Families play a significant part in how children develop. Family relationships can shape their ability to cope at school with social and academic pressures, how children form relationships with peers and can influence their risk of being rejected and bullied.

What part do parents play
Parenting styles and behaviour - both good and bad - are a major factor in this. There is even evidence that a child’s vulnerability to bullying can begin in the womb, according to Dr Wolke. He and his colleagues have investigated the impact of stress during pregnancy and discovered this does increase the risk significantly. They based their findings on a study of nearly 9,000 children who were again from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children. They found that family adversity such as money worries, drug or alcohol use or crime while a woman is expecting a baby were a factor in that child becoming a bullying victim. The reason for this is that the anxiety a pregnant woman experiences is passed on to her unborn child. Dr Wolke said: “Our results suggest that maternal anxiety during pregnancy may affect the developing foetus and increase vulnerability to be victimised by peers at school. When we are exposed to stress, large quantities of special hormones (neurohormones) are released into the blood stream and in a pregnant woman this can change the developing foetus’ own stress response system.”

The way a child reacts initially to being picked on is a deciding factor in what the bullies do next. Dr Wolke found that bullies will repeatedly victimise those who cry or run away after the first attack. This is how bullies increase their dominance. Children whose mothers have suffered stress during pregnancy were more likely to react emotionally when bullies target them. How a parent brings up a child can also increase or decrease the chances of being bullied. To investigate this association between bullying and parenting, Dr Wolke and his team reviewed 70 studies which had looked at the experiences of 200,000 children in total. The conclusion from this review was that those with harsh, negative or neglectful parents were most likely to become prey to bullies. What also emerged though from the review was that overprotective parents also increased the chance of their children becoming victims too. This was also true for ‘bully-victims’ - children who bully others and have been bullied themselves.

“They often assume bullying is a problem for schools alone but it’s clear from this study that parents also have a very important role to play.
“We should therefore target intervention programmes not just in schools but also in families to encourage positive parenting practices such as warmth, affection, communication and support.”

Dr Wolke

Dr Wolke said: “Children who come from overprotective families with ‘helicopter’ parents tend to get victimised at school. Children definitely need support but they also need to learn how to solve conflict. If the mothers always handle the conflict within the child’s life, they will not be able to develop the skills to cope and may become an easy target for bullies.” The children least likely to be bullied had parents who showed them affection, communicated well with them and who set clear rules about behaviour.
Bullying by brothers and sisters

Rivalry between brothers and sisters is an inevitable part of family life. However, this can develop into bullying behaviour if left unchecked. In another study into bullying, Dr Wolke looked at whether being bullied by a sibling is associated with clinical depression, anxiety and self-harm in early adulthood. Researchers asked around 7,000 children aged 12 how often a sibling had hit and shoved them, lied to them or ignored them. Once they reached 18, they were asked about their mental health. The results showed that 786 children had been bullied several times a week by a sibling and they were twice as likely to self-harm or suffer from depression or anxiety as the other children. Girls were slightly more likely to be victims of sibling bullying than boys particularly in families where there were three or more children. Another factor which increased the risk of sibling bullying was having an older brother. Dr Wolke said sibling bullying also led to an increased risk of bullying at school. “This is down to ‘learned behaviour’- children who put up with bullying at home are likely to be targeted at school because they find it difficult to retaliate.”

In his opinion, Dr Wolke says parents must take sibling bullying seriously and a national campaign is needed to make them aware of the serious long-term consequences. The role of a parent includes teaching children to behave in a way which is socially acceptable. This should include telling a child it is time to stop if they are causing physical or emotional injury to their brother or sister. Dr Wolke said: “A lot of children ‘play fight’ with their parents and this is a good time for parents to set boundaries. They can teach their children what is and is not acceptable by saying ‘That’s enough!’

What needs to be done?

Schools are regarded as the place where bullying takes place. However, it really starts at home according to Dr Wolke. Anti-bullying programmes are needed to prevent victimisation of children.