



Give kids a chance



No-one deserves **to be** **left out**

Executive summary

School bullying in Australia has become a focus of attention by researchers only in recent years, with major work starting in the 1990s. Against the background of continual tragedies linked to school bullying, numerous studies have emerged since that time, driven by the need to expose and understand the nature of bullying. Taking up the charge was Professor Ken Rigby, with works that sought to explain the behaviour patterns that constitute bullying and the roles involved (2007).

While there are now numerous definitions of bullying from which to choose, it is Rigby's definition that is largely accepted, which states that bullying is the:

... repeated oppression, psychological or physical of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons.

Research on school bullying which has focused on the social skills that characterise the roles within the bullying experience is of particular interest to Wesley Mission because of its involvement with support services for children. These services are largely focused on building and restoring the social skills of children subject to forms of abuse, conditions that make them vulnerable to the bullying experience as victims or perpetrators.

The seriousness of the problem is demonstrated in statistics released by Kids Helpline (2004: 1) which found school bullying to be the fourth most common reason for seeking advice from counsellors. When these results were restricted to children aged 10 years and under, bullying became the second most common reason.

The issues highlighted in this report show the damaging consequences of bullying, with victims reporting significant levels of withdrawal and isolation which inhibit their social skills development and lead to insecurity even in adult life. Wesley Mission also understands the importance of healing bullies (many of whom have suffered victimisation themselves) as well as victims. These insights guided the naming of this report: *Giving kids a chance: No-one deserves to be left out.*

About the research

The report seeks to advance knowledge of school bullying in Sydney by assessing the social skills that influence the bullying experience. The report also sets out to identify the interplay between these skills and the impact of school bullying in adult life.

The project began with an online survey of 1200 respondents, with questions designed to extract both quantitative and qualitative data about the role and experience of each respondent in schoolyard bullying and the impact of their experience in adult life. The responses were analysed against five key social skills — self-esteem, assertiveness, empathy, co-operation and anger-management — that govern an individual's ability to handle life and relationships confidently and successfully.

In this report, the roles in the bullying experience are labelled broadly — bullies and victims — as well as in sub-sets: victims who go on to bully others are referred to as bully-victims; those who are unambiguously victims are called pure victims; those in the corresponding category are termed pure bullies.

Policy workshop

Selected staff from Wesley Mission centres involved in child and family care and representatives from government, universities and the nonprofit sector provided comprehensive advice to be fed into the formulation of the report's policy recommendations. The workshop was facilitated by Professor Kim Oates, Emeritus Professor of Paediatrics at the University of Sydney, who commands wide respect for his knowledge of children's issues.

Pack bullying

An issue highlighted by the findings is the significance of pack (group) bullying to victims and perpetrators and the intensity it brings to the bullying process.

Pack bullying, according to victims in the Wesley Mission survey, occurred mainly in high school and happened more frequently than bullying by individuals: 56 per cent of respondents said pack bullying occurred at least two or three times a week compared to 29 per cent who said that bullying by individuals took place at the same frequency.



Pack bullying went on for longer than bullying by individuals: 34 per cent of victims said pack bullying lasted more than a year compared to 16 per cent who said that individual bullying lasted more than a year.

Victims were only willing to report pack bullying when it occurred most days (35 per cent) and lasted more than a year (39 per cent).

Victims of pack bullying scored lower than the generally acceptable level of self-esteem in comparison with those who were bullied by individuals.

Pure victims suffered pack bullying more often and for a longer period than did bully-victims.

Victims of pack bullying reported the lowest level of assertiveness with reference to three particular indicators which were:

- I looked like an unhappy person (43 per cent).
- I kept to myself and did not really interact with others (43 per cent).
- I generally felt more comfortable in the company of teachers or other adults than with kids of my own age (44 per cent).

