

Working with
children

who are bullied



Supporting teachers, leadership teams and professionals in primary and junior secondary schools

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Children who are bullied

In Australia one in six children are bullied at school each week.¹ Bullying involves one or more individuals threatening or causing harm to another individual's psychological or physical health and safety. These threats or acts of harm are ongoing, either intermittently or frequently. Bullying usually involves an unfair balance of power with often, unpredictable attacks, which leave the bullied child feeling vulnerable and isolated. Despite increased action by schools to prevent bullying over the past decade, school based anti-bullying interventions have had limited success².

More than 90% of school children report witnessing others being bullying at school.³ Teachers rarely witness acts of bullying, and are often not informed of what has happened. High rates of bullying are likely to continue unless schools adopt a culture of no-tolerance for both bullying and bystander behaviour. It can be argued that this requires strong school leadership and a school community that demonstrates empathy, respect and tolerance for others. Unfortunately, aggression, intolerance, and harassment are seen as 'acceptable' behaviour in some families as a means to influence or isolate others and/or to resolve conflict. Bullying can include both direct and indirect behaviours.

Direct bullying behaviours

Direct bullying can include the following.

- Physical contact such as hitting, kicking, pushing or taking a child's property
- Verbal remarks such as teasing, name calling, insults
- 'Secret clubs' led by the bully who exerts power and influence over others in the 'club'. The leader may have previously bullied some group members. The bully leader usually does not abide by the rules other members are required to follow.

Indirect bullying behaviours

Boys are more likely to use direct forms of bullying, while girls will often engage in indirect bullying.

- Spreading rumours, mimicking, telling lies, encouraging others to exclude the child socially, or playing tricks to humiliate or harm the child's social reputation
- Cyber-bullying - where bullies use digital forms of communication such as SMS, email, chat rooms and social networking sites to repeatedly and intentionally humiliate and cause distress - can be particularly harmful. The 24/7 nature of web based communication tools and mobile phones may lead children to feel there is no place they can ever feel safe. See the Australian Government's cyber safety program, <http://www.cybersmart.gov.au/>

1 Rigby, K. (1997). What children tell us about bullying in schools. *Children Australia*, 22, p.28-34.

2 Rigby, K and Thomas, E.B (2002). How Australian schools are responding to the problem of peer victimisation in schools. Criminology Research Council grant; (10/00-01) <http://www.criminologyresearchcouncil.gov.au/reports/200001-10.html>

³ Rigby, K. & Johnson, B. (2006). Expressed readiness of Australian school children to act as bystanders in support of children who are being bullied. *Educational Psychology*, 26, p.425-440.



Who is more likely to be bullied?

Appearance and other attributes such as weight, race, and social economic status are not always predictive of being bullied. Other children, who don't fit the common stereotype of the weak, sensitive, or anxious child who tends to get bullied, can be at risk. Some children who display a talent, who are slightly 'different' or popular with others can also be targets of bullying. Anxious children are frequently less liked by peers, and can be rejected, bullied and teased.

Effects of bullying on children

Children who are bullied are often anxious, insecure and unhappy. They may also be:

- less likely to take risks
- lacking in self confidence
- lacking in age-appropriate social skills and may have few friends
- more likely to have parents whom others consider overprotective
- perceived as 'different' or physically weaker than their peers
- more likely to have special or additional education provision.

Bullied children are up to three times more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression than their peers.⁴ They also have higher rates of worry, self-harm and suicidal thoughts, poor physical health, impaired academic performance and greater school non-attendance. For some children, anxiety and depression will resolve itself when the bullying stops. For others, residual worry, anxiety or depression can persist. For these children, intervention by teachers and other professionals is needed to help reduce the harm and feelings of isolation, distress and anger that can result from being bullied.

In extreme cases, children who have been bullied may contemplate suicide or plan retaliation.

Children who are bullied typically do not feel supported or protected by the school and it is not uncommon for some families to have little faith in a school's actual or likely response to bullying. In some cases, fear of retaliation from the bully or the bully's family can mean that parents of a bullied child will go outside the school to seek counselling for their child, attempt to deal with the bully's parents themselves, shift schools, and/or don't report the bullying to the school.

