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Harassment in ECEC institutions: 4- to 6-year-old children's experiences

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ABSTRACT

There are limited studies involving preschool children and phenomena such as harassment, bullying, exclusion and rejection. This study explores the relations between 4- to 6-year-old children's experiences of being frequently harassed in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) institutions, their overall feeling of subjective well-being and their social relationship experiences with staff and peers. The study also investigates whether there are significant differences between frequently harassed children's experiences of well-being and social relations compared to other children's experiences. The data reported in this study are collected through the Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor, an online, free of charge, electronic questionnaire developed for ECEC institutions. A total of 3598 children are included in the study. The main findings show that, for a majority of indicators, children who are frequently harassed have significantly different experiences of subjective well-being and social relations with peers and staff, mostly more negative, than other children.

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Subjective well-being; ECEC institution; harassment; preschool children; social relations; peer relations

Introduction

The issue of children's subjective well-being (SWB) in early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions is on the agenda in many countries (EU 2019; OECD 2019). The reason for this concern is the importance of well-being for children's general development, academic learning and their overall quality of life (ibid).

However, studies reveal that some children feel unhappy in educational institutions; they are not thriving together with other children and different forms of harassment, bullying or exclusion from play and other activities can be the reason for this (Bistrong 2016; Vlachou et al. 2011; Aaseth et al. 2021). Even though there has been increasing interest in preschool children's well-being during recent years, there is still a lack of research describing how children experience these negative social phenomena, and knowledge regarding how different factors in ECEC institutions correlate with children's experiences of being harassed, is scarce (ibid).

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Aim of study

This study aims to explore the relations between 4- to 6-year-old children's experiences of being frequently harassed in Norwegian ECEC institutions (*barnehage* in Norwegian), their overall feeling of subjective well-being and their social relation experiences with staff and peers. The study also investigates whether there are significant differences between frequently harassed children's experiences of well-being and social relations compared to other children's experiences. The research question is: How do children who are frequently harassed in ECEC institutions view their subjective well-being and social relations in the institution compared to children who do not experience frequent harassment?

Children's subjective well-being

Research-based knowledge on what promotes and impedes young children's subjective well-being (SWB) in ECECs is lacking and the very notion of child SWB is contested (Amerijckx and Humblet 2014; Mashford-Scott, Church, and Tayler et al. 2012). SWB is 'an umbrella term for different valuations that people make regarding their lives, the events happening to them, their bodies and minds, and the circumstances in which they live' (Diener 2006, 400). Ben-Arieh (2005), one of the first researchers who placed child well-being into this area of research, argued for the importance of a *subjective* view of childhood. In this perspective, children are regarded competent to evaluate for themselves, the degree to which they experience being content, a sense of happiness or wellness. Based on Diener's definition of SWB, Deci and Ryan (2008, in Mashford-Scott, Church, and Tayler et al. 2012) further developed an operational definition of SWB where high SWB is characterized by experiencing a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and a high degree of satisfaction with one's life. This definition is guiding our research on children's experiences of being harassed by other children in ECEC.

Grounded in this SWB tradition, Fattore et al. (2017) developed a theory of children's well-being based on qualitative research where children themselves made the foundation for the researcher's conceptions of well-being through conversations and drawings. They found three overarching and interconnected dimensions that are particularly important for children's subjective well-being. The first is *positive sense of self*, which includes a feeling of being okay, experiences of positive recognition and feeling a sense of belonging. The second is *agency – control in everyday life*, which includes the importance of having agency or the capacity to have some control over and exert influence on everyday occurrences. The third is *security and safety*, which includes the importance of feeling safe and emotionally secure and being a part of warm, trusting relationships with adults and peers. These dimensions, which to some degree overlap with the components of self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2017), constitute the emotional and relational ground for children's well-being, and the educational environment, activities and adversity (e.g. harassment) can be discussed in light of these dimensions. Because the theory of Fattore et al. (2017) is developed to better understand children's SWB in particular, we choose to use this theory to discuss the objectives in this article.

Well-being is an abstract, multi-dimensional, social and culturally constructed phenomenon. Related to Amerijckx and Humblet's (2014) analysis of different positions in child

well-being research, our study will be positioned as negative (focusing on negative aspects of children's lives in ECEC), hedonic (focusing on children's lives here and now), subjective (listening to children's own experiences), spiritual (not focusing on material aspects) and collective – not individual (children in ECEC are members of a small institutional community, and the children's experiences are interdependent of the staff and the other children).

