depiction of Character Teasing

Indicators of Teasing

As mentioned previously, indicators of teasing refer to the off-record markers that provide the contextual cues to help define teasing behaviour as it unfolds. With the exception of the four drawings depicting speech bubbles, the off-record markers were difficult to discern from the drawings alone. However, from the narratives that occurred during the drawing activity the children indicated laughter, sing-song chants, spitting, smirking, removal of toys and objects from a person's reach, and repeated disruption of another's play as indicators of teasing. Often the children highlighted these indicators by dramatizing the actions or varying their tone of voice as they narrated the story that accompanied the drawing. For example, as the illustrator of the above Figure narrated, "My cousin Samantha she is in Grade five and she teases me all the time and calls me Matty Fatty, Matty Fatty, Matty Fatty", she emphasized the repetition by using sing-song chanting and exaggerated facial expressions.

Additionally, of the four drawings that included speech bubbles, two identified laughter (i.e. "ha ha ha ha") and two included specific text related to another's character as indicators of teasing (Figure 3). However, all four children in explanation of their speech bubble pictures verbalized these indicators with an accompanying sing-song intonation. As illustrated in Figure 3, not only did the verbal statements (i.e. "Ha Ha I'm cooler than

you”) cue the recipient to the tease but the delivery of the statement with a sing-song intonation provided even greater contextual information for the recipient. Exaggerated intonation and prosody has been noted as a common feature of adult teasing encounters in previous sociolinguistic studies (Straehle, 1993). Thus, in this study the sing-song chant and the delivery of the off-record marker appeared to be equally important as the indicator itself.



Figure 3. Indicators of Teasing

Narrated Stories of Teasing

Similar to previous research, most drawing sessions contained instances of social talk. Social talk refers to “talk which does not directly relate to the drawing activity or its subject matter but instead focuses on common issues of companionship” (Coates & Coates, 2006, p. 229). During the drawing sessions, children conversed freely with each other and the researcher about topics such as families, home, friends, sports, television, school life and other off-task topics. This social talk was significant in both establishing rapport with the children and often serving as jumping off points to further conversation. As David (1999) highlights knowledge of children’s interests and previous experiences help the adult researcher understand where their “amazing ideas, sometime misinterpretations, come from” (p. 3), thus as researchers we remained cognizant throughout the process of *listening* to children. As the children drew, the primary researcher asked questions such as *what is happening in your picture, what story is your picture telling, why is the teasing happening, or what should he/she (recipient) do?* Children

Similarly, the boys also used emotional state terms such as *sad*, *hurt*, and *bad* to describe the emotional response of the recipient. However, they were equally likely to use terms such as *angry*, *mad*, and *annoyed* in their narrations.

In general, the boys spent less time drawing and included fewer details in their illustrations. In contrast to the girls' narrations, the accompanying stories of the boys' drawings were uniform and involved elements of aggression either in the tease itself or the response strategy (Figure 4).

Garth (7-8 age group)

*A bully is pushing someone down...[later
Garth continues]*

*Well he's going to get up and he's going to
hurt me again and again and again and
again.*

Jack (7-8 age group)

That guy is kicking him in the face.

