

Working with families concerned with school-based bullying

Dr Jodie Lodge

Bullying and harassment are pervasive problems in schools and continue to be a matter of great concern among parents, teachers and others working with children and young people. The right to a safe and supportive learning environment clearly resonates with the wider community. The House of Representatives Standing Committee responded to the issue of bullying in Australian schools in a 1994 inquiry on violence in schools. More recently, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs developed the National Safe Schools Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003) to help schools and their communities address issues of bullying, harassment and violence, as well as child abuse and neglect.

This paper examines bullying and its impact on young people's health and wellbeing, and the significance of family relationships in dealing with bullying behaviour. Family relationships practitioners can play an important part in managing bullying concerns with affected families by offering a collaborative approach to the school-based bullying problem. Strategies discussed in this paper include providing helpful information, making referrals to appropriate resources, and guiding families through the process of working together with the school to address the concern.

School-based bullying

Findings from a large-scale Australian study of some 38,000 school-aged children have indicated that, on average, school bullying affects one in six young people (Rigby, 1997). School bullying is a distinct form of aggressive behaviour that typically involves a power imbalance and deliberate acts that cause physical, psychological and emotional harm. It can involve physically threatening behaviour such as punching; verbal and relational forms of aggression such as name-calling and social exclusion; and, more recently with the growth of technology, online social cruelty or electronic bullying.

Evidence of the negative consequences of bullying show that it can be a physically harmful, psychologically damaging and socially isolating experience. Longitudinal studies confirm school



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bullying as a significant causal factor in lowered health and wellbeing. Outcomes include physical and somatic symptoms, anxiety, social dysfunction and depression (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Olweus, 1994; Rigby, 1997). Peer victimisation has also been linked with poor outcomes, including school failure and the uptake of unhealthy and socially damaging behaviours such as alcohol and substance use (Coggan, Bennett, Hooper, & Dickinson, 2003; Kumpulainen, Rasanen, & Puura, 2001). Appearance-related teasing problems intended to humiliate or harass are especially common, and have been associated with decreased self-esteem in young Australian adolescents (Lodge & Feldman, 2007).

There are also serious long-term outcomes for those who bully others. Bullies are more likely to drop out of school early (Byrne, 1994) and tend to become aggressive adults who stand a much higher chance than average of obtaining multiple criminal convictions (Olweus, 1979). Longitudinal studies confirm that aggressive and dominating behaviours displayed at age 8 are a powerful predictor of criminality and violence at the age of 30 (Eron, Husemann, Dubow, Romanoff, & Yarmel, 1987).

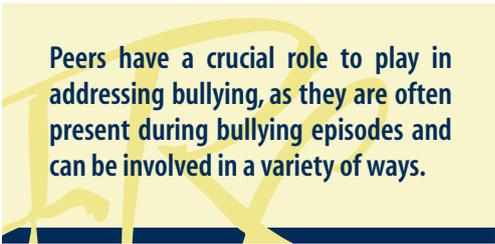
While bullying is prevalent in both primary and secondary schools, younger students tend to report bullying incidents more frequently (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Both boys and girls report being victims, especially when the bullying includes verbal insults and harassment (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2006), and there is some indication that the effect of bullying on mental health status is more enduring for girls (Bond et al., 2001). More often than not, boys tend to bully in direct and physical ways, while girls tend to bully in emotional or indirect ways (Olweus, 1993). However, new permutations of bullying that involve the use of information and communication technologies are tending to blur these gender lines, with both boys and girls being involved in cyber-bullying.

Cyber-bullying typically involves destructive text or images posted on the Internet via personal websites or web logs (blogs), email messages, discussion groups, message boards, online personal polling sites, chat services or instant messaging (IM), or on mobile phones using short message service (SMS) or multimedia messaging service (MMS). Research into this new permutation of bullying is still in its infancy; however, one survey of Australian teenagers aged 12–17 years indicated that one in five had received hateful messages via their mobile phone or through an Internet-based medium during the current school year (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007). Cyber-bullying is often very serious, and

young people who are victims can experience severe suffering that interferes with their social and emotional development.

Peer bystanders

Peers have a crucial role to play in addressing bullying, as they are often present during bullying episodes (Rigby & Johnson, 2004) and can be involved in a variety of ways. Peer bystanders can encourage and prolong the bullying by providing attention or actually joining in with the harassment. Passive observation by the majority can also inadvertently reinforce bullying and send a positive message to the bullies.



