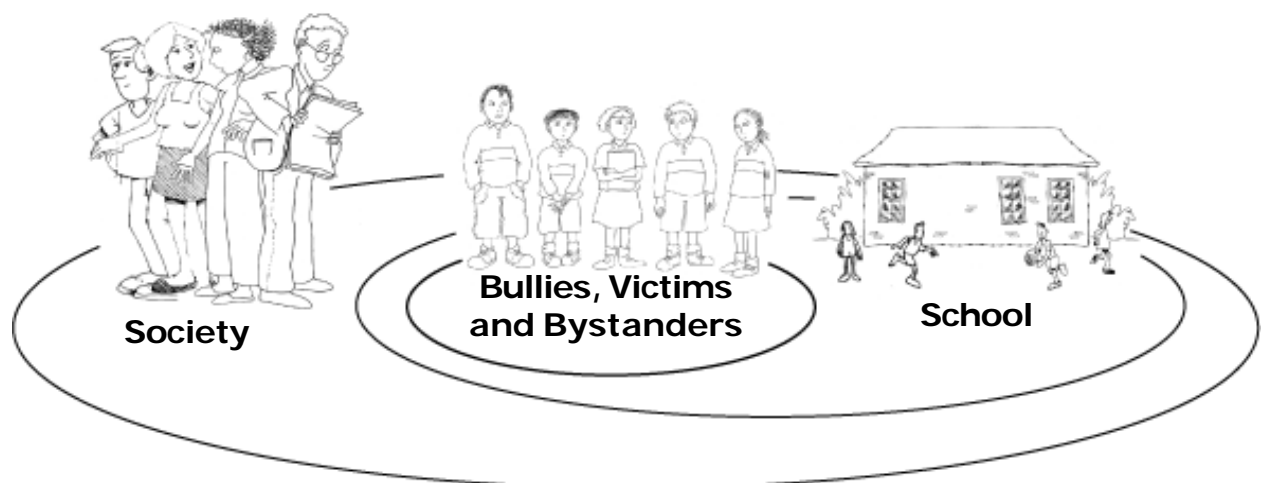


HAPPY SCHOOLS

Managing Student Responses to Bullying

Who is involved in bullying?

It is sometimes tempting to think of bullying as brief episodes involving one, two or three children. In fact, if we look closely at those involved in bullying, we need to acknowledge that quite a lot of people are involved. The following diagram outlines this.



Society: It may seem foolish to suggest that the larger society has anything to do with bullying. Yet bullying is by no means confined to school. It can happen at home, in the streets or shopping centres – in fact anywhere where children are together. While *most* parents encourage children to be caring, we could hardly assert that it is a value universally applied. There *are* aspects of our culture which endorse aggression, competitiveness, power plays – even violence. A successful approach to the bullying problem includes talking about and dealing with cultural assumptions enshrined in statements like ‘They deserve it’, ‘Let them taste their own medicine’, ‘It’s a jungle out there’, ‘No doblers’ or even the classic ‘Don’t worry – it’ll just toughen them up’.

School: Just because the school officially disapproves of bullying doesn’t mean that children see it as a bully-free environment. Just because there is a bullying policy doesn’t mean that every child feels safe. It is possible for staff to inadvertently give mixed signals on the issue – such as encouraging aggressive competition, or even laughing at people who make mistakes (whether students or others). It is a daily possibility that teachers will not visit the sites most likely to be problematical (the toilets, the far ends of the playground) and thus allow the practice to flourish ‘unseen’, or to sit aggressive children near those likely to be

vulnerable. Constant vigilance is necessary. Educating the children about *their* behaviour is only a partial solution.

The person bullied (the victim*): The most obvious one to attract attention in any discussion of bullying is the child who is victimised by others. The school owes it to such children to detect bullying when it happens, and to offer them counselling or other support in the aftermath – hopefully as the bully or bullies is/are dealt with and the practice stopped.

(*We use the term ‘victim’ in this discussion for the sake of directness and simplicity. It is not in fact used in any of the performances or documentaries of *Happy Schools*, because it often draws criticism in its own right.)