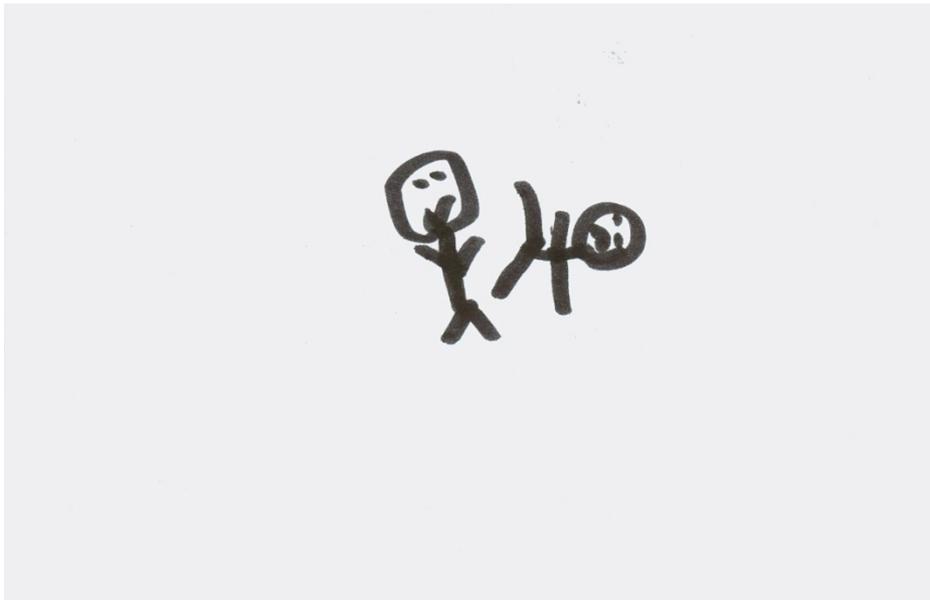


Figure 4. Older Male Drawing of Teasing and Elements of Aggression

Both of the older boys told stories of repeated and intense aggression. Interestingly, the scale of the characters in the two older boys' drawings was distinct from the other children's drawings, perhaps highlighting a need for future research to examine associations between scale of drawings and frequency of victimization. Regardless of the age, physical forms of teasing and elements of bullying were narrated and drawn by each boy (Figure 5).

Researcher

And what do you think this person should do next? [Pointing to drawn character]

Samuel (5-6 age group)

He need to throw him down and get his necklace back.

Why Teasing Happens?

Overall, the 15 children participating in the drawing activity were unclear as to why teasing happens and why specifically they were the recipients (of the 13 who identified as the targets). When asked questions related to what the teaser was thinking or feeling, the older children unanimously responded with psychological aspects such as “the teaser wanted to make her cry” or “she likes hurting me”, or “he’s mean”. Conversely, all the younger children responded with behavioural or instrumental responses, such as “she wanted her hair band” or “he took her ball away”. Gender related differences in responses within the two age groups were not found.



Figure 5. Younger Male Drawing of Teasing and Elements of Aggression

In general, the children labelled the teasers in their drawings as being ‘mean’ and as individuals who enjoyed teasing (e.g. “he likes to do it”). The eldest group of children were more likely to narrate stories of multiple teasing scenarios while drawing, citing themselves as the frequent recipients.

Response strategies

The drawing task provided children an opportunity to represent their thinking regarding appropriate response strategies to teasing. In most instances the question was personalized, "what did you do?" as 13 of the children drew themselves as the recipient of teasing. It is important to note that only one child depicted a series of events in her drawing with separate panels for the beginning of a tease, the response, and the conclusion (Figure 6). The remaining children narrated the events of the drawing in response to the researcher's question, "tell me what is happening in your picture" or "tell me the story that is happening in your picture". The older children identified "walking away" (two eldest boys) and "getting adult help" (four eldest girls) as the appropriate responses depicted in their pictures.

The younger children expressed more varied response strategies with two boys describing a verbal response (i.e., saying "no" or "go away" to the teaser), one girl and one boy each describing the use of aggression or hostility in response (i.e., hitting or kicking), one girl relating an emotional response (i.e., crying), and three girls who recounted enlisting the help of an adult (i.e., telling a teacher or recess guard or one's mother). Despite the prevalence of typical adult advice to 'just ignore' teasing cited in previous studies (Lightner et al., 2000), none of the children in this study specifically identified 'ignore it' as a response strategy within the context of their real world experiences with teasing. Perhaps, the 'ignore it' strategy does not validate the intensity of the emotional experience for the child and children perceive this strategy as ineffectual.

Moreover, although the 5-6 year old children identified four distinct strategies (i.e., verbal, aggression/hostile, emotional, and adult intervention) the older group's identification of response strategies was limited. Other response strategies identified in previous studies with older children (Lightner et al., 2000; Scrambler et al., 1998), such as the use of humour or empathy, were not evident in the children's drawings or narrations. However, the efficacy of various response strategies has yet to be systematically researched. As well, children's abilities to infer the ambiguous content of a tease and the underlying intent (whether antisocial or prosocial) may impact their use and perceived efficacy of a specific response strategy (Barnett et al., 2004). For example, "some children may tend to display a social information processing bias whereby teases directed at them that are meant to be prosocial and friendly are instead perceived and responded to as if they were meant to be antisocial and hostile" (Barnett et al., 307). Regardless of individual social and cognitive ability, perhaps all children could benefit from explicit instruction on the variety of response strategies within a real world context such as teasing on the school play ground.