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Research suggests that peers who are bystanders to bullying can either be a part of the problem or part of the solution. For example, when bystanders do object, bullying has been found to stop in more than half of the episodes (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). However, while bystanders have the capacity to help create safe schools for themselves and other students, an Australian study revealed that few young people are willing to object (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005). Many of the young adolescents aged 10–13 years reported conflicting feelings, including feeling guilty, sad or angry, but also having a lack of knowledge about what to do. Clearly, further support from parents, teachers and others who work with children is needed, so that young people can learn when it is safe to intervene and how they can do so, including seeking help from adults.

The importance of family

Support received from within the family environment is a crucial factor in determining a young person's involvement in bully–victim situations. The dynamics of families and their ability to resolve conflicts through appropriate modelling are also of great importance (Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman, Gregory, & Stein, 2002). Two key aspects of family life that are particularly influential are parenting style¹ and family disharmony.

Children who bully are more likely to come from family environments where parenting is both authoritarian and inconsistent (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1994). For example, aggressive behaviour in a family, including the control of a child's behaviour through harsh physical punishment, can predispose a young person towards bullying in school (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Bowers, et al. 1994). For these young people, aggressive and dominating behaviours tend to also continue in later life and have been linked to domestic violence in Australia (National Crime Prevention, 1999; Rigby, Whish, & Black, 1994). In contrast, young people whose parents support their autonomy while providing clear boundaries as to what is acceptable behaviour are less likely to engage in bullying behaviour (Rican, Klicperova, & Koucka, 1993).

Anti-bullying strategies

The school can be an important context through which to engage and work with families. A comprehensive approach is desirable—one that seeks to promote responsive parenting and monitoring of children, change student behaviours and attitudes, and increase the willingness of teachers to intervene.

While many of the anti-bullying evaluation studies conducted around the world have yielded modest results to date (Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004), a meta-evaluation commissioned by the Australian Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department (Rigby, 2002) highlighted some of the common elements in successful interventions, of which three key findings are likely to inform good practice:

- Interventions were more successful when implemented in the early years of schooling.
- Regardless of the approach, intervention was better than no intervention (i.e., schools with no program reported greater increases in bullying than schools with programs).
- Level of school commitment and staff involvement influenced the success of interventions.

¹ Parenting styles reflect different naturally occurring patterns of parental values, practices, and behaviours (see Baumrind, 1991).

In general, anti-bullying programs emphasise either rules-and-sanctions approaches or problem-solving approaches. Restorative justice methods (Morrison, 2007),² the No-Blame Approach³ (Maines & Robinson, 1992), and the Method of Shared Concern⁴ (Pikas, 2002) are among the social problem-solving methods used to address bullying. These approaches aim to foster more socially responsible relationships and behaviours by encouraging those involved to take others'

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perspectives into account. Carefully structured opportunities are provided for individuals to understand the impact of their actions and to make amends. These approaches are thought to be more suitable for older children with a capacity for independent critical thinking and displays of emotional sensitivity (Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Van Oost, 2000).

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program⁵ (1991) is one of the best-known rules-and-sanctions interventions. It involves a multilevel, multi-component school-based program that attempts to restructure the existing school environment to reduce opportunities and rewards for bullying. Efforts are directed toward

improving peer relations and creating a safe environment. This is done through a coordinated system of supervision, staff training, parent meetings and individual-level interventions with children who bully and those who are targets of bullying. As with most whole-school approaches, implementation of the program requires significant and ongoing commitment from school staff.

Friendly Schools and Families (Cross & Erceg, 2002) is an Australian whole-school bullying intervention for primary schools, based on empirical research into bullying. Schools are encouraged to systematically implement and tailor strategies to reduce bullying. It incorporates both staff training and parent and community involvement. The intervention specifically engages families in the process. A parent booklet provides tips on how to help young people prevent or deal effectively with bullying. The focus is on improving parent–child communication, building social skills and strategies for managing bullying at school and in the family.

Practitioners may be able to assist schools in the development of policies and practices to address bullying. Members of the school community often seriously underestimate the prevalence of bullying and the harm that it causes (Olweus, 1994). Raising awareness through violence prevention strategies is therefore crucial, and will provide compelling reasons for initiating interventions to prevent bullying.

