

KEY INFORMATION FROM THE LITERATURE ABOUT BULLYING

Section 1 – A brief background

Bullying is widely regarded as a particularly destructive form of aggression with harmful physical, social and emotional outcomes for all involved (bullies, victims and bystanders). The research of the last 25 years confirms its widespread nature where it is particularly likely in groups from which the potential victim cannot escape, e.g. schools.

While bullying at school has long been recognised as existing in Australian literature, the empirical study of the problem really did not begin until 1989 – 90. We now hold clear evidence of the nature, extent and effects of bullying in Australian schools. The bulk of it is from studies conducted by Rigby and Slee.

The issue of conflict in schools was recognised with the publication of *Sticks and Stones* by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Violence in Schools (1994). This influential report focused mainly on aggression and violence but also paid attention to the more specific problem of bullying. The inquiry concluded that while violence was not a major problem in Australian schools, bullying was. A recommendation of the inquiry was for the development of intervention programmes to reduce school bullying.

Section 2 – What is bullying?

There is no standard or universally accepted definition. However, some progress has been made toward a consensus regarding what elements should be included in an acceptable definition. Bullying is now regarded as a distinct form of aggressive behaviour, and not as aggressive behaviour in general (National Crime Prevention, 2002). The most frequently cited definition of bullying is the “repeated oppression, psychological or physical of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons” (Rigby, 1996). Three critical points are important in this definition:

- *Power.* Children who bully acquire their power through various means: physical size and strength; status within a peer group; and recruitment within the peer group so as to exclude others.
- *Frequency.* Bullying is not a random act; it is characterised by its repetitive nature. Because it is repetitive, the children who are bullied not only have to survive the humiliation of the attack itself but live in constant fear of its re-occurrence.
- *Intent to harm.* While not always fully conscious to the child who bullies, causing physical, psychological and emotional harm is a deliberate act (Morrison, forthcoming).

What is conceived as constituting bullying behaviour has expanded over the past few years. It had been conceived narrowly as involving physically threatening behaviour only. It is now generally seen as including verbal forms of aggression, as in the case of ridicule and name calling. More recently, it has become customary among researchers and educators to include indirect or ‘relational aggression’ as aspects of bullying behaviour – for example, deliberate exclusion or the spreading of destructive rumours.

Section 3 – What leads to bullying?

Morrison (forthcoming) argues that the family, peers, the school and our broader social institutions play a developmental role.

3.1 The family

In general, the relationship patterns that children first learn at home are the ones they bring to the school environment. The importance of family variables in predicting bullying has emerged from a number of studies. Morrison (forthcoming) suggests that two features of family life are particularly influential in the social development of bullying behaviour: parenting style and family disharmony.

Parenting style:

Parenting style has been differentiated in terms of whether it is authoritarian or authoritative. An authoritarian parenting style is characterised by harshness and punitiveness. The behaviour of children in this family environment is controlled through the assertion of power and domination. Parents who bully their children produce children who bully others. In contrast, an authoritative parenting style is characterised by support for the autonomy of the child while providing clear boundaries as to what is acceptable behaviour. Children who perceive their parents to adopt this style are less likely to engage in bullying behaviour (Rican et al., 1993).

Parent-child relationship:

The parent-child relationship has also been shown to be important. Children with positive relationships with their parents are less likely to participate in bullying (Rican et al., 1983; Rigby, 1993). In other words, children who are insecurely attached to their parents are more likely to bully their peers.

Family disharmony:

Along consistent lines, it has also been shown that children who perceive their families to be less cohesive and less caring for each other, are also more likely to participate in school bullying (Bowers, Smith & Binney, 1992, 1994; Berdondini & Smith, 1996).

Morrison (forthcoming) concludes that generally speaking, the family life of children who bully others can be characterised by neglect, dominance, hostility, and harsh punishment (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1993, 1994). This family dynamic can be overt or insidious. The children of these families model the conflict resolution style to which they have been exposed. Children who observe their parents behaving aggressively begin to behave aggressively, as they come to believe that aggression is the norm, in the home and outside (Ahmed, et al., 2001).

Children's interaction with their siblings is also a factor (Patterson, 1986). Aggression between siblings has been found to be the most common form of family violence (Struas et al. 1981). By not intervening when siblings fight, parents can inadvertently support bullying. Children cannot proceed to productive levels of resolution unless parents signal the inappropriateness of their behaviour and ensure they have effective role models in resolving conflict (Morrison, forthcoming).

