

Speaking out about wellbeing

Policy brief, May 2011

Children and young people speak out about bullying

"I got bullied earlier in the year and that put a really bad perspective on my life. I didn't see things as funny any more." girl 14

What do children and young people say about bullying?

In 2009 the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA undertook research to investigate children and young people's views on what was important to their wellbeing.¹ As part of the research, an online survey of more than five hundred 10 to 17 year-olds found that bullying happened 'all the time, to everyone'. More than 60 per cent of respondents said they had been bullied, and 44 per cent said they had bullied someone else.

The children and young people who participated in the research identified a strong link between bullying and ongoing mental health problems.

"Some people get bullied a whole lot more than other people and so it is just that they tend to have the darker outlook on life and then, as a result of people going "why are you so depressed" and stuff, it just makes you more depressed." girl 14

A group of 13 year-olds said bullying was a major problem at their school.

"There's name calling, pushing, shoving, kicking, punching, everything." boy 13

"[People] think bashing other people is good and there's a lot of that at this school." girl 13

Bullying was reported as being more prevalent during primary school and the lower secondary school years than in senior school.

"You don't see it as much as you get older because people get a sense of maturity as they grow older... but in Year 8, 9 and 10 you still do see a lot of it going on because people don't have respect for anyone." girl 16

Some children and young people said they believed bullies should be punished, but they also recognised that kids who bullied were likely to have reasons for their behaviour. They said telling an adult about the problem was generally not a permanent solution.

"Most bullies don't have friends; they bully because something worries them." girl 10

"But the bullying doesn't stop...parents come and deal with it and the parents leave him and he starts over again." boy 10



How does bullying affect children and young people?

The act of bullying is commonly defined as having three components:

- The intentional use of aggressive behaviour to deliberately hurt someone, and involving unwanted, negative actions.
- A pattern of behaviour repeated over time.
- An imbalance of physical, social or psychological power or strength.²

Children and young people who are bullied can suffer stress, intimidation and physical injury.³ Significant long-term effects of bullying can include anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, poor academic achievement and even psychiatric disorders and suicidality.^{4 5 6}

Children and young people who bully others also tend to demonstrate high levels of conduct problems and a dislike of school, as well as depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts.^{7 8}

The prevalence of bullying among children and young people is of great concern given the physical and mental health implications. Extensive research by the Child Health Promotion Research Centre (CHPRC) at Edith Cowan University has found that one in four children in Years 4 to 9 are bullied every few weeks or more and often in the last term at school.⁹ Recent research by Girl Guides Australia found that almost 70 per cent of girls under the age of 10 years are bullied.¹⁰

Studies have also shown that Aboriginal children and young people are more vulnerable to the effects of bullying and experience more negative outcomes than non-Aboriginal children and young people.¹¹

The different forms of bullying

Bullying is not confined to the school yard, nor is it confined to verbal or physical confrontation. The emergence of cyber bullying involves targeting victims via global communication technology, namely websites, social media, text messages and emails.^{12 13}

Cyber bullying is particularly difficult to tackle because perpetrators can remain anonymous, the audience is often world-wide and children and young people can be victimised anytime and anywhere, including in their own homes.¹⁴ Cyber bullying has also become an extension of existing bullying behaviours – with a recent report finding that 90 per cent of children and young people who are bullied online are also bullied offline.¹⁵

Bullying can be overt or covert. Young people define covert bullying as any form of bullying that is hidden¹⁶ - and cyber bullying falls within this category. Emerging evidence is revealing that covert bullying *'...has the potential to result in more severe psychological, social, and mental health problems than overt bullying, and is not only more difficult for schools and parents to detect, but also has the capacity to inflict social isolation on a much broader scale than overt bullying.'*¹⁷

What needs to be done?

The Commonwealth and State governments and the education sector currently have a strong focus on anti-bullying measures – for example, through the *Bullying No Way!* campaign¹⁸ and the National Safe Schools Framework.¹⁹ There is also a productive partnership between the Western Australian Department of Education and CHPRC.

However, bullying continues to be a major concern for children and young people and ongoing research, policy and program development is required to tackle it – particularly as new communication and information technologies are constantly changing the nature of bullying.



Bullying is a whole of community issue and can occur in a range of places.

"I don't get teased at school most of the time. I get teased by other kids that aren't in school. Like when I go to local footy in other towns, they always tease me a lot... they try to hurt your feelings." boy 10

It is known that bullying peaks twice in childhood: once in primary school (Years 5 to 6) and then again following the transition to secondary school.²⁰ Children and young people in these age brackets are between nine and 14 years old and are already experiencing major physiological, neurological, cognitive and psychosocial changes. Their peer relationships are increasing in importance and influence as their personal and social identity becomes established.²¹

School is therefore an important setting in which to implement anti-bullying programs. However, almost 40 per cent of students say their teachers do not know how to help students who are being bullied.²²

Priorities for policy and program development

In Western Australia, CHPRC is the primary source of research and information on bullying.

Children and young people who participated in the Commissioner's wellbeing research said they believed bullying could be stopped by:

- telling someone and getting support (for example, counsellors, teachers, friends, parents, support groups)
- raising awareness through anti-bullying campaigns, discussions and the provision of information
- zero tolerance.

Children and young people themselves have a significant role to play in the prevention of bullying. Bullying takes place in the presence of others 85 per cent of the time²³, which makes the role of the bystander important. Research shows that when a child bystander acts in some way to discourage bullying, there is a 50 per cent chance it will stop.²⁴ Encouraging bystanders to act is an important part of addressing and preventing bullying.