However, a ‘victim mentality’ is not the best attitude, either in the child or concerned teachers. Nor is it always appropriate to completely absolve the ‘victim’ of responsibility. Some children come to school with problem behaviours – attention-getting urges, a tendency for socially inept comments or attitudes – a variety of actions which ‘draw fire’. These need to be dealt with, if the child is to be helped. Of course children are not always bullied because they have problem behaviours. Sometimes they are picked on just because they are ‘different’ in some way – racially, in terms of a disability or whatever – and this theme is made very clear in the teaching materials of *Happy Schools*.

An even stronger need is for the ‘victim’ to be helped to *find friends* (a constant and deliberate theme in the student materials in this resource package) and to be more confident and assertive.

The bully (or bullies): Often it is difficult to be sympathetic with bullies. Indeed the student materials in this package deliberately make bullying behaviour look dramatic and inexcusable. In real life however, schools have to try to find a way to help bullies too.

Often, as Dr Simone Heeney suggests (‘What to do if you’re bullied’), and the research verifies (‘Research on Bullying’), bullies are dysfunctional children whose ‘misbehaviour’ makes sense (to them). Various theories have been advanced about the motivation of bullies: that it is learnt behaviour (copying what they are exposed to themselves at home), a by-product of anger or frustration or revenge (for perceived wrongs), a way of boosting low self-esteem, a form of boredom relief or thrill seeking, a type of aberrant behaviour typical of children with a lowered sense of individual responsibility (as for instance in the anonymity of a gang), and so on. There *is* evidence that children from homes where interpersonal conflict is common are more likely to be bullies at school, and that boys (in particular) who have witnessed domestic violence are highly likely to display excessively aggressive behaviour. Whatever the cause, these children come to school with problems just waiting to find an outlet. The bullying at school is the outward manifestation of their unhappiness. This does not excuse it, but it needs to be addressed. We try to address the issue of recovering bullies in ‘Helping Bob Change.’



The bystanders (or onlookers): All the research suggests that the role of the bystander(s) is vital to dealing with the problem. If bullies sense that they have the approval of other children (in what they are doing to victims), or that they will not be stopped, they will continue in their dysfunctional behaviour. Much of the student material is aimed at this group – children who *see* bullying happen, without being personally involved. If these children can be recruited, and their influence brought to bear, real changes for the better can happen – often out of sight of any teacher.

The materials on the DVD and CD are aimed at helping *all* children – and specifically the bystanders – recognise bullying (‘Why isn’t our school happy?’, ‘What’s happening here?’ and ‘Who was the bully?’), at creating a feeling of empathy with the victims, then at urging them to find appropriate ways of acting (‘How to make our school a happy school’, ‘Good friends’ and ‘All together now’). The song and dance feature ‘No more bullies’ is a fun way of summing up all the key ideas in a ‘Muppet Show’/MTV style music video.

Appropriate anti-bullying responses

It is important for teachers not to set unrealistic expectations for children. Bullying is by its nature often private, and many children (like adults) are reluctant to ‘get involved’, especially if they see it as ‘none of their business’.

To the extent that *Happy Schools* encourages all children to be aware, and to try and stop bullying, one would hope for more *proactive* responses to bullying from children. But there are limits. The student materials which offer advice in this area (‘How to make our school a happy school’, ‘Good friends’ and ‘All together now’) take care not to exaggerate what is possible.

For instance, *Happy Schools* does *not* endorse

- Aggressive responses (eg threatening to punch a bully to teach him a lesson)
- Heroic but foolhardy interventions (eg one child taking on a pack)
- Payback or revenge behaviour (eg getting even with a bully by a secret act of destruction)
- Trying to humiliate or publicly expose a bully (eg shouting ‘Come and see the bully ... nyah nyah nyah!’ or ‘You animal – how dare you do that to her!’)

There *are* times when another child, or better a *group* of children, *can* act to defuse a bullying situation – by physically inserting themselves, protecting a victim by their presence, or by making inoffensive remarks that act as a cue to stopping the bullying (eg ‘Come on – let’s all be friends...’). There are many more times however when it is just *too hard* for children. The only sensible course of action is to get a teacher, or to quietly tell an adult what happened.