What is bullying and what is not bullying

Single acts of hostility or aggression should not be defined as bullying, and neither should mutual conflict where there is no imbalance of power. The key component of bullying is psychological or physical threats or harm that occur repeatedly over time, creating an ongoing pattern of abuse. This difference needs to be clearly explained to the school community. However, all instances of hostility or aggression need to be followed up, ensuring that these unacceptable behaviours are not tolerated and/or do not escalate into bullying.

Caution

The school's intolerance of bullying should be communicated through policies and procedures matched with clear actions to minimise and stop bullying. Ineffectual school interventions and serious cases of bullying can lead to police involvement and legal action. Policies should strongly

⁴ Rigby, K. (1998). *The relationship between reported health and involvement in bully/victim problems among male and female secondary school students.* Journal of Health Psychology, 3(4), 465 - 476.



recommend that parents of a bullied child refrain from approaching the child who is believed to be the bully or their family.

Unfortunately, bullying has been prevalent in schools for many generations. It is important to recognise that some parents may have been bullied at school, or subjected to violence and could feel fragile about their experiences, leading to strong emotional reactions when told their child has been bullied.



Strategies to assist the child who is being bullied

Whole school strategies

- **Ensure your school firmly implements a no-tolerance bullying policy, which is matched with the processes used to deal with bullying.** It is important also to include a no-tolerance to witnessing bullying rule. That is, those who witness bullying but do not report it will receive a consequence. If you do not believe your school policy is effective, raise it with relevant senior staff privately or at a staff meeting. Ensure that no-tolerance bullying policies are clearly communicated to children, teachers, parents and other members of the school community through newsletters, websites, school assemblies, staff meetings, and in the classroom. The [National Safe Schools Framework](#) can help guide policy implementation or modification. The framework consists of nationally agreed principles and appropriate responses to bullying to create a safe and supportive school environment. Further tips on school policy can be found at <http://www.kenrigby.net/> and www.friendlyschoools.com.au
- **Promote values of tolerance and acceptance.** Classroom values such as a love of learning, along with respect, harmony, honesty and responsibility help instill in children a clear set of guiding principles. It can be helpful to explicitly incorporate classroom activities around these values to embed the meaning of these concepts. For Australian schools, values based curriculum ideas, lesson plans, and interactive web-based programs can be accessed at <http://www.curriculum.edu.au/values>
- **Implement pro-social strategies, from the school principal to beginning students** that promote positive social interactions, and foster responsibility and power sharing. For example:
 - **Be a positive role model to all children.** Ensure the school leadership and all teachers provide positive role models by using their power in a fair and balanced way during interactions with students, each other, parents and other school personnel. Work hard to foster an environment of shared respect— respect for the teacher and respect for the child.
 - **Use school-wide policies in child friendly language** such as 'It is not swell to yell' to promote a sense of calm and safety at school. It is important for all school staff to abide by these policies and for teachers to model and manage their own reactions.
- **Take all reports of bullying seriously.** Ensure all cases of bullying are brought to the attention of the school principal and other relevant staff members. Parents of both the bully and the bullied child should also be informed.
- **Ensure staff supervision in the playground and in known bullying areas is appropriate.** Survey students to identify key areas in the school where bullying may occur, or distribute a map of the school and have students colour in areas or 'hot spots' where they may feel unsafe or uncomfortable or where bullying may occur. Additional teacher supervision of hot spots and 'blind' spots behind buildings may help reduce the incidence of bullying. There are a number of bullying surveys available, see www.bullyingnoway.com.au
- **Use methods other than punishment.** In the majority of cases, punitive measures do not reduce bullying but, rather, lead the bully to use methods that are harder to detect and typically more harmful. Children who break school rules or hurt another child should be given appropriate consequences but other measures should also be put in place. Effective methods are discussed below.