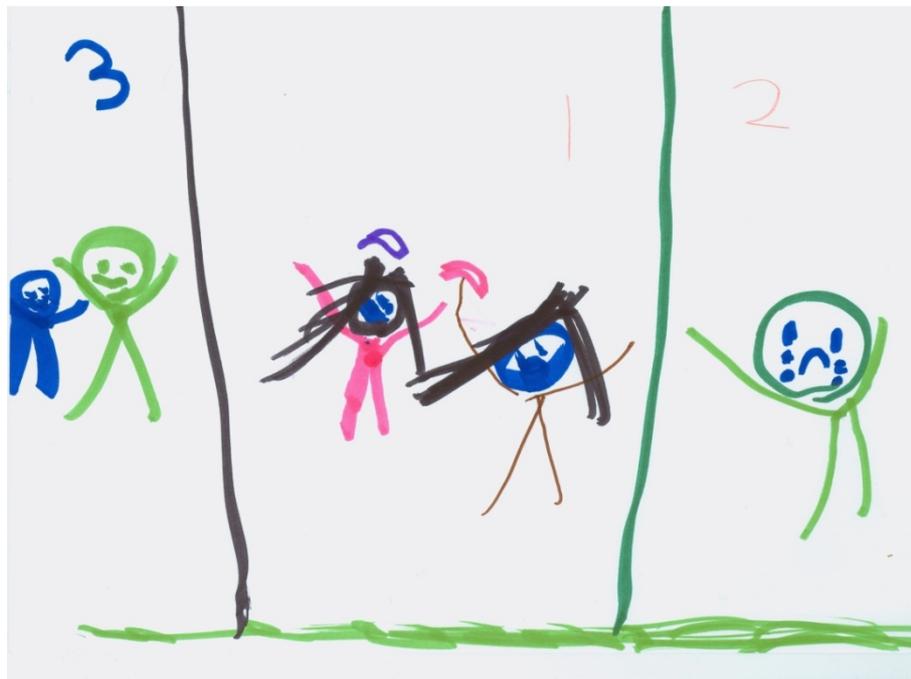


Figure 6. Seriation of Teasing Event

Discussion

An important aspect of this research process was the use of a methodological approach to enable the research team to listen to children. Children were provided with multiple mediums to express their ideas with the goal of the inductive analysis to “create meaning from a mix of representation that are not exclusively text, not exclusively image but rather a polysemic technopodge of the two” (Sanders-Bustle, 2003, p. 10). The children’s drawings revealed complex understandings about the complexity and multi-faceted aspects of peer teasing which may ultimately help researchers to broaden current conceptualizations of teasing. For example, teasing patterns found in this study were distinct from patterns previously reported in other teasing studies (Keltner et al., 2001; Mooney et al., 1991) and studies on bullying (Bentley & Li, 1995; Craig & Pepler, 1997; Whitney & Smith, 1993). In this study, same-sex teasing was identified most often with relatively high numbers of drawings depicting girls as the instigator of a tease. Moreover, the increased social complexity of teasing scenarios (i.e., teasing that involved more than a dyad) was only depicted by the youngest group of children while the older group of children portrayed teasing dyads. Furthermore, a power-differential was only depicted in the younger children’s drawings with the older children drawing the teaser and recipient as being the same size.

Often within current research practice teasing is conflated with bullying (Froschl & Sprung, 2005; Olweus, 1993; Ross, 1996) and various negative outcomes have been found to be associated with antisocial forms of teasing (Furman & Thompson, 2002; Olweus, 1993). In contrast, studies on prosocial teasing are less evident (Barnett, et al., 2004). And as Keltner et al.'s, (2001) review of the teasing literature indicated most of the previous research has not specifically focused on children's perceptions and experiences with different forms of teasing.