Based on several studies of young children, happiness and subjective well-being in general, we know that warm and supportive social relations are fundamental and that family, friends and teachers are crucial in this regard (Fattore et al. 2017; Holder and Coleman 2009; Sandseter and Seland 2018; Seland, Beate Hansen Sandseter, and Bratterud et al. 2015; Thoilliez 2011).

Harassment

In this study, we have chosen to use the word 'harassment' (*plaget* in Norwegian) rather than 'bullying' when investigating children's negative social experiences in their peer community. The concept of 'bullying' has been – and to some degree still is – contested when it comes to children below school age in Norway (Aaseth et al. 2021). This is because bullying is associated with older children and their intentional, aggressive actions towards other children in situations of power imbalance (Olweus 1993). Whether bullying is the right concept for analyzing young children's behavior is also problematized by Bistrong (2016).

In the Norwegian ECEC research, policy and practice, there is no unambiguous definition on bullying, but rather a diversity of concepts in use, such as harassment, rejection, infringement and exclusion (Aaseth et al. 2021). The lack of unambiguous definitions on bullying is also discussed in international research (Vlachou et al. 2011). However, the concept of bullying in ECEC in Norway has moved from an individual to a social focus, where the need to belong to a community is seen as crucial (Søndergaard and Rabøl Hansen 2018). It is the existential anxiety for social exclusion from the peer community that makes children act in antisocial ways. This new way of understanding children's behavior has resulted in the definition that we relate to in this study: 'Bullying of children in ECEC is actions from adults and/or other children which infringe the child's experience of belonging and the possibility to be an important person in the community' (Lund et al. 2015:45)¹. 'Actions' may be different kinds of physical, verbal or non-verbal harassments, rejection or exclusion from play. In this research tradition the individual *subjective experience* is more important when defining an action as bullying than more objective criteria of intention and repetition of actions over time, which were emphasized in former definitions (see e.g. Olweus 1993).

Research indicates that preschool children do not have a clear understanding of 'bullying' as a concept (Helgeland and Lund 2016; Vlachou et al. 2011). 'Harassment' is one of the words children in Norway use to describe negative social actions from peers. This concept of harassment in an everyday context expresses a wide range of negative experiences, including both physical and psychological infringements inflicted by others, actions that make them angry, frustrated or sad, i.e. *experiences that lead to negative affect*. Based on this rationale, we will use 'harassment' in place of 'bullying' in this article.

There are limited studies among preschool-aged children on bullying (including different kinds of harassment, exclusion and rejection by peers) and because the research methods, definitions of concepts and words used to describe these negative social phenomena differ and overlap, both in Norwegian and international research, knowledge about the prevalence of this phenomenon in ECEC is limited. The percentage of children being bullied seems to vary between 6% and 22% (Sandseter and Seland 2018; Vlachou et al. 2011; Aaseth et al. 2021).

Some of the few studies investigating how preschool children experience harassment from peers have found that harassment is what children fear the most (Helgeland and Lund 2016) and that it provokes strong bodily pain, such as pain in the stomach and heart, and a feeling of intense sadness (Nergaard 2018). Being harassed in ECEC is associated with children missing their parents and experiencing that the institution is a boring place where the children talk in an unfriendly way and are not kind to each other, as well as the feeling that staff are too busy to have time for them (Sandseter and Seland 2018). Nergaard (2018) describes children's feelings of being excluded by peers as *social pain*, related to the unfulfilled need to belong. Children express a feeling of not being appreciated; they feel fragile and vulnerable, reflecting a feeling of unsafe belonging to the peer community. Research reveals that some of these children withdraw from social relations and hide their sadness and that they can be overlooked both by other children and the staff. Others become so frustrated and angry when being harassed that they behave negatively towards children who have rejected them (Helgeland and Lund 2016; Nergaard 2018). As such, children who are excluded from play could also experience negative sanctions from staff members.

Methods

The data reported in this study are collected through the Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor. This is an online, free of charge, electronic questionnaire with 50 questions, developed for ECEC institutions with the objective of obtaining knowledge about how 4- to 6-year-old children experience ECEC.