- **Train specific staff to use effective methods to tackle bullying.** It is useful to have one trained teacher from each grade or department level as well as a school counsellor or psychologist trained to assist with the techniques outlined below. A number of staff should be trained, as these methods can be time-consuming and each requires specific training and expertise for the method to work effectively. Trained staff would then be one of the contact persons to deal with bullying at their grade or department level.
 - **Method of shared concern.** This involves several stages, during which no blame is assigned. Bullies and bystanders meet individually with the teacher and brainstorm ways they can help to improve the bullied child's situation, and commit to acting upon this improvement. At subsequent meetings, which may eventually include the child who was bullied, the bullies and bystanders are asked to check on progress and to discuss the impact of bullying.
 - **Restorative justice conferencing.** This seeks to repair the harm done to the bullied child and others, encourages acceptance of difference, and builds social responsibility. All people involved (bullies, bystanders, bullied child and parents, teachers, and bullies' parents) meet and discuss the impact of the bullying on each person present, the reasons for the bullying, and solutions to stop the bullying behaviour and to help restore the bullied child's wellbeing.
 - **Circle time or discussion groups.** This can be used with whole classes and groups across grade levels to build skills of listening, empathy, respect for others and acceptance of difference. General case studies of bullying, its effects, and possible solutions and consequences can be discussed as a whole class. At the secondary school level, teachers need to be well trained in assertive communication and techniques requiring difficult or unsympathetic students to 'sit out' of discussions for short periods to help build respect for the teacher's actions and empathy for a bullied child.

Caution: Before implementing techniques such as restorative justice conferencing, it is important to carefully plan, work with and evaluate to ensure that the bullied child and the bullied child's parents are not likely to be intimidated or threatened during any conference. Before a conference, ensure that the bully and the bully's parents understand the wrong that has been inflicted by the bully and that there is an appropriate level of remorse and empathy for the bullied child.

Involve all parents

Parents play an important role in identifying and reducing bullying at school. Often a parent may be the first to know about a bullying incident following a disclosure by the child who was bullied.

- **Ensure parents are informed of their role in terms of dealing with bullying at the school.** Inform parents that the school needs to know about bullying immediately. Explain that parents should not deal with the bullying themselves or approach the child who is bullying or the child's family without consultation with the school.
- **Recommend to parents that sharing regular mealtimes together as a family,** without electronic distractions, is a strategy to monitor whether bullying is occurring. During the meal, family members are encouraged to talk about their day. This is a strong protective strategy designed to assist children to raise any issues or concerns with their parents rather than dealing with them on their own.
- **Survey parents confidentially to promote an open dialogue.** Teachers can follow up with parents at parent-teacher interviews to identify any bullying issues and reassure families about the school's intolerance of bullying. Without communicating a 'no-tolerance' approach, it is likely problems will continue to stay hidden or develop into more difficult issues or situations over time.



- **Ask parents to write a note to the class or homeroom teacher** at the beginning of each term outlining any concerns they have in regards to their child at school. This can reveal significant information about the ‘smart bully’ whose behaviour may have been undetected for some time.
- **Inform parents about how to respond appropriately to cyber-bullying.** Children who experience cyber-bullying at home, often feel that their parents will remove their access to communication technology if they speak up about the bullying, and thus remain quiet. The website www.cybersmart.gov.au provides valuable tips for parents, such as keeping computers in visible places in the home, switching off laptop computers and mobile phones at night or removing them from bedrooms. The site encourages parents to use the Internet with their child so they are aware of potential issues and more likely to notice inappropriate activity. Parents of children aged 13 years and older can be encouraged to learn about social networking sites with their children so they are better equipped to monitor inappropriate behaviour or cyber-bullying.

Whole class strategies

- **Assist each child to speak up about bullying.** Some children who are bullied or witness bullying don’t believe teachers will be able to adequately protect them from the bully and hence are reluctant to speak up. Teachers can use a number of strategies to address this issue.
 - **Reassure the class that you and the school will not tolerate bullying** and that bullies and the children they bully will be followed up and monitored for a long period into the future. Ensure you follow through with this undertaking.
 - **Set up a message box in the classroom,** homeroom or other suitable location, where students can deposit short, written messages about things that worry them at school. Encourage students to use this system to report bullying if they do not feel comfortable directly approaching the teacher. Ensure a teacher reads and follows up any messages in the box each day.
 - **Hold a class meeting or short session after lunch each day where students can air concerns.** Remind students who do not want to speak publicly that they can use the message box, or they can speak to you privately near the staff room or in the office area at a designated time, or while you or other teachers are on yard duty.
 - **Teach the class about ‘protective’ behaviours,** that is, that there is nothing so bad that they can’t talk about it and that any ‘secret’ that makes them feel uncomfortable should be told to a trusted adult. Reassure students that any ‘bad’ secret or ‘bad’ feeling needs to be discussed or shared with a trusted adult.
 - **Ensure children understand that they have a right to feel safe and secure at school and home,** and that a good solution will eventuate when they turn to a trusted adult or teacher. Teach the class that if the first person they tell doesn’t act, to keep telling someone until something is done about the bullying.
- **Develop a class code of acceptable behaviour.** At the start of each year, create an acceptable behaviour policy for the class or homeroom. Focus on positive behaviours (for example ‘Listen when others are speaking’, ‘One person speaks at a time’ or ‘Treat one another kindly’). Also list behaviours that are unacceptable and appropriate consequences for these.