These indicators of a lack of assertiveness were associated with almost all the forms of emotional bullying mentioned, mainly:

- being teased in an unpleasant way in the playground
- being called hurtful names
- having possessions moved or hidden
- being left out of things on purpose.

Pack bullies reported a lower level of empathy with their victims than did individual bullies. Bully-victims, when they bullied in packs, seemed to have a higher level of empathy with victims than pure bullies did in the same activity.

Emotional bullying

Another area of interest depicted in the findings related to the differential experiences of exposure to physical bullying and emotional bullying, the latter being where verbal tactics are employed, or insidious means such as ostracising or deliberately excluding people from group activities.



The most frequently cited forms of emotional bullying were being:

- teased in an unpleasant way in the playground (30 per cent)
- called hurtful names (30 per cent)
- left out of things on purpose (25 per cent)
- avoided or ignored by other students on purpose (25 per cent).

Female victims reported more emotional bullying than males: 85 per cent reported being left out of things on purpose compared to 77 per cent of male victims.

The longer bullying lasted the more frequently it involved emotional forms: for example, 49 per cent of victims who were bullied for more than a year reported being called hurtful names on most days.

Victims of pack bullying reported being subject to high rates of emotional bullying in school: 87 per cent reported being left out of occasional peer group activities.

Victims were only willing to report emotional bullying when activities such as being aggressively teased in the playground or being excluded from group activities lasted for a long time (58 per cent and 54 per cent respectively).

Having possessions moved or hidden or knowing that the teacher was ignoring classroom bullying were examples of emotional bullying that had a marked effect on a victim's self-esteem with even the slightest increase in frequency of the adverse actions.

The more frequent the emotional bullying, the lower the level of assertiveness exhibited by victims. One finding shows a high degree of isolation and loneliness ensuing: 49 per cent of victims who were left out of things on purpose reported keeping to themselves when they were in school. (Withdrawal behaviour also occurred over physical bullying, with 46 per cent who were often hit or kicked keeping to themselves.)

Victims were less likely to display positive assertiveness characteristics where they reported emotional rather than physical bullying e.g. 42 per cent of victims who were often avoided or ignored said they were unable to stand up for themselves when bullied. In contrast, 46 per cent who reported being hit or kicked even sometimes said they would fight back.

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There was a significant association between emotional bullying and low self-esteem in pure victims: two-fifths of these respondents scored 11–15 on the Rosenberg scale when they were even sometimes:

- left out of things on purpose
- avoided or ignored by other students
- had their possessions moved or hidden.

The 30-point Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale does not have a discrete cut-off for low self-esteem as this is dependent on the population sample. For the purposes of this report a score between 16 and 25 was considered within the acceptable range for self-esteem.

There appears to be a clear interplay between self-esteem, assertiveness and aggressiveness linked to emotional bullying, particularly when the bullying took the form of exclusion.

Although more difficult to determine, it appeared that perpetrators of emotional bullying had lower levels of self-esteem and capacity for anger management than bullies who used physical tactics.

Almost half (48 per cent) of individuals who said they bullied in order “to show others they were the boss” felt ashamed of their behaviour.

Bullies who often engaged in emotional bullying reported a lower level of self-esteem than those who did it only sometimes: 46 per cent of bullies who admitted to often “giving soft kids a hard time” scored 11–15 on the Rosenberg scale.

Impact in adult life

More than four-fifths of respondents (85 per cent) reported that the school time bullying experience had affected the way they had developed as adults.

Negative effects

Low self-esteem and lack of assertiveness were listed as the primary negative effects in adult life. This was followed by difficulties in building relationships of trust. Other problems included aggression and difficulty controlling anger.

These were all found to be interrelated to some extent. Respondents who reported low levels of self-esteem also tended to report low levels of assertiveness (feeling withdrawn or isolated from society).

This had an impact on their ability to build various levels of trust within their relationships. This difficulty was reported with reference to:

- building trust in personal relationships
- building trust in a general social setting
- trusting too easily for want of attention or affection.