Strategies to tackle bullying include:

- a systematic, coordinated policy and program approach that supports school staff to engage students and parents and create a safe learning environment
- implementing evidence-based staff training (including pre-service training for teachers) and professional development programs and resources to support schools²⁵
- using comprehensive, whole-of-school frameworks involving the broader school community – teachers, students, parents, families and non-teaching staff²⁶
- placing bullying and cyber bullying within a positive, wellbeing framework and encouraging students to learn positive behaviours and become part of an anti-bullying culture. This is proving to be more effective than deficit models where the bully is 'demonised' and the victim 'problematized'.^{27 28}

Footnote: for more information about CHPRC, visit its website <http://www.chprc.ecu.edu.au/index.php>



- ¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2009, *Speaking out about wellbeing: the views of Western Australian Children and Young People*, Perth, Western Australia.
- ² <http://www.olweus.org/public/bullying.page>
- ³ <http://www.youthbeyondblue.com/factsheets-and-info/fact-sheet-20-bullying/>
- ⁴ Nansel, T et al 2001, 'Bullying behaviors among US youth: Prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment', *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 285(16), p. 2.
- ⁵ BeyondBlue, *Information about cyber bullying*, [website] viewed on 19 April 2011, http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=59.1172
- ⁶ Roland, E 2001, 'Bullying, depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts', *Educational Research*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp 55-67, viewed 18 April 2011, http://pdfserve.informaworld.com/729596__713766162.pdf
- ⁷ Nansel, T et al 2001, 'Bullying behaviors among US youth: Prevalence and association with psychosocial adjustment', *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 285, No. 16, p. 2.
- ⁸ Roland, E 2001, 'Bullying, depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts', *Educational Research*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp 55-67, viewed 18 April 2011, http://pdfserve.informaworld.com/729596__713766162.pdf
- ⁹ Child Health Promotion Research Centre 2009, *Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study*, Edith Cowan University, Perth, p xxi.
- ¹⁰ Girl Guides Australia 2010, *Australian Guides Say...2010: An insight into the minds of girls and young women in Australia today*, p. 23 [website], viewed 18 April 2011, <<http://www.girlguides.org.au/attach/Guides%20Say%20Report%20FIN.pdf>>.
- ¹¹ Coffin, J et al 2010, 'Bullying in an Aboriginal Context' [online], *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp 77-87.
- ¹² Spears, B & Slee, P 2010, *Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety*, The Australian Cyberbullying Research Alliance, p 10. viewed 19 April 2011, http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jssc/subs/sub_62.pdf
- ¹³ Child Health Promotion Research Centre 2010, *Strengthening School and Families' Capacity to Reduce the Academic, Social and Emotional Harms Secondary Students Experience from Cyber Bullying: Cyber Friendly Schools Project*, Edith Cowan University, Perth, p 4.
- ¹⁴ Child Health Promotion Research Centre 2010, *Strengthening School and Families' Capacity to Reduce the Academic, Social and Emotional Harms Secondary Students Experience from Cyber Bullying: Cyber Friendly Schools Project*, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia, p 4.
- ¹⁵ Cross et al, cited in Spears, B & Slee, P 2010, *Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety*, The Australian Cyberbullying Research Alliance, p 16. viewed 19 April 2011, http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jssc/subs/sub_62.pdf
- ¹⁶ Child Health Promotion Research Centre 2009, *Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study*, Edith Cowan University, Perth, p xxi.
- ¹⁷ Child Health Promotion Research Centre 2009, *Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study*, Edith Cowan University, Perth, p xix.
- ¹⁸ Bullying No Way! [website], viewed 28 February 2011, <<http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/issues/implications.shtml>>.
- ¹⁹ Available at: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/national_safe_schools_framework.htm
- ²⁰ Child Health Promotion Research Centre 2007, *The Supportive Schools Project* [website] viewed 18 April 2011, <http://chprc.ecu.edu.au/research/bullying/supportive-schools.php>
- ²¹ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth 2011, "betwixt and between": *A report on ARACY's middle years project*, ARACY, p 5.
- ²² Rigby, K & Bagshaw, D 2003, 'Prospects of adolescent students collaborating with teachers in addressing issues of bullying and conflict in schools', *Educational Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 5, p. 538.
- ²³ <http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/talkout/spotlight/bystandermain.shtml>
- ²⁴ <http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au/talkout/profiles/researchers/kenRigby.shtml>
- ²⁵ Spears, B & Slee, P 2010, *Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety*, The Australian Cyberbullying Research Alliance, p 42. viewed 19 April 2011, http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jssc/subs/sub_62.pdf
- ²⁶ For example, *Friendly Schools and Friendly Families: An evidence based bullying prevention and reduction program* [website], viewed on 19 April 2011, <http://www.chprc.ecu.edu.au/res-translation/friendly-schools-and-families/index.php>
- ²⁷ Feinberg, T 2003, 'Bullying Prevention and Intervention', *Principal Leadership Magazine*, Volume 4, Number 1, viewed on 19 April 2011, http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/nassp_bullying.aspx
- ²⁸ Spears, B & Slee, P 2010, *Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety*, The Australian Cyberbullying Research Alliance, p 43. viewed 19 April 2011, http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jssc/subs/sub_62.pdf