Restoring and promoting wellbeing

Building social skills is a key area of primary prevention for bullying in school. A full repertoire of social skills provides young people with the ability to make social choices that will strengthen their interpersonal relationships and facilitate success in school. Practitioners can help young people acquire good interpersonal skills, especially in making friends and acting assertively when necessary.

Effective social skills programs comprise two essential elements: a teaching process and a set of steps that facilitates the learning of new behaviour. If the young person is timid and lacks friends, arranging for him/her to participate in positive social groups can be very helpful and may develop his/her confidence and self-esteem. Self-esteem is influenced by social interaction and the individual's experiences with the environment (Fox, 1992). Research suggests that high self-esteem can serve as a protective factor against peer victimisation, even if young people display behavioural vulnerabilities (Egan & Perry, 1998).

For young people experiencing school bullying, research suggests that the ability to deal successfully with a difficult problem or situation is also important for maintaining self-esteem (Lodge & Feldman, 2007). Therefore, directly teaching coping skills may offer a further avenue of support. In particular, teaching young people to reduce their use of avoidant strategies—such as

2 Family and community group conferencing is showing promise in expanding restorative practice beyond schools to include families and communities in addressing bullying (see www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/03/26093704/1).

3 www.happychild.org.uk/acc/tpr/mem/0103nobl.htm

4 www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/concern.html

5 www.clemson.edu/olweus

worrying, accepting undeserved blame and keeping the problem inside—may be important in helping young people cope more effectively with school and life problems (Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002).

Families can also help in maintaining a child's self-esteem and self-confidence. For example, involving parents as significant participants in developing and selecting appropriate social skill interventions for young people will allow them to reinforce the skills taught and to further promote the use of these at home and at school.

Building positive relationships in families

Encouraging responsive and responsible, authoritative parenting will reduce the risk that young people are involved in school bullying problems and increase their capacity for handling problems that do arise (Rican et al., 1993; Rigby, 1993). Specifically, assisting parents in the development of parenting skills that support constructive relationships with their children can be beneficial in ensuring attachment security and healthy development. Securely attached children experience their parents as being available and responsive to their needs. This security fosters adaptive exploration and buffers children from stress (Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2001).

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Interactions with siblings are also important, as these interactions can influence adolescents' relationship styles and whether they engage in delinquent behaviours (Slomkowski, Rende, Conger, Simons, & Conger, 2001). Patterson (1986) suggested that when siblings fight, parents can inadvertently support bullying by not intervening. Instead, signalling the inappropriateness of children's behaviour and modelling ways to effectively resolve conflicts, are ways in which parents can assist. Increasing parental supervision and the use of effective, non-violent consequences (appropriate for the child's age and stage of development) are also helpful methods of parenting.

Developing good relationships with their children also allows parents to find ways of exploring what their children are experiencing. If a young person is involved in bullying, whether as a victim, a bully or a bystander, they will need the confidence and understanding of a parent. The parent-child relationship is associated with the development of social skills such as conflict resolution (Engels et al., 2001).

Families that are open and accepting and build on a young person's strengths can make a positive difference. Young people tend to model the social skills of parents with whom they have a positive relationship (Zahn-Waxler & Smith, 1992).

Preparing families to share the problem and to work collaboratively with the school to solve it is an important first step for practitioners. Active listening will help to foster a trusting relationship and help the family to feel accepted and understood. It can contribute to establishing a helping relationship and is a useful way to gain information and understand what the family and young person are experiencing.

Parents can also be encouraged to use active listening skills as a way to support young people and parents to talk or continue talking. Conversations will validate whether there is a bullying problem that needs to be addressed, and will help identify options and determine an appropriate course of action. While young people are often reluctant to talk about bullying, taking an interest in the young person's school and friends is one way of facilitating the conversation.

Interactive questions useful for starting conversations with young people include:

- What is lunchtime like at your school?
- Who do you sit with, what do you do, and what do you talk about?
- Have you ever seen kids at your school call others names?
- Do they ever bully by hitting or pushing?
- What usually happens? What do other kids do?
- Let's talk about what you do when this happens.

- Do you ever feel lonely at school or left out of activities? Let's talk about what happens and what you feel.
- Do kids ever call you mean names or tease you? Talk more about how you feel. Take your time.
- Have kids ever bullied you by hitting or pushing you, or other things like that?
- Let's talk about what you do when this happens.
- Now that we're talking about bullying, what can I do to help?