Child maltreatment:

Research published in January 2003 by the Australian Institute of Criminology also demonstrates a direct path from *child maltreatment* to juvenile offending (Stewart, Dennison & Waterson, 2002). A major study focussing on 41,700 children born in Queensland in 1983 found that by the time they were 17, 10% of these children had been the subject of a child protection matter with the Department of Families – 25%

of the male children and 11% of the female children who had been maltreated subsequently offended, with 5% having appeared in court for a proven offence. The study found that physical abuse and neglect are significant predictive factors for youth offending, but sexual and emotional abuse are not. 23% of children who were victims of physical abuse subsequently offended, compared with 15% of maltreated children who were not physically abused. Maltreated Indigenous children were four times more likely to offend than non Indigenous children.

Domestic violence and aggression in later life:

Rigby, Whish and Black (1994) present evidence that children from homes in which interpersonal conflict is common are more likely to be bullies at school, and that children who are inclined to bully others at school continue to be highly interpersonally aggressive in later life (1994: 8). In their study, conducted with secondary school students, they examined both the common features of bullying in schools and abuse in the home, and also causal links.

One of the study's findings was that:

boys especially who are bullied at school are more pre-disposed than others to feel that wife abuse is legitimate. Hence it is not simply being a bully at school that constitutes a threat to society at a later stage in the child's development ... being a victim appears to have implications for approval of violence against weaker people, which suggests that wife-abusers are not uncommonly men who, as children, were continually abused by their peers at school.

The study also showed that support among school children for the use of physical abuse by husbands is disturbingly high. "Two boys out of five indicated that hitting a wife to resolve a disagreement was acceptable even in some relatively non-serious matters" (1994:11). This research supports the focus on prevention of violence in schools as a direct means towards prevention of and early intervention in domestic violence (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003).

For perpetrators of violence in schools, longitudinal studies have shown that there is often a continuity of aggressive and dominating behaviours over time (Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz & Walder, 1984; McCord, 1991; Moffitt, 1993; Pepler & Rubin, 1991; Tremblay, McCord & Boileau, 1992).

Pepler and Craig's (1997) work reveals that the form that bullying takes changes with life stage: from playgroup bullying and gang violence, to sexual and workplace harassment, to child abuse and domestic violence, as well as abuse of our elders and disabled.

3.2 Peers

Peers play an important role in understanding bullying and victimisation. An interesting finding shows that 85% of bullying episodes occur in the context of a peer group (Atlas & Pepler, 1997; Craig & Pepler, 1997). While most (83%) students report feeling uncomfortable when confronted with an incident of bullying, peers have been observed to adopt many roles; joining in, cheering, passively watching and, on occasion, intervening. This observational research has spotted the following pattern of interaction between peers. More often than not, positive attention is given to the bully over the victim. This reinforces the bully's dominance over the victim and their position within the peer group. Peers attracted to aggression become excited and join in, more often in the case of boys than girls (Salminvalli et al., 1996).

3.3 The school

School culture also contributes significantly to the reduction of bullying. Schools differ significantly in the amounts of reported bullying, even when socio-economic and other variables are controlled (Rigby, 1996).

Morrison (forthcoming) argues that without the support of those in power in the school, addressing bullying in a systematic way can be an uphill battle. It is important for everyone in the school to be committed to reducing bullying in the school. In particular, teachers need the support of the principal if school bullying is going to be reduced (Charach et al., 1995). Positive and supportive school relationships between all members of the school community (principals, teachers, students and parents) can have a positive impact on reducing school bullying. Having all members of the school community share in the decision-making that affects their lives has also been found to be particularly effective (Olweus, 1987). This process has been applied to the development of the school bullying policies, as it aids in making the message clear that bullying behaviour is not condoned and that follow-through is consistently applied (Olweus, 1991). It is also incorporated in the *National Safe School Framework's* guiding principles.

It is also important that schools and their classrooms are well structured physically and well integrated culturally. More behaviour problems occur in classrooms where this is absent (Doyle, 1986). Teachers' organisational skills are essential to the goal of maintaining order. Effective teachers have a very clear communication style; monitor and respond to student behaviour; and endorse student responsibility and accountability for their work (Evertson & Emmer, 1982; Duke, 1989). In contrast, disorderly schools are characterised by teachers with punitive attitudes; rules that are loosely enforced and perceived to be unfair or unclear; ambiguous responses to student misbehaviour; a non-consensual attitude between school staff about appropriate responses to misconduct; and general staff disagreement. Lack of appropriate resources within schools is also associated with higher levels of school bullying (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1995). The parallels with the risk factors associated with family life are clearly evident. Schools need to be consistently authoritative rather than authoritarian (Morrison, forthcoming).