Inappropriate responses include, by the way, the victim overreacting to the bully. Belligerence and aggressiveness are dangerous – even if the child *has* been abused. Tears or other forms of obvious distress may lead the bully to continue their behaviour. **Assertiveness** and **confidence** are what is needed (see ‘What’s good about me’). It is good to help a victim feel more empowered. It is *not* good to encourage him/her to fight back, to scream at the bully, to ‘lash out’ in any way. That way leads to the oldest question in the playground: ‘Who started it?’ or ‘Who is the bully?’

One last word: ‘dobbing’ is an issue. It is a deeply ingrained part of the child’s peer group – almost a ‘rule’ – not to ‘tell’. Yet this silence works to the bully’s advantage, and he/she knows it. The school needs to counter the ‘dobbing’ worry with better arguments. ‘Everyone needs to feel safe – and *that’s* more important than not telling.’

Appropriate intervention strategies

There are a number of productive in-school strategies referred to in the research. While the ‘Whole school approach to bullying’ emerges as the most often recommended response – this is to some extent a policy rather than a strategy. The research is clear that if the whole school takes action against bullying there is a higher chance of success (see ‘Research on Bullying’).

However, when it comes to specific follow up measures in specific cases, the following are worthy options to consider:

- (1) **The Method of Shared Concern:** this approach works through three phases:
 - (a) A teacher or teachers meet with the bully for a discussion about the incident(s). If there is a group involved, the main offender is interviewed first. The aim is to pinpoint the behaviour or incident that is of concern, *without blaming the bully*. It can be often initiated with a question like ‘Student X is unhappy. Can you tell me about it?’ The bully will perhaps try to justify or excuse. There are *no criticisms or accusations*. The teacher instead focuses on *the problem for Student X*. The bully is asked to try to help – because they both ‘share a concern’ for Student X’. ‘How could we help Student X?’ The bully will offer suggestions. The teacher affirms these ideas, as appropriate. ‘Good idea’ etc. Then the bully is given a period of time (a week?) to try to help.
 - (b) There is a follow up meeting, to assess progress. Again there is *no accusation – only concern* for Student X. More solutions might be found, or plans changed.
 - (c) There is a final meeting, *after* the period of improvement, in which Student X is involved, as well as the bully (or bullies). The object of this meeting is to confirm the progress made, and establish the principle of tolerance and support – in front of both parties – to help it go on unaided.

- (2) **The Support Group Method:** this too involves recruiting the participants on what amounts to an anti-bullying rescue mission. There are three phases:
 - (a) The victim (Student X) is interviewed to find out what happened and who was involved. This must include naming the bully (bullies) but also other children who were there, and even children whom the victim wants as friends.
 - (b) A support group is formed, consisting of the bullies, bystanders and others – as appropriate. This group meets, under the supervision of a teacher. It is most important that no one is made to feel bad and the term ‘bullying’ is not used. The object is to focus on the problems of Student X, though other people’s bad feelings can be used by way of analogy or introduction. The group is asked for suggestions about ways in which Student X can be made happier. **It is not the teacher making suggestions – it must be the students.** Having arrived at a plan, the group then agrees to follow up on the actions decided – as a way of supporting Student X.
 - (c) After a suitable time, the support group meets again (and perhaps several times) to discuss how the support plan worked. The emphasis is on affirmation for the progress made and feelings of solidarity around the common goal – helping Student X.

It needs to be said that these two methods both involve what is usually called the ‘*no blame*’ approach. The concept is simple: focus on repairing the damage and helping the victim – *not* on blaming or punishing the bully. The underpinning motivation is to *enlist the bully in the change process* – something that is likely to happen if the bully can be engaged in feeling for the victim and finding solutions – and is unlikely to happen if the bully is defending him/herself and feels under threat.

If and when these methods fail, or the case is sufficiently serious, it is time to call in a professional. All states and territories have procedures for referring a child, whether a badly damaged victim, or an intractable bully, to a recommended child psychologist. As Dr Heeney pointed out in her discussions with us, teachers must sometimes know when to 'bow out' and let someone with the full clinical background take over.

This is not a 'cop out'. It is not a sign of weakness or indifference. It is a recognition that sometimes the issues involved for the child are so complex that ordinary in-school measures are not sufficient.