Questionnaire

The Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor facilitates a structured conversation between a child and an ECEC staff member about friendship and play, relationships with the staff, the physical environment, activities, possibilities for participation, and children's overall subjective well-being in ECEC. Questions around children's overall subjective well-being are quite general and explore if the children think their ECEC institution is a good place to be, how they mostly feel while being in ECEC and if they like spending time in ECEC. Questions exploring well-being in activities and relations are more specific and aim at more detailed information about how children experience activities such as play, meals, hikes, circle time, etc., or relational aspects on how they experience the staff (e.g. 'Do the staff listen to you when you speak your mind or suggest something?' or 'Do the staff do fun things together with the children?'), or the other children (e.g. 'Do you have some good friends in your ECEC?' or 'Do you think the children in your ECEC are kind to each other?').

To access the instrument, ECEC staff members have to register online, agree to the terms of use and provide basic information about their institution (i.e. size, ownership, organization and profile). To create a safe environment for administering the Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor, staff should be quite familiar with the child in question. A technique resembling the technique used in The Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (Harter and Pike 1984) is used. The children are asked the question (e.g. 'Do you think being in your ECEC institution is boring?') and answers 'yes' or 'no', and then the interviewer follows up to get a more nuanced answer. If the child say 'yes', the interviewer asks 'Do you mean "yes, often" or "yes, sometimes"?' This technique was tried out in a pilot study (described in Sandseter and Seland 2018), and amendments were made to the wording and number of questions before the actual data collection was conducted. The pilot study showed that the children were highly consistent in their responses (Cronbach's Alfa: 0.756) (ibid.).

Some of the questions in the Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor have three response alternatives, while most of them have two (*yes/no*) or four alternatives (e.g. *yes, often/yes, sometimes/no, almost never/no, never*). To increase statistical power, we pooled answers of *never* and *almost never* into one category of *never/almost never*. Although this resulted in a cruder measurement, we found it justifiable due to the similarities of the two response alternatives.

In this study, we focus on children who answered *Yes, often* to the question *Are you harassed in your ECEC to the point that you become unhappy?* By adding the words *to the point that you become unhappy*, we wanted the children to perceive the questions to be about serious matters. We also focus on whether these children respond differently to questions about overall subjective well-being, relations with staff, and relations with other children compared to children who do not report being harassed. We categorized all children who answered *Sometimes, Almost never* and *No, never* as the 'not-harassed group'. The reason for this is that children in this age group are in a period of life where they are learning social skills, language and self-regulation through continuous social interaction with peers. Solving conflicts in non-peaceful ways and protecting ongoing play and friendships by excluding or offending other children is not unusual and is part of children's social learning (Bistrong 2016; Corsaro 2003; Löfdahl 2010; Vlachou et al. 2011). Almost all children in a peer community will have experiences of sometimes being harassed in one way or another. We are interested in the ones experiencing this *often*, as this may indicate that these children are exposed to infringements beyond what a child may expect during daily life in an institution.

Sample

Between 1 January 2014 and 31 December 2019, 3768 children provided data using the Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor. Since the Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor is an open online tool that all Norwegian ECEC institutions can use, the participating institutions are part of this study by voluntarily registering and using the tool for conversations with children. When registering for the tool, the institutions automatically agree that the anonymized data from their conversations may be used for research purposes. As such, the recruitment of participating children is done by the institutions themselves, choosing to have conversations with all children or a selection of children in their institution. Even

though the sample cannot be claimed to be representative for all Norwegian children in ECEC, the data represent children from all counties and most municipalities in Norway, the distribution of public and private ECEC institutions is in accordance with the national distribution, as is the gender distribution of children.

In the present study, a total of 170 children were excluded: 33 had missing age information, 27 were 3 years old, 15 had missing gender information, and 95 had missing information about their harassment status. A total of 3598 children (1799 boys and 1894 girls) were eligible to be included in the study. Drop out analyses confirmed that the excluded children did not differ in relevant characteristics from the final sample. The children did not have to answer all the questions if they did not want to. Thus, the number of answers (N) varies somewhat in the presentation of the results.

Ethical considerations

In this study, it was the ECEC staff who conducted the conversations with the children, so there was no direct contact between children and researchers. The parents have, on behalf of the children, given their written consent. The study was also approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) under the condition that the data would not be analysed at institution level due to the increased risk of identifying children in small ECEC institutions.

