

Bullying and Mental Health

The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide an overview of social and emotional (mental health) issues related to bullying, rather than to provide a comprehensive treatment of bullying and school violence. To explore other aspects of bullying, please visit some of the sites listed in the Web Links section.

Bullying

Bullying is the repeated intimidation or oppression of a person by a more powerful individual or group. It differs from general conflict or aggression in being repetitive and involving a power imbalance. In bullying, there is an intention to cause pain and discomfort for the victim, either physically or emotionally.

Differences in power may be related to physical strength or skill, or may relate to perceived social power and influence. Bullies may focus their attentions on any aspect that sets a person apart from others - such as stature or disability, cultural or indigenous status, sexual preferences, physical or intellectual ability.

Examples of bullying behaviour include:

- Verbal - teasing, yelling, name-calling, put-downs, swearing, threatening, ridiculing, racist comments, criticism of sexuality
- Emotional and social - spreading rumours, exclusion, humiliation, extortion, blackmail, stalking, dirty looks
- Physical – pushing, shoving, damaging or stealing property, hitting, slapping, spitting, punching, assault
- Sexual - making suggestive comments or signs, leering, touching or groping, showing offensive material, rape

Bullying can occur in all settings, including the family, school, workplace, sporting field and broader community. Sometimes those who are bullied may themselves bully other people: they are sometimes termed bully-victims.

Estimates about how many school-aged children experience bullying vary a good deal, depending on their location, methodology and the definition of bullying. Australian estimates suggest that about 16% of students report being bullied weekly (www.bullyingnoway.com.au) but the incidence of bullying is likely to vary considerably depending on the characteristics of a given school or community.

The Impact of Bullying

Bullying is a major social problem that can have serious effects on the wellbeing of young people. Many studies have suggested that greater frequency and severity of bullying is associated with poorer psychological wellbeing and with adjustment problems in later life. Difficulties later in life, such as family or workplace violence, may be more likely if the person is a bully-victim.

A person who is more resilient will have greater resistance to the effects of bullying and may even be less likely to be targeted. Factors associated with resilience include: strong relationships with family or with a caring adult, positive social skills and behaviour, a sense of connection with peers, a sense of belonging in the community or within a supportive school.

Factors associated with an increased risk of bullying include: low self esteem, seeming shy or withdrawn, a problematic or over-protective family, speech difficulties such as stuttering, physical or intellectual disability, or being perceived as a member of a minority group – eg, due to racial or ethnic difference or same-sex attraction.

Being victimised at school is associated with poor self-esteem and other psycho-social problems. However when researching such relationships it is sometimes difficult to be clear about whether bullying causes these problems, or whether these issues already exist to some degree and attract the attention of bullies.

It may be that there is an effect both ways: that vulnerable students are more likely to be bullied, and that this in turn increases their negative feelings and affects how they interact with others. Most studies show that there is at least an association, but more recent longitudinal studies go further, supporting the idea that bullying may independently cause health and psycho-social problems.

Being bullied repeatedly at school, or when travelling to or from school, is associated with a higher level of absenteeism and truancy. This is likely to be because students feel unsafe and unhappy at school. There is also some evidence that the impact of bullying may persist beyond the school years, resulting in adults who are lonelier and have more relationship difficulties than their peers.

Repeated bullying is associated with feelings of anxiety and depression, anger and irritability, self-pity and withdrawal from others. Some studies have also shown that frequently victimised students are more likely to have thoughts of suicide. Repeated bullying may also lead to general ill health, being associated with a higher level of colds, mouth sores, headaches, stomach aches, etc.

Given effects such as absenteeism, social and emotional problems and physical ill-health, it follows that young people who experience severe or frequent bullying may show a decline in their academic performance and changes in their behaviour at school. Teachers who notice changes in behaviour or performance should consider bullying as a possible factor, particularly in students who seem to have poor self-esteem or difficulty relating to others.

The Wellbeing of Bullies

It has also been suggested that bullies suffer to some extent from social and emotional difficulties and are poorly adjusted. The following characteristics have been associated with being either a bully, or a bully-victim:

- Feeling unhappy at school and/or disliking school
- Lower levels of engagement at school, poor academic achievement
- Higher levels of truancy, difficult behaviour and defiance at school
- Increased risk of getting into trouble with the police and juvenile justice
- Higher levels of certain mental health problems or disorders, such as ADHD, conduct disorder, depression
- Increased incidence of suicidal thoughts and self-harm

It is difficult to know whether these associations are caused by the student's involvement in bullying, or are the result of other factors such as parenting and home environment. It is not

uncommon for bullies to come from homes where physical punishment is used and where parental involvement and emotional warmth are low.