In this study, children's perceptions provided cues on further defining teasing and differentiating teasing from other forms of social behaviours. Several indicators were included in the children's drawings and narrations that highlight the potential uniqueness of teasing as a social phenomenon. For example, physical forms of teasing tended to dominant the boys and 5-6 year old girls' drawings while older girls depicted aspects of character teasing (i.e., teasing regarding a specific aspect of an individual's character, physical, or mentalistic trait) (Warm, 1997). Thus, teasing cannot be examined solely as a verbal or communication act (Eisenberg, 1986) and the definition must be broadened to include physical forms of teasing that appear more typical of younger children.

Additionally, the use of off-record indicators appears to be utilized by children in defining and differentiating teasing. And although only four children depicted speech bubbles, the remaining children described a series of indicators to indicate the intent to tease (e.g., laughter, sing-song chants, spitting, smirking, removal of toys and objects from a person's reach, and repeated disruption of another child's play). And although little is known about the indicators of teasing, the findings of the present study are generally consistent with the results of a previous study on young children's teasing behaviours (Harwood, 2008).

The contextual cues provided in the girls' drawings tend to highlight the propensity for teasing to occur outdoors (and often in the school play yard), an area of often minimal supervision. This finding tends to be in line with previous findings that adults are generally unaware of the frequency of teasing (and bullying) among young children (Harwood, 2008; Mooney & Smith, 1995). The response strategies that were portrayed in the children's drawings and narratives of this study further highlight the potential uniqueness of teasing as a social phenomenon. Although it was the younger group of children that were more likely to depict greater variety of responses, it is important to note that the awareness and perception of teasing response strategies appears rooted in early childhood. Potentially, explicit instruction on various response strategies in relation to the diverse forms of teasing would have greater impact in early rather than later elementary.

However, like the findings of previous research on bullying (Bosacki, Zopito, & Dane, 2006), the majority of the instigators of teasing were also

depicted as happy in this current study. Perhaps, children's perceptions of teasers appear closely aligned with the concept of a 'happy bully' or 'happy victimizer' identified in previous research (Malti, Gasser, & Buchmann, 2009; Malti & Keller, 2009). Nonetheless, as the majority of the children self-represented themselves as the recipients of teasing this finding may not be consistent across more varied groups of children (i.e. instigators and recipients, frequent teasers, infrequent teasers, etc.). Noticeably absent from the drawings and accompanying narratives was any consistent indication of why teasing happens and specifically how and why specific recipients are chosen as targets. And although older children cited psychological aspects to explain what a teaser was feeling or thinking, younger children responded with behavioural or instrumental justifications. Clearly, more research is needed in this area before specific curricular programs can be recommended and the argument of targeted skill deficit curricular approaches versus school-wide modules that focus on social-emotional development remains largely unanswered. Longitudinal studies on the development of teasing and the investigation of the role of age, gender, and language are greatly needed as a dearth of literature specific to teasing currently exists.

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution. The participants represented a relatively small sample of homogenous children who were nominated to participate in the study by their parents. Whether or not these children were frequent teasers or recipients was unknown, and thus the results may be skewed and over-represent or under-represent the perceptions and experiences of one particular form of teasing behaviour. However, the study highlights potential avenues for future research. Namely, the perceptions of children from diverse background would greatly enhance our understanding of teasing in a variety of contexts. Additionally, the efficacy of various response strategies, the correlational or causal relationship between various developmental aspects and teasing, and the implications of gender and social status on teasing are other potential avenues to explore.

This research followed an ethic of *listening to children*; principles equally important for researchers and teachers of young children. The children of this study were provided with a variety of means to express their thoughts and experiences on a personally meaningful topic. The children were clearly appreciative for the seriousness of the attention and focus provided to them, at times verbalizing to their non-participating peers, "she's here to talk to me", or "she wants to know what I think" (children's narratives). The children's responses and drawings confirmed the feasibility and utility of using visual and narrative methodologies as a means of gaining that insider's perspective.

The results of this study indicate that peer teasing is a topic of concern for young children and they have unique perspectives and insights into this social phenomenon. Clearly, young children are capable of

contributing to the scarcity of teasing literature that currently exists when provided mediums that support their *voice*. Perhaps, by including children's perceptions and insights, curricular approaches can be contextualized and explicitly address the needs of individual groups of children. By actively *listening to children* the practical, conceptual, and theoretical understandings of the teasing phenomenon can be expanded and new avenues pursued.



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