There are always special ethical issues in research with young children (Grieg et al. 2007). One of these issues is the need to gain informed consent from the children. When an ECEC start to use the Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor, they must confirm that they will inform the children about the intention and content of the conversation, and carry out the interviews in a sensitive and respectful way. They must be especially aware when it comes to questions about friendship, harassment and other topics that may be experienced as sensitive for the individual child. If a child do not want to participate in – or complete an interview, the staff are instructed to not push the child. Children's participation in the Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor is voluntary.

Statistical analyses

We computed two-way contingency tables to evaluate associations between harassment and 1) overall subjective well-being, 2) relations with other children and 3) relations with staff. Because the assumption of minimum expected cell frequency was not violated, we used the *chi-squared test of independence* to assess potential differences between those being harassed and those not being harassed. We considered p -values <0.05 to be statistically significant. For the observed statistically significant differences, we calculated *Cramer's V* to assess the strength of the associations, whereas effect sizes were interpreted as either small ($d \leq 0.20$), medium ($d = 0.21-0.50$), or large ($d > 0.5$) (Cohen 1988). To increase statistical power in the main analyses, we did not stratify according to gender or age. All analyses were conducted using SPSS (IBM Corp. Released 2013. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 24.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.).

Table 1. Baseline characteristics of the study population.

	Not harassed, <i>N</i> (%)	Harassed, <i>N</i> (%)
Total	3361 (93.4%)	237 (6.6%)
Year of data collection		
2014	360 (93.3%)	26 (6.7%)
2015	259 (93.2%)	19 (6.8%)
2016	560 (94.8%)	31 (5.2%)
2017	356 (92.7%)	28 (7.3%)
2018	970 (93.1%)	72 (6.9%)
2019	856 (93.3%)	61 (6.7%)
Gender		
Male	1608 (92.5%)	130 (7.5%)
Female	1753 (94.2%)	107 (5.8%)
Age (year of participation – year of birth)		
4 years old	648 (91.9%)	57 (8.1%)
5 years old	1593 (93.6%)	109 (6.4%)
6 years old	1120 (94.0%)	71 (6.0%)

Results

The baseline characteristics of the study population according to whether they reported being harassed are presented in [Table 1](#). Among 3598 children, 237 (6.6%) reported that they were often harassed.

[Table 2](#) shows how the children responded to questions about their overall subjective well-being according to whether they reported being harassed or not. The results suggest a significantly lower degree of overall subjective well-being among the harassed children than among the children who were not harassed (questions 2–6; *p*-values <0.05), although the strengths of the associations were small (questions 2–6; *Cramer's V*-values <0.21).

Table 2. Overall subjective well-being among harassed children versus not harassed children.

	Not harassed <i>N</i> (%)	Harassed <i>N</i> (%)	χ^2	<i>p</i> -value	<i>Cramer's V</i>
1. Do you think being in your ECEC is fun?			0.412	0.814	
Never/almost never	135 (4.0%)	9 (3.8%)			
Sometimes	929 (27.7%)	70 (29.7%)			
Yes, often	2285 (68.2%)	157 (66.5%)			
2. Do you think your ECEC is boring?			8.780	0.012	0.050
Never/almost never	1960 (58.5%)	131 (56.0%)			
Sometimes	1203 (35.9%)	79 (33.8%)			
Yes, often	186 (5.6%)	24 (10.3%)			
3. How do you like being in your ECEC?			19.534	<0.001	0.074
Not so good	233 (7.1%)	33 (14.3%)			
Just OK	1223 (37.1%)	92 (40.0%)			
Very good	1837 (55.8%)	105 (45.7%)			
4. Do you think the ECEC is a nice place for children to be?			6.903	0.032	0.045
No, not so nice	31 (1.0%)	4 (1.8%)			
Just OK	674 (20.8%)	60 (27.1%)			
Yes, very nice	2543 (78.3%)	157 (71.0%)			
5. When you are in your ECEC, are you mostly:			58.237	<0.001	0.128
Sad and distressed	102 (3.1%)	28 (12.1%)			
In the middle	1077 (32.5%)	89 (38.5%)			
Happy and content	2134 (64.4%)	114 (49.4%)			
6. Do you miss mum and dad when you are in your ECEC?			46.481	<0.001	0.115
Never/almost never	1166 (35.4%)	59 (25.4%)			
Sometimes	1409 (42.7%)	77 (33.2%)			
Yes, often	721 (21.9%)	96 (41.4%)			