Display the class code and consequences of unacceptable behavior on a classroom wall in the form of a poster. Involve the students in making the poster. The level of involvement will depend on age and ability—younger children might decorate it, while older children may create it. Involving children gives ownership of the code and consequences. Revisit the code regularly throughout the year, discussing with students whether they are still upholding it. As a class discuss potential problems and brainstorm solutions.



- **Teach assertiveness skills to all children, including those who may witness bullying.** Children need to be explicitly taught assertive techniques to reduce bullying, and to stand up for others who are vulnerable. Provide scenarios where students can role-play how to respond appropriately to bullying, and how to respond as a witness to a bullying incident. For example, teach assertive statements and techniques such as:
 - ‘Stop! I don’t like it when you call me that name. Stop doing it!’
 - The five-finger strategy: 1. Say ‘Stop.’ 2. Walk away. 3. Say ‘No.’ 4. Loudly say ‘No!’ 5. Tell the teacher.
 - ‘What are you doing? No, you’re not (dispute their statement), you are trying to hurt me. I don’t like it. Please stop.’
 - ‘Stop it! You’re breaking a school rule. Leave Jack alone!’ (bystander statement).
- **Encourage bystanders to support the child who is bullied in appropriate and safe ways.** It may be unrealistic and potentially dangerous to encourage children, to intervene directly. It is important to emphasise safety and give children ideas about how to support the child who is being bullied without endangering themselves.

As a whole class discuss how children can support the child who is being bullied. It may be helpful to show age-appropriate clips of bullying from popular television shows such as ‘Worst Best Friends’, ‘Lockie Leonard’, ‘The Simpsons’, ‘Glee’, ‘Home and Away’ to help generate discussions. Ask the class to talk in groups then share ways they can support a child who is being bullied, and to role-play various situations.

Some ideas for supporting the child who is bullied without intervening:

- Walking away. Removing the bully’s audience.
- Several bystanders telling the bully that the child being bullied is their friend and that the bully should stop
- Telling the child who is being bullied that you don’t like what is happening and that you want to help
- Telling a teacher, coordinator or principal.

Some ideas for supporting the child who is being bullied by intervening: (Note: these must only be done if it is safe to do so).

- Tell the child who is bullying to stop it.
- Walk in and remove the child being bullied from the situation. Take them gently by the arm and tell them to come and play, or to walk away with you.

It is important to regularly revisit at least 2-3 times per year what works for your class in supporting children who are bullied. Questions to promote discussion may include, ‘What have you done or seen at school, on television or in the movies that worked well to support a child who was being bullied? What was the effect on the bully? What have you seen that didn’t work well? Why? What might be effectively tried in the future?’

- **Use cooperative learning in the classroom.** The regular use of cooperative learning will help reduce the social isolation of the child who is bullied. Be mindful when selecting groups and place a vulnerable child with sympathetic, caring peers.