Schools also play a role through recognising where bullying occurs. Generally, students are much more aware of bullying than teachers (Section 4 refers). When there are consequences for bullying at school, children who bully are careful about where and how they exert their dominance. One UK study showed that teachers only intervene in one in 25 bullying episodes (Craig & Pepler, 1997). There are times and places at school where bullying is most likely to occur. Bullying often occurs when there is little or no supervision, such as on the school playground (Olweus, 1991; Pepler et al., 1997). Bullying is also more likely to occur during more competitive or aggressive activities (Murphy et al., 1983). Morrison (forthcoming) concludes that this highlights the importance of supervision of students during non-classroom time and the maintenance of behaviour codes during all school activities.

3.4 Social institutions

Morrison (forthcoming) argues that the assertion of power, across many contexts, is rewarded in many ways. Violence, and other forms of bullying, are legitimated by corporate bodies, sporting institutions and the family. The consistent message in the media, be it the evening news, the latest block buster production or morning cartoons, is that bullying works – i.e. that domination of others is an effective means to an end. Aggressive children are more likely to be drawn to and imitate media violence (Huesmann et al., 1984). Those developmentally predisposed to bullying

and other forms of school violence are also predisposed to seek out aggressive acts in the media and others who perpetrate it (i.e. through the internet, television and street gangs).

Section 4 – How pervasive is school bullying?

The full extent of bullying is very hard to detect. It usually happens out of sight, away from teachers or other adults. The people most likely to know what is going on are other children. Children who are being bullied often do not tell anyone because they feel weak or ashamed, or are frightened that it will only make things worse.

If they do tell, it is most likely they will tell their parents – usually their mother or their friends – before they will tell a teacher (DEST, 2000). In fact, it has been suggested that only a very small percentage of children ever tell anyone they are being bullied.

Bullying in schools is a world-wide phenomenon. The data in Australia mirrors that of other countries, such as Canada, Scandinavia, Ireland and England (Morrison, 2001). The first systematic empirical study of bullying in schools in Australia, drawing upon reports from children in South Australia, was published in the early 1990s (Rigby & Slee, 1991). From this it was clear that bullying was prevalent in Australian primary and secondary schools.

Six years later, results from a large scale national survey of more than 38,000 schoolchildren between 7 and 17 years established that approximately one child in six was bullied by peers each week in Australian schools (Rigby, 1997). To date, no comparable study has been published in relation to Australian children under 7 years old in schools or preschools (National Crime Prevention, 2002). However, it has been reported that bullying is prevalent in Australian kindergartens. Following an observational study conducted at four early childhood centres in Canberra in 1994, graphic evidence was presented of both physical and verbal bullying, perpetrated mainly by boys and frequently ignored by kindergarten staff (Main, 1999).

Victimisation is more frequently reported by younger students and girls generally report less victimisation than boys. In secondary school the amount of bullying is highest in Years 8 and 9.

Research involving approximately 5,884 primary and secondary students from Catholic, Independent and government schools around Australia (Slee, forthcoming) found that boys report that they could 'join in' bullying another child more than girls (9% compared to 4%) and secondary students are more likely to report that they could bully another child than primary school students (11% compared to 5%). Approximately 5% of students reported that they have 'often' bullied another child either in a group or by themselves.

In 2002, Kids Help Line received almost 6,000 calls about bullying from young people in Australia. Overall, it is the fourth most common reason young people seek help from the service. Among those under 15, it is the third most common reason. The reasons young callers to Kids Help Line give for victimisation include: ethnicity (the rate of bullying calls from Indigenous and non-English speaking callers is higher than for other callers); resistance to pressure to behave in a certain way; physical differences; high achievement; being new; sexual orientation; and socio-economic background.

There is no evidence to suggest that the size of the school, or whether the school is single-sex or co-educational, or government or non-government, makes any significant difference to the amount of bullying that goes on.

Bullying may be physical, psychological or verbal. While boys bully in overt physical ways, girls are more insidious (Craig and Pepler, 1997). The Australian research of Owens, Slee and Shute (2002) has provided new insight into the nature of girls' aggression and to the damaging effects of indirect or relational aggression in peer relationships.

The research has shown that while most bullying lasts for a day or two, for a disturbingly high percentage of students it lasts weeks or more. Research now leaves little doubt regarding the cumulative negative effects of being subject to repetitive acts of bullying or violence (Slee, 2001).