**Table 3.** Relations with other children among the harassed children versus the not harassed children.

	Not harassed N (%)	Harassed N (%)	χ^2	p-value	Cramer's V
1. Do you have some good friends in your ECEC?			17.676	<0.001	0.070
No, none	18 (0.5%)	6 (2.5%)			
Just a few/some	1149 (34.4%)	96 (40.5%)			
Yes, many	2171 (65.0%)	135 (57.0%)			
2. Do you like the other children in your ECEC institution?			17.238	<0.001	0.070
No, none	20 (0.6%)	7 (3.0%)			
Just a few/some	1060 (32.3%)	81 (34.6%)			
Yes, many	2203 (67.1%)	146 (62.4%)			
3. Do you sometimes have no one to play with in your ECEC?			49.433	<0.001	0.118
Never/almost never	1705 (51.6%)	84 (36.2%)			
Sometimes	1400 (42.4%)	109 (47.0%)			
Yes, often	197 (6.0%)	39 (16.8%)			
4. Do you like playing alone in your ECEC?			38.759	<0.001	0.105
Never/almost never	1712 (52.1%)	105 (44.9%)			
Sometimes	1226 (37.3%)	73 (31.2%)			
Yes, often	346 (10.5%)	56 (23.9%)			
5. Do you think the children in your ECEC are kind to each other?			45.746	<0.001	0.114
Never/almost never	130 (4.0%)	31 (13.3%)			
Sometimes	1215 (37.1%)	90 (38.6%)			
Yes, often	1927 (58.9%)	112 (48.1%)			
6. Do children in your ECEC talk badly/ unfriendly to each other?			168.929	<0.001	0.222
Never/almost never	1182 (36.8%)	47 (20.7%)			
Sometimes	1692 (52.6%)	89 (39.2%)			
Yes, often	342 (10.6%)	91 (40.1%)			
7. Are some children in your ECEC harassed to the point that they become unhappy?			292.042	<0.001	0.289
Never/almost never	1252 (38.4%)	38 (16.5%)			
Sometimes	1714 (52.6%)	87 (37.8%)			
Yes, often	291 (8.9%)	105 (45.7%)			

Table 4. Relations with the staff among harassed children versus not harassed children.

	Not harassed N (%)	Harassed N (%)	χ^2	p-value	Cramer's V	
1. Do the staff play with you when you are indoors? Never/almost never	1397 (41.8%)	102	31.638	<0.001	0.094 (43.6%)	
Sometimes	1546 (46.2%)	77				(32.9%)
Yes, often	400 (12.0%)	55				(23.5%)
2. Do the staff play with you when you are outdoors? Never/almost never	1299 (38.9%)	92	12.139	<0.002	0.058 (39.1%)	
Sometimes	1541 (46.1%)	89				(37.9%)
Yes, often	503 (15.0%)	54				(23.0%)
3. Do the staff do fun things together with the children? Never/almost never	396 (12.2%)	31	7.590	0.022	0.047 (13.5%)	
Sometimes	1352 (41.5%)	74				(32.3%)
Yes, often	1507 (46.3%)	124				(54.1%)
4. Do you want the staff to play with you more? No	1294 (38.8%)	61	19.669	<0.001	0.074 (26.0%)	
I don't know	338 (10.1%)	19 (8.1%)				
Yes	1707 (51.1%)	155				(66.0%)
5. Do the staff listen to you when you speak your mind or suggest something? Never/almost never	244 (7.5%)	24	9.498	0.023	0.052 (10.5%)	
Sometimes	1129 (34.8%)	94				(41.0%)
Yes, often	1868 (57.6%)	111				(48.5%)
6. Do you have a favourite staff member at your ECEC? No	578 (17.6%)	28	4.949	0.026	0.037 (11.9%)	
Yes	2709 (82.4%)	207 (88.1)				
7. Are children sometimes scolded by the staff? Never/almost never	1074 (33.0%)	45	97.352	<0.001	0.167 (19.4%)	
Sometimes	1791 (55.0%)	107				(46.1%)
Yes, often	389 (12.0%)	80				(34.5%)
8. Do you think that the staff are busy and have little time? Never/almost never	1389 (43.4%)	63	50.287	<0.001	0.121 (28.4%)	
Sometimes	1319 (41.2%)	86				(38.7%)
Yes, often	490 (15.3%)	73				(32.9%)