Frustration regarding low self-confidence, isolation and failure to trust led to the development of aggression and anger in some respondents. This involved:

- anger at the school for not protecting them effectively
- anger with themselves for not being assertive when bullied
- anger with the individual by whom they were bullied by and the desire to retaliate aggressively.

Other respondents linked their lack of self-esteem to the mental health issues they experienced in adult life.

Positive effects

The positive effects were almost a mirror image of the negative effects. Respondents reported:

- becoming more assertive
- having more self-esteem or self-confidence
- becoming more understanding and empathetic.

Once again there appeared to be an interrelation between assertiveness and self-esteem. Respondents who reported a higher level of one usually also mentioned an improvement in the other. There seemed, however, to be an association between these skills and the victims’ understanding of the bullying experience.

Understanding was developed in two ways:

- by shifting the focus of blame from the victim to the bully
- understanding the predicament of the bully (empathy).

More victims displayed empathetic tendencies than would have been expected. However, there were a number of bullies who reported genuine remorse for their actions and the intention to refrain from such behaviour.



Victims who are parents took care to build positive social skills in their children at a young age.

The main difference between the negative and positive effects in adult life was the concept of fear. Respondents who experienced low social skills development in adult life tended to be fearful of the school, their social environment and the individuals by whom they were bullied. The positive effects were associated with an overcoming of that fear.

Advice sought

Advice was mainly sought from a professional, While there seemed to be a large positive attitude to the advice being consequently received, some respondents mentioned their annoyance with the advice. This was mainly due to their impression that the advice given exacerbated the bullying.

Action taken

Many sought professional help and most of those who had done so were prescribed medication.

An indication of positive social skills development was that some action involved enrolling in educational

courses to learn more about the experience of bullying. This served the purpose of self-development or a desire to assist others with similar experiences.

Action was also taken by bullies in terms of recognition that their behaviour constituted bullying, leading to a resolve to change their behaviour.

Reasons for not seeking help

Two-fifths (41 per cent) of the sample did not seek advice or take action in response to bullying when they were of school age. The primary reason was that those victims felt they could manage the issues on their own.

There was a portion of respondents that reported feeling too embarrassed or ashamed to label themselves victims of bullying. Their problems of self-esteem and assertiveness are arguably exacerbated by the decision to further isolate themselves.

Other respondents stated they were unaware of available services. However, a closer look suggests that if they had been aware of the assistance, they feared these services would be too costly.



Policy recommendations

Wesley Mission's work among children has helped identify a range of initiatives that can be usefully undertaken to prevent bullying in schools. This knowledge, has fed the recommendations for policy reform that are set out in full on p.74. A summary of the recommendations is given below. To protect children from the damaging effects of schoolyard bullying, Wesley Mission urges:

1. **Improved identification of bullying**, with specific questions built into routine existing assessments of children by teachers and services providers and in teacher-parent contact.
2. **More programs to build up social skills in children in the early years**, at pre-school classes and "soft" early intervention points such as the Breakfast Club and literacy programs run by Wesley Mission for pre-school and primary school children.
3. **A clear line-of-sight reporting regime in schools** from the first report of bullying to the resolution of the problem, with schools meeting criteria within a universal accreditation system such as SunSmart and Asthma-Friendly Schools.

4. **Accredited anti-bullying and resilience programs at primary and secondary school** with emphasis on transition points at the start of primary and secondary school where childhood vulnerabilities are high, within an unambiguous culture of respect. Funding for adequate in-school ancillary services in recognition that teachers have a full workload.
5. **The introduction of funding for children suffering from abuse**, including bullying, so that they can rely on extra support in school.
6. **The extension and tailored family therapy programs** so that parents learn to recognise when children are involved in bullying and can be taught to build up key social skills.
7. **Support programs for adults** who are suffering from the effects of childhood bullying such as unresolved problems of guilt, distrust and aggression.





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