While some people believe that bullies have poor social skills and understanding – and thus resort to violence or intimidation – it is possible that these young people actually have an advanced social understanding in certain areas. For example, some may have a heightened ability to predict others' reactions, identify potential victims and win loyalty from other bullies. This may be particularly true of 'ringleaders' who seem to lead bullying behaviour by groups.

Research suggests negative longer-term outcomes for those who have been bullies in adolescence. Bullies are more likely than their peers to go on to adult substance misuse, violence and abuse, or criminal behaviour. One study also found that they are also more likely to have children who behave aggressively, although it is unclear whether this should be attributed to genetics, family environment or both.

For Schools and Teachers

While it may be hard to know whether bullying actually causes mental health problems, it is certainly important as a teacher to recognise that mental health problems and bullying often occur together. It is also helpful to recognise that there are social and emotional mental health implications for those who are bullied, the bullies themselves, as well as bully-victims. The effects of bullying or being a bully may persist well into adulthood.

You may encounter individuals who believe that bullying is good for young people and 'toughens them up' but schools should not tolerate bullying, harassment or violence. A culture in which such behaviour is not challenged only exacerbates the power imbalances which are typical between bullies and victims.

Bullying interventions that target only individual students are largely ineffective. The problem of bullying is best addressed in schools by a multi-faceted approach, which considers systems and policies, curriculum exercises, environmental improvements and work with individual students.

A good first step is to try to create a school culture in which resilience and connection are promoted and individuals are valued for their contribution to the school community. To read more about how resilience and connection can be promoted, look for the fact sheet about Promoting Resilience on the Response Ability web site (www.responseability.org).

Since some level of bullying may still occur even within a supportive school environment, the school will need to have an effective anti-bullying policy and a clear discipline policy which is consistently enforced. All students need to be aware of the consequences of their behaviour and there should be a structured step-by-step process by which discipline is imposed. Ideally, a school's anti-bullying policy should be developed in consultation with students, staff and parents.

Schools will find it helpful to survey students or run focus groups, to discover what type of bullying is most common and where it occurs. For example, there may be trouble spots in the school grounds or at certain times, where an increased staff presence might reduce bullying behaviour. Students should be engaged in addressing the problem and encouraged to challenge bullying rather than be passive bystanders – this will create a whole-school culture in which bullying is not tolerated.

Staffing issues and roles may also need review. If a particular staff member such as a deputy principal has responsibility for discipline, but has too much other work to fulfil this role effectively, then students will become aware that the policy is rarely enforced. This only reinforces the powerlessness of victims and of those who might otherwise challenge bullies.

There may also be difficulties if the same staff member is responsible both for discipline and for student wellbeing, or pastoral care. In some cases it will be easy to manage both roles, but sometimes it is difficult to balance behaviour management and a supportive relationship, particularly when negative behaviour is the result of difficult personal circumstances.

The school can also take steps to raise students' awareness of bullying and help them build up protective skills, by examining relationships and bullying as part of the curriculum. Useful skills to explore would include assertiveness, conflict resolution, communication and making friends.

Students should be encouraged to seek help for themselves or others when bullying occurs. Peer support programs, in which older students become mentors to younger students, can be helpful if students are reluctant to report a situation to school staff.

The MindMatters kit (www.mindmatters.edu.au) presents some curriculum material on bullying which is suitable for junior secondary students – some studies suggest that bullying reaches its peak in these years. You will also find useful material on the Internet at <http://www.reachout.com.au/default.asp?ti=319> and of bullying behaviour, by discussing relevant issues with students and by actively participating in broader school approaches to combat bullying as a way of exploring the issues.

In summary, teachers can help by being aware of all types of bullying behaviour, by discussing relevant issues with students and by actively participating in broader school approaches to combat bullying.

Web Links

Here are some web sites about bullying which may be of interest and which consider the issue from varying perspectives:

Bullying Noway! (Australian)	www.bullyingnoway.com.au
Racism Noway! (Australian)	www.racismnoway.com.au
Bully Beware (Canadian)	www.bullybeware.com
Bullying Online (UK)	www.bullying.co.uk

Sources and Further Reading

Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing (2000). Dealing with Bullying and Harassment, In MindMatters: A Mental Health Promotion Resource for Secondary Schools [kit]. Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, Canberra. www.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters

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