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

	Not harassed N (%)	Harassed N (%)	χ^2	p-value	Cramer's V
9. Are the staff nearby and able to help you when you play?			8.115	0.017	0.048
Never/almost never	344 (10.4%)	38			(16.3%)
Sometimes	1147 (34.5%)	73			(31.3%)
Yes, often	1829 (55.1%)	122			(52.4%)
10. Are the staff hard to reach when you need them?			50.057	<0.001	0.119
Never/almost never	1781 (54.2%)	73			(31.6%)
Sometimes	1033 (31.4%)	96			(41.6%)
Yes, often	471 (14.3%)	62			(26.8%)
11. Do you think the staff know when someone is being harassed?			7.050	0.029	0.045
No	578 (17.9%)	46			(19.7%)
Only if the children tell them	1194 (37.0%)	66			(28.3%)
Yes	1459 (45.2%)	121			(51.9%)

Table 3 shows how the children responded to questions about their relations with other children according to whether they reported being harassed or not. There were significant differences in how the harassed children answered all the questions compared to the not-harassed children (questions 1–7; p-values <0.05). The strengths of the associations were small for questions 1–5 (*Cramer's V* < 0.21) and moderate for questions 6 and 7 (*Cramer's Vs* of 0.222 and 0.289, respectively).

A higher percentage of the harassed children than the not-harassed children reported that they often have no one to play with (question 3: 16.8% versus 6.0%). However, a higher percentage of the harassed children than the not-harassed children also reported that they often like to play alone (question 4: 23.9% versus 10.5%). For question 6, *Do children in your ECEC talk badly/unfriendly/rudely to each other?* A higher percentage of the harassed children answered *Yes, often* than the not-harassed children (40.1% versus 10.6%). Furthermore, on question 7; *Are some children in your ECEC harassed to the point that they become unhappy?* A higher proportion of the harassed children answered *Yes, often* than the not-harassed children (45.7% versus 8.9%).

Table 4 shows how the children responded to questions about their relations with the staff according to whether they reported being harassed or not. There were significant differences in how the harassed children and the not-harassed children answered all the questions (questions 1–11; p-values <0.05), although the strength of the differences were small for all the questions (*Cramer's V* < 0.21).

Questions 1–3 show that a higher percentage of the harassed children than the not-harassed children reported that the staff often play and do fun things with them. Nevertheless, compared to the not-harassed children, a higher percentage of the harassed

children would have liked the staff to play with them more (question 4: 66.0% versus 51.1%). The harassed children answered *Yes, often* to a greater extent than the not-harassed children on question 7: *Are children sometimes scolded by the staff?* (34.5% versus 12.0%). For questions 8, 9 and 10, a higher proportion of the harassed children than the not-harassed children reported that staff members are busy and hard to reach. Compared with the not-harassed children, a higher percentage of the harassed children reported that they think staff members know when someone is being harassed in their ECEC institution (51.9% versus 45.2%).

In supplementary analyses, we investigated potential gender and age differences of being harassed. Although more girls than boys reported to be harassed (p -value = 0.037), the strengths of the differences were small (0.035). Analyses stratified by gender gave largely similar results as when data from boys and girls were collapsed (data not shown). Furthermore, there was no association between being harassed and age (p -value = 0.181), and stratified analyses according to age gave similar results as the main analyses.

Discussion

The majority of the children in the present study reported positive experiences with their life and social relations with other children and staff at their ECEC institution. Nevertheless, 6.6% of the children reported that they are frequently harassed.

Overall subjective well-being

The results concerning overall subjective well-being at ECEC institutions show that frequently harassed children had a significantly lower score on 5 out of 6 questions than the other children. They do not like to be at their ECEC institution as much as the other children, and they are more often sad and distressed, indicating a lower emotional state. Nergaard (2018) describes the heartbreak of being socially excluded, and a feeling of intense sadness. Our findings may reflect this. The fact that 41% of these children report missing their parents *often* strengthens this finding. Parents are children's primary care givers and their secure base (Bowlby 1988). When 4–6-year old children express that they miss their parents often, this may be an indicator of low well-being related to children's needs for emotional security and belonging (Fattore et al. 2017; Howes 2011). Sandseter and Seland (2018) found positive correlations between being harassed and viewing the ECEC institution as boring and missing mum and dad. Our findings support this.