Section 5 – The effects of bullying

The harmful effects of school bullying are now well documented. Generally, the findings confirm that bullying is a physically harmful, psychologically damaging and socially isolating aspect of an unnecessarily large number of Australian children's school experience (Slee, 2001). Bullying, harassment, violence and discrimination are harmful to both victims and perpetrators.

5.1 Students who are bullied

The damaging physical effects have been highlighted in Australian studies. Children who are bullied have higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression and illness, and an increased tendency to suicide (Cox, 1995; Rigby, 1998; Rigby, 1999). The victims of bullying are two to three times more likely to contemplate suicide than their peers (Rigby, 1998). Psychological well-being (e.g., self esteem and happiness) has been shown to suffer with bullying, while loneliness and alienation from peers is also linked with victimisation. Research has clearly linked victimisation with poor school adjustment (Slee, 2001).

Victims are typically withdrawn and anxious, characterised by tenseness, fears and worries (Neary & Joseph, 1994; Slee, 1995). This is particularly evident in younger years. Try as they may, they find it difficult to fit in with others. As a result, victims report lower self-esteem (Besag, 1989; Egan & Perry, 1998) and depression, characterised by sadness and loss of interest (Slee, 1995; Craig, 1998). The anxiety and depression associated with victims has also been linked to lower immunity to illness (Cox, 1995). A study reported in the British Medical Journal showed that children who were bullied suffered health problems such as eating and sleep disorders, headaches and stomach aches (Williams, 1996 and Williams et al., 1996). An Australian study has shown that victims have higher levels of anxiety, social dysfunction, depression and other somatic symptoms (Rigby, 1998). They report more headaches, sore throats and mouth sores. Victimisation has also been associated with suicidal ideation (Rigby, 1998). Furthermore, the effects are long term (Rigby, 1999).

Just as bullying eases the way for children who are drawn to a path of delinquency and criminality (Farrington, 1993; Junger, 1990), a number of general points can be made about the path of children who are victimised. Over time, they are less inclined to relate positively to the school environment and may exclude themselves. Rigby (1998) found that 9% of girls and 6% of boys reported staying away from school at least once because of school bullying. The high anxiety levels that these children

report interferes with their ability to concentrate and their capacity to learn. Finally, their health, mentally and physically, is affected, both short and long term.

In extreme cases, victims of bullying may resort to violent retaliation. While experts say that suffering bullying at school would rarely lead to murder, they do agree that bullying is a common theme emerging in school shootings. A study by the U.S. Secret Service found that most perpetrators of school shootings were the victims of bullying (Boston.com news, 25/09/03). A study of 37 school shootings from 1974 to 2000 by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education found that more than half the time, revenge was cited as a motive (Marcotty, Star Tribune, 26/09/03).

5.2 Students who bully others

Victims of bullying are not the only ones who are adversely affected. Those who bully are more likely to drop out of school, use drugs and alcohol, as well as engage in subsequent delinquent and criminal behaviour (Gottfredson, Gottfredson & Hybl, 1993). Young bullies carry a one in four chance of having a criminal record by the age of 30 (Huesmann et al., 1984).

A more recent, large-scale study in Sweden found that 60% of the boys labelled as bullies in Years 6 – 9 (ages 13 to 16) had at least one criminal conviction by the age of 24. Further, 35 – 40% of the young bullies had been convicted of at least three officially registered crimes by the age of 24. In contrast, this was true of only 10% of boys who were not classified as bullies. In other words, former school bullies were four times more likely than other students to engage in relatively serious crime (Olweus, 1994).

Morrison (forthcoming) argues that the process of becoming a chronic offender (and victim) in society is often fed by the cycles of bullying and victimisation that develop in the school system. Not all children who bully are on the trajectory that leads to violence and criminality later in life. But of all children, these are the ones most at risk for eventually committing violent crimes.

In Australia, this evidence has been clearly recognised. The National Crime Prevention Branch of the Attorney-General's Department has identified school bullying as a risk factor associated with antisocial and criminal behaviour in its publication "Pathways to prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia" (National Crime Prevention, 1999).

5.3 Students who bully others and are bullied

A number of surveys have identified students who report being both bullies and victims. This category covers the smallest percentage of students. A recent Australian sample found it to be just over 8% of students (Ahmed et al, 2001). By comparison, a Canadian sample found that 2% of students fit into this category and a British sample report 6% (respectively, Pepler et al., 1997; Stephenson and Smith, 1989).

Given that students in either one of these categories are already at high risk of maladjustment, these children are at an even higher risk of developing a range of adjustment problems and subsequent antisocial behaviour. They are the most insecure, the least likeable and the most unsuccessful in school (Stephenson & Smith, 1989).