Constant questioning, however, can be stressful. For young people who perceive that they should be able to handle the issue on their own, persistent questioning could make them even less willing to talk. Some young people may find it easier to talk to someone they trust but who isn't closely related to them. Identifying a caring adult who is interested and willing to help could be worthwhile.

In terms of cyber-bullying, concern has arisen over ways to prevent and address bullying in online environments. In turn, it is acknowledged that adults have an important part to play in supervising the activities of young people when using these technologies. In monitoring the use of technologies, Lodge (2007) suggested that parents can be encouraged to:

- keep home computers in easily viewable places, such as a family room or kitchen;
- talk regularly with their child about online activities they are involved in;
- talk specifically about cyber-bullying and encourage young people to tell if he or she is a victim;
- outline expectations for responsible online behaviour and the consequences for inappropriate behaviour; and
- help young people develop skills that would enable them to identify the need to leave online situations.

Conclusion

School bullying is a destructive form of peer aggression. Young people, their families and other members of the school community can all be encouraged to contribute positively to the safety and wellbeing of themselves and others. Practitioners can help parents who are concerned

Encouraging parents to be sensitive to what their children are experiencing and helping them to find ways to develop good relationships and open communication, can greatly assist in recognising and addressing problems of bullying behaviour as soon as they arise.

about bullying in schools by working with families and by providing information. Importantly, they can assist in encouraging responsive parenting and helping parents to build positive relationships with their children. Help can be directed at improving the young person's self-esteem, confidence and interpersonal skills, and addressing methods of parenting that are linked with bullying and victimisation. Encouraging parents to be sensitive to what their children are experiencing and helping them to find ways to develop good relationships and open communication, can greatly assist in recognising and addressing problems of bullying behaviour as soon as they arise.

Useful resources

NetAlert: Protecting Australian families online
www.netalert.gov.au/advice.html

A Commonwealth Government initiative, NetAlert provides practical advice for families on Internet safety, parental control and filters.

Friendly Schools & Families Program
www.friendlyschools.com.au

This program comprises whole-school (including family) learning and teaching strategies, resources and case studies from Australian schools. It is designed to maximise family involvement, and is underpinned by research conducted in Australian schools.

Kids Help Line

www.kidshelp.com.au

Kids Help Line is a free 24-hour telephone and online counselling service for young people aged between 5 and 25 years. The service provides information on local support services and also assists young people to develop options, identify and understand the consequences of a particular course of action, and facilitate more productive relationships with family and friends.

National Safe Schools Framework: Resource Pack. Student Learning and Support Services, Taskforce of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. (2003). Canberra: Author.

The resource pack is designed to help schools implement the National Safe Schools Framework, conduct the safe schools audit, and build a coherent planning, implementation and monitoring process.

Cybersmart Kids Online

www.cybersmartkids.com.au

Cybersmart Kids Online is a community awareness project developed by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), with the objective of providing parents and children with information and tools to help them to have a rewarding, productive and safe experience of the internet.

Bullying No Way

www.bullyingnoway.com.au

This website provides nationwide resources on approaches to minimising bullying, harassment and violence in schools.

Mindmatters

<http://cms.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters>

A resource and professional development program to support Australian secondary schools in promoting and protecting the social and emotional wellbeing of members of school communities.

Bullying Among Young Children: A Guide for Parents and A Guide for Teachers and Carers

www.crimeprevention.gov.au/agd/www/ncphome.nsf/Page/Bullying_Among_Young_Children

These guides provide useful advice to parents, teachers and other carers on recognising changes in moods and behaviours that are associated with bullying. They also provide strategies to help children who bully and those who are bullied.

Mobile Phones: Child Safety Checklist

www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD/pc=PC_100694

This checklist offers independent advice and practical tips on what to look for and what to ask mobile providers about, including:

- malicious calls and bullying;
- phone costs and charges;
- pre-paid and fixed-term contracts;
- Internet access;
- premium rate and chat services; and
- unsuitable content.

Children and Bullying: How Parents and Educators Can Reduce Bullying at School. Rigby, K. (2007). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

This book offers a collaborative approach to the school-based bullying problem. Practical resource links for parents and professional educators are also detailed.

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