If we use the definition of bullying from Lund et al. (2015), harassment and other forms of bullying are actions that *infringe the child's experience of belonging*. Fattore et al. (2017) describes how inclusion in the social community among peers is important for children's subjective well-being. They relate this to the dimension *positive sense of self*, where feeling a sense of belonging is interconnected with a feeling of being okay, because positive experiences of recognition from others are fundamental for a person's self-confidence and well-being.

Relations with other children

In 7 out of 8 questions regarding relations with peers, we find that children who are frequently harassed had significantly different answers from the rest of the children.

Friendship is important for children's social lives, learning and well-being (Corsaro 2003; Fattore et al. 2017; Kernan 2011), and the fact that some children do not have close relations with peers, or even like their peers, renders those children vulnerable with regard to harassment and inclusion in play. Friendship and inclusion in play is an expression of recognition and belonging to a peer community (Corsaro 2003; Nergaard 2018; Søndergaard and Hansen 2018). Inclusion in play promotes children's agency and participation in meaningful and appealing activities and is important for emotional and relational well-being (Fattore et al. 2017). The results of this study show that children who report often being harassed also more often experience having no one to play with than other children.

Similarly, the frequently harassed children reported, to a higher degree than the rest, that other children are not kind and talk unfriendly to each other. These findings indicate that harassment often takes the form of verbal infringements and, given that these children often have no one to play with, this unfriendly talk may be connected to rejection or exclusion from play. These experiences are painful and distressing and may lead to either apathy and withdrawal from social life or more externalized expressions such as anger and frustration (Nergaard 2018), which are examples of negative affect that may have negative effects on the level of children's subjective well-being (Ryan and Deci 2017). This may explain why compared to the not-harassed children, a significantly higher percentage of the frequently harassed children reported that they like to play alone (23.9% vs 10.5%), as playing alone will not expose them to infringements from peers.

Our understanding of harassment and other dimensions of bullying is based on a social theory where the fundamental human need to belong may lead to an existential anxiety for social exclusion (Søndergaard and Hansen 2018). This anxiety makes the individual act in a protective way when it comes to peers and friendship relations, and the consequence may be that he or she uses verbal and non-verbal harassment strategies to exclude other children from play. The exclusion, rejections and the 'unfriendly talk' are means to protect one selves, and not intentional aggressive behaviour against another child. According to Fattore et al. (2017), *agency* and a feeling of having control in everyday life is important for children's experience of well-being. Children who feel anxiety about being excluded may use exclusion of other children as a controlling strategy to secure their position within a peer group by keeping other children away. In this way, they exert agency and get to influence everyday occurrences. Nevertheless, when doing that they deprive other children from their feeling of control. Because of these social mechanisms, harassment and other forms of bullying can hit anyone for no special reason (Søndergaard and Hansen 2018). In this way, the harassed child is placed in a position with reduced agency and control, which is devastating for their subjective well-being. Pedagogical work with an aim to strengthen the peer community and friendship relations in the group will therefore have a preventive effect on these kinds of negative social behaviours (Aseth et al. 2021).

Relations with staff

In 11 out of 14 questions regarding relations with staff, the answers from children who are frequently harassed were significantly different from the answers provided by the rest of the children.

Our study indicates that Norwegian staff play more with children who report being frequently harassed than they do with the other children. This may indicate that staff members know that these children often have no one to play with. When staff play with children, they will normally try to include more children and thus help children to develop play competence and friendships (Howes 2011). The fact that staff members prioritize playing with children can contribute positively to the children's well-being because play is a fun and exciting activity in itself, and engagement in play may give children a feeling of positive recognition and belonging, which is essential for their well-being (Fattore et al. 2017). Playing with a staff member may also give children the opportunity to participate in and control the play content and narrative, which will contribute to feelings of agency and mastery. This may be one of the reasons that 66% of the children who are frequently harassed reported that they want the staff to play more with them. They are more dependent on the staff in regard to positive play experiences than the rest of the children. To play without staff can also be risky because harassment and bullying often takes place during play situations that are hidden from the staff (Helgeland and Lund 2016; Löfdahl 2010; Nergaard 2018).