Section 6 – What strategies are effective in dealing with bullying?

The clear message from the literature is that a 'whole school approach', in which the resources of the whole school community are drawn upon and coordinated in a systematic manner in addressing the problem of bullying, is much more likely to be successful than single-factor interventions. "A key ingredient seems to be the conceptualisation of the school community in a holistic way, consisting of students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders, combined with the acceptance by management of their responsibility to achieve and maintain a harmonious and caring school environment" (Homel, year?). Section 3 (e.g., *The school*) also refers.

Peer intervention and mediation can reduce overall levels of bullying in schools. Mediation is often effective when peers become involved in whole school anti-bullying programs. One study has shown that peers often intervene more than adults – respectively, 11% compared to 4% (Morrison, forthcoming).

There is a lack of independent evaluative evidence about the effectiveness of Australian anti-bullying programmes (Attachment 2 refers). A June 2002 meta-evaluation of worldwide research, commissioned by the Attorney-General's Department and authored by Ken Rigby, reports on programmes and procedures that have led to significant reductions in bullying in schools. Strategies have varied somewhat between programmes, but have generally had the following in common:

- Education of school staff about bullying and harassment through in-servicing, with a focus on what is happening between students in the school, making use of appropriate data gathering methods (e.g., surveys) and related discussion.
- The development of specific policy to counter bullying in the school, employing a consultative approach involving students and parents. Emerging policy has normally included an agreed definition of bullying and harassment, a statement of rights and responsibilities of members of the school community and an outline of how the school is undertaking to address the problem. In developing such a policy, it is considered necessary to take into account the content of other relevant documentation, e.g., that relating to Behaviour Management, Sexual Harassment and Racial Harassment.
- The use of the school curriculum to provide lessons and activities designed to help children develop knowledge, attitudes and skills that will help them deal more effectively with issues of bullying, including sessions relating to: anger-management, the distinction between assertiveness and aggressiveness, methods of conflict resolution, how bystanders can discourage bullying, the development of cooperativeness and empathy, and the identification of prejudice and discrimination, for example, as they relate to racism, gender bias and homophobia.
- The empowerment of students to assist in reducing conflict, for example, through the use of programmes to train students to act as peer mediators, peacekeepers, peer supporters, peer counsellors, buddies or members of anti-bullying committees working with school authorities.
- Clarification of the roles of staff members in countering bullying in schools, for example, in monitoring student behaviour in the schoolyard and intervening and reporting where necessary, and in modelling and encouraging respectful, pro-social behaviour. (Note links with values education.)

- Working closely with parents to prevent bullying, informing and consulting with them on relevant issues, especially when their children become involved in bully/victim problems, either as perpetrators, victims or both.
- Addressing cases of bullying that arise, taking into account the nature and severity of the problem and the likely effectiveness of possible modes of intervention. Currently available research does not enable Australian educators to conclude that one intervention method is, in general, more effective than another (divergent) approach. Programmes that have emphasised the use of clear rules about bullying and negative sanctions for their infringement have been no more effective than programmes that have advocated problem-solving approaches such as Mediation, the Method of Shared Concern, the No Blame Approach and Community Conferencing based upon principles of restorative justice. Rigby concludes that possibly each may be applied, depending upon particular circumstances.
- The clear documentation of steps that have been taken in particular cases together with outcomes in order to facilitate evaluation and justify possible modification in approaches.
- A focus on restoring the well-being of students who have been psychologically damaged by continued harassment, especially through providing adequate counselling and social support.
- Collaboration with appropriate agencies with a related or complementary function, for example, the police and mental health organisations.

It is important to note that, of the 13 studies selected as meeting rigorous research criteria which enabled the researchers to reach conclusions about the effectiveness of an intervention program, only one was Australian, because it is currently the only published study of an intervention evaluation in Australia. In the report, Rigby argues that the dearth of Australian research in evaluating interventions is of serious concern. He stresses that even though Australian educators can learn from the work conducted overseas, there is always the suspicion that generalisations across cultures may not be valid. The meta-evaluation also showed that:

- there is fairly consistent evidence from evaluations conducted in many countries that bullying behaviour between children in schools and centres can be reduced significantly by well-planned intervention programs;
- the chances of success in reducing bullying are greater if interventions are carried out among young children, that is, in pre-secondary school;
- there is evidence from results from control groups composed of students with whom programs were not implemented that, in the absence of interventions, bullying tends to increase;
- the commitment of a school to a program and strong involvement by staff in its implementation appears to be an important and possibly crucial factor in reducing bullying.

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