Individual strategies

- **Take reports seriously and investigate.** If you do not have time, ask a colleague to assist. Gathering additional information can assist you to reassure the child that you and others are now aware of or have observed the bullying behaviour. Where possible, observe interactions or ask other children what they know about the situation. Reassure the bullied child that any negative repercussions or retaliation by the bully are a serious matter and will not be tolerated.
- **Avoid telling the child to act as if bullies do not exist or to just ignore them.** This includes not telling the child to go and play with someone else. Deal with the incident directly, do not minimise the bullying or give the bullied child any messages that they are to blame. It may however be appropriate to set them up to play with other supportive children the next day.
- **Ask the older child to keep a diary of bullying events.** While bullying should not be happening, if the child reports being bullied, have them keep a pictorial or written diary of events, dates and times, showing what happened, who was involved and names of those who observed the bullying. Ask them to keep copies of notes, emails or other electronic messages.
- **Provide safe zones.** Yard duty teachers can monitor students who are feeling unsafe in the yard by having clearly designated areas of refuge. Teachers can list students who present in refuge areas to monitor and review need for student support regularly. The welfare team can also regularly review support for students who are frequent presenters to the school nurse, library, sickbay, and other quiet areas or other designated senior staff member.
- **Assist the child to develop assertive thinking in response to bullying.** Teach children that strong thinking can help them to cope with unfair situations. Children can learn to change their thinking to reduce the impact on their emotions. For example, a child who tends to use catastrophic thinking, such as, 'Oh no. He called me a loser. Everyone's going to think I'm stupid and no one will ever play with me again' is likely to feel sad and lonely. A more accurate and beneficial way for the child to think is, 'So what? He calls everybody a loser' or 'I'm not a loser' or 'There are lots of good things about me.' Reframing the thoughts the child has about the situation will help the child to cope when called a hurtful or insulting name. Developing self-confidence and strength of the bullied child can help them to avoid reacting to teasing or rumours. Reactions or responses to bullying behavior often lead to an escalation of bullying incidents.
- **Talk with the child about preventive and resilient behaviours to help cope with bullying.** It may be beneficial to work with either another teacher or (if you feel comfortable with this) a supportive same-aged friendship group, to brainstorm with the bullied child behaviours or clusters of behaviours that might prompt bullies to view them as targets. For example, having body odour, reacting to name-calling by lashing out, crying, yelling or throwing things, being a complainer or trying to dominate games or discussions.
- **Talk with the bullied child about empowerment.** List one or two strategies they would like to build upon, such as:
 - practicing speaking assertively
 - building leadership skills
 - learning peer mediation and conflict resolution
 - playing in safe zones if feeling uncomfortable or unsafe
 - developing a broader network of supportive friends.

You or a designated teacher or other professional could be asked to follow up with group activities to promote these skills and behaviours.



- **Refer the child via their parents for counselling.** It might be necessary for some children to have individual counselling to debrief their experiences, reduce anxiety associated with bullying, develop social skills and learn how to choose and maintain supportive friends.

Inform the parent of the bully

Involve an experienced senior staff member such as the deputy or assistant principal, head of school, student welfare co-ordinator or psychologist in the meeting. In some cases, the bully and the bully's parent may lack remorse and empathy for the bullied child.

- **Be clear about the specifics of what occurred**, including times, dates and places. It can be useful to have eyewitness accounts on hand, or the child's diary of bullying events.
- **Pre-empt the reactions of the bully's parent prior to informing them of the bullying behaviour.** This can help you plan your responses accordingly. It is important to be aware that the parent of a child who is bullying may react in one of the following ways.
 - The parent is 'horrified' at the child's actions and supportive of the school's responses.
 - The parent may be disbelieving to some extent and at a loss as to what to do.
 - The parent may 'discount' or trivialise the bullying, saying they were bullied at school and 'got over it.'
 - The parent may want to blame the child who was the target of bullying.
 - The parent may smirk or laugh and think it's funny.

In the case of the first two scenarios, with clear information about what has occurred it is likely that a partnership can be readily formed to deal with the unacceptable behavior.

In the case of the last three scenarios, it is recommended that you involve a senior staff member such as a principal or a psychologist to talk with the bully's parents. In some families aggression may be viewed as 'acceptable' behaviour as a means to influence others or to resolve conflict. Point out to parents that bullying is unacceptable, can lead to behavior contracts or suspension or may be viewed as a crime requiring referral to the police.

- **Give the parents a copy of the school's bullying policy** or refer them to the school's website. Inform parents that the school takes the issue of bullying very seriously and has a 'no-tolerance' approach to such behavior. Thank parents who demonstrate empathy towards the bullied child, and highlight that the school will continue to monitor the situation and will discuss with them any further inappropriate bullying behaviour.
- **Indicate that there will be sanctions such as a warning, reflection sheet, detention or suspension for minor misdemeanours.**
- **Serious cases of bullying and crimes such as cyber or online bullying or the use of weapons** will be referred by the school leadership team to the principal who will take action in accordance with Federal and State laws, education department or governing authorities statewide procedures and the school's code of conduct.
- **For strategies to support the child who bullies** see the Psych4Schools ebooklet, '*Children who bully*' when it becomes available on this website.

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