There is, however, a potential risk for further 'stigmatization' of children who receive more time and attention from the staff than other children do. This may be difficult to avoid, because children in this age group are often aware of the power hierarchy and social positioning inside the peer group (Corsaro 2003; Löfdahl 2010). By working with pedagogical projects, play, social and emotional competence and friendship with an aim to strengthen the psychosocial environment for the whole group, the staff can reduce the focus on children involved in problematic social actions.

With regard to scolding, we find that the two groups of children had quite different experiences. While 34.5% of the harassed children reported that the staff often scold children, only 12% of the not-harassed children reported the same. As such, our study indicates that frequently harassed children are involved in situations where scolding occurs more often than other children. Children who often experience being harassed will observe staff members who negatively confront children performing harassment, and they will find themselves scolded if they react to harassment with anger, aggression and violence (Helgeland and Lund 2016). Being scolded is a severely emotionally negative situation, and children have described it as being *hit by words* (Sigsgaard 2005). Also, children do not have control over when and where harassment or scolding happens, which can make the social environment feel insecure. In this way, scolding in ECEC will contribute to negative affect and potentially lower well-being among children who experience it often.

The last significant finding is related to the questions about staff members being available to the children. We find that compared to other children, children who are frequently harassed have the experience of staff being busier and less available. This may lead to a feeling of insecurity because help is not always available when needed. Only half of the children answered yes when asked if they believe that the staff members know when someone is being harassed, which strengthens this interpretation of insecurity. A feeling of safety and security is dependent on ECEC staff (Howes 2011) and is a core

dimension of children's social and emotional well-being (Fattore et al. 2017). These findings may therefore explain the somewhat low overall subjective well-being observed among frequently harassed children.

The strengths of the present study include the assessment of harassment and well-being through structured conversations, and especially giving voice to such a large number of young children from a wide range of ECEC institutions in geographically varied locales. Because most of the research conducted on children's daily life in ECEC settings has applied qualitative methods to a rather limited number of children, this study aimed to use methods that allowed for the inclusion of a larger number of children and the use of quantitative data analysis. In an annual student survey on bullying in Norwegian schools, 5.8% of the children report that they experienced bullying, a number that has been stable over time (Wendelborg 2021). This is similar to our results, and therefore indicates that the Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor may be a reliable tool for measuring the level of children being bullied/harassed in ECEC.

A limitation of our study is the cross-sectional design. Without longitudinal data, it is not possible to establish whether our findings represent associations or true causes and effects. Another possible limitation is that the accuracy of children's answers may have been influenced by their relationship and level of trust with the ECEC staff member conducting the conversation. The momentary mood and feelings of the children and staff could have biased the results. Whether the children's answers represent stable beliefs or simply their feelings at the time of data collection therefore remains uncertain. However, in order to minimize such potential misclassification and to create a safe environment for the children, the ECEC institutions were instructed to use staff members that were familiar with the child in question. The Norwegian ECEC Well-being Monitor contains 50 questions, and both the children and staff member may have found it tedious, such that the answers given became less accurate over time. Lastly, we cannot rule out residual confounding due to unknown or unmeasured factors. Nevertheless, our study provides novel data within a field that is sparsely studied.

Conclusion

This study aimed to compare subjective well-being and social relations of children who are frequently harassed with those of children who are not. The main findings show that for a majority of indicators, children who are frequently harassed have significantly different experiences of overall subjective well-being and social relations with peers and staff, mostly more negative, than other children. Even though staff members seem to play more with these children, thus signalling that they know about their position outside the peer community, these children perceive the staff as busy and not available when the children need them. However, small effect sizes indicate that the magnitude of the observed differences are small.

This study suggests that the experience of being harassed may be intertwined with the complexity of social relations and emotions. ECEC staff working holistically with the psychosocial environment, friendship and play could therefore be essential to minimizing harassment and increasing children's well-being.

Being harassed and being excluded from the peer community make children vulnerable and in need of extended attention and care from staff to feel safe. Highly qualified ECEC staff

who involve themselves in children's play and who are warm, sensitive and available, are factors that may increase opportunities to prevent and hinder harassment at ECEC institutions.

Note

1. Our translation from Norwegian: *Mobbing av barn i barnehagen er handlinger fra voksne og/eller andre barn som krenker barnets opplevelse av å høre til og være en betydningsfull person for fellesskapet.*

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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