# Dealing with Bullying

Ways to deal with bullying have been the subject of much research. We now know some of the things that work, and some of the things that don't.

## Be aware

Bullying effects about 20 percent of the school population at any one time. While we don't have accurate measures over many decades, we suspect the incidence of bullying was even higher when most parents were at school. In earlier times we weren't as aware about bullying as we are today.

This is why some parents may have the incorrect belief that there is little that can be done to stop bullying. Fortunately, in this area we have become much more effective in the last few years.

## What doesn't work in stopping bullying

Strategies that do NOT work with bullying include:

- Fighting back
- Bullying the bully
- Ignoring it and walking away
- Just playing with a different group of students
- Remaining silent about the problem.

## What parents can do as a first step

The most powerful ally a parent has in terms of dealing with bullying is their child's school. Unfortunately, all schools have some bullying incidents. This means that all schools recognise it as a serious problem with negative consequences, and staff receive training on how to deal with it effectively.

Parents' firs  step should be to speak to the school. You do not need to ask your child's permission to speak to their school. Understandably children who are being bullied are often fearful and worry that any action will worsen the problem. They may try to talk you out of speaking to the school. The solution is to make a parental decision to talk to the school. You can always let your child know later what actions you have taken.
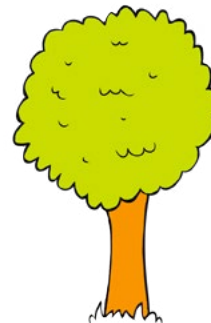
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## What schools can do to prevent bullying

Most often, bullying takes the form of verbal abuse, particularly comments about physical appearance or sexuality, (see homophobia advice sheet). Increasingly we also see cyberbullying (which is dealt with separately).

Establishing a school culture that is clearly pro-learning, and where all members of the school community receive and communicate clear, coherent messages that 'this is a place of learning where violence is neither accepted or expected' is a powerful step towards preventing bullying. Bullying prevention needs to be an ongoing aspect of a school system.

### Be proactive

Cultures of cooperation do not occur by chance They need to be planned for and created.

Schools should establish key values of the school and live them, coherent messages and deliver them. They should review the structures of the school and look for opportunities to enhance positive relationships between staff, parents and students.

### Reduce anonymous space

Bullying thrives where there are no adult eyes. Schools where violence has been a problem improve by reducing the amount of un-owned, anonymous space.

Secondary schools have had success in reverting to a primary school model of classrooms that belong to specifi teachers.

## Determine the extent of bullying

Encourage people who know about bullying to report it.

Surveys, school maps, random bullying audits and posting on websites are methods of students and parents notifying the school about bullying.

## Develop an anti-bullying policy

Generally these should be developed over time with students, parents, and staff members. Policies should include:

- a general statement of intention
- a definitio of bullying as well as different types of bullying—for example physical, verbal, sexual, racial, telephone, cyber and exclusion
- details of how to notify a bullying incident as well as people to contact.

One such example of a definitio that was written by a student is:

*'Bullying is when someone repeatedly uses their power to hurt or scare others. It can be done by an individual or by a group. It can be carried out physically, emotionally or verbally. People bully because they feel bad about themselves or to gain popularity and sometimes even for pleasure.'*

Every government school in Victoria has an anti-bullying prevention policy.

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## Sensitise and involve the peer group

Most students don't want bullying to happen but don't think they can stop it and doubt if their teachers can control it. Make sure the students know that bullying is not accepted and if it is reported it will be acted upon.

## Have a good transition program

Schools that have an effective transition program for students joining them have less bullying.

## Develop resilience

Students who are resilient are much less likely to bully others or to become victims.

## What schools can do to intervene in bullying incidents

The two main research-based methods used for intervening in school bullying are the **no blame** approach and the method of **shared concern**.

The **no blame** approach can be quickly used with groups of students and enlists them in helping students who are the victims of bullies to be empowered and to have a happier time at school.

The method of **shared concern** involves individual meetings with each student involved in the bullying with follow up until the issue has been resolved.

Both methods have been used successfully in Australia and overseas to intervene in bullying incidents.
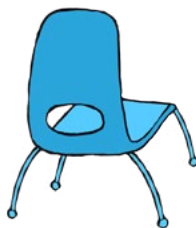
## What people who have been bullied can do

While the people doing the bullying need to be firml and clearly assisted to change their behaviours, those who have been bullied also need be re-empowered so they are equipped for the future. Some people who have been bullied believe the negative messages about them and feel ashamed.

It is important to help de-personalise the bullying. Often we discuss bullying as a primitive, nasty behaviour used to assert dominance at someone else's expense. Many people bully others because they feel bad about themselves. For this reason we explain bullying to people who have experienced it as 'nasty monkey' behaviour.

Immature primates engage in dominating behaviours. When unsupervised and in conditions where there is an opportunity to inflat individual social position, many will be tempted to exploit the vulnerability of others.

This helps people who have been bullied to see that the bullying is not their fault.

This is followed with training in deflectio techniques so students are not overly reactive or sensitive to future taunts or negative comments. Students are then helped to refocus on strengthening other social connections and interests.

The other part of dealing with bullying is to create a school culture, which makes bullying uncool and empowers others who witnesses to bullying and to make a stand.

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## How parents can support

- Take the bullying incident seriously and also know that your child's school will.
- Let the school take responsibility for helping students who are bullying to change their ways.
- Take your child's distress seriously but also convey a message that 'we are going to fix this'.
- Help them to de-personalise the message given to them by bullies by saying things like;

*"That is not true—they are just being mean." or "Just because they say that doesn't mean it's true—there are lots of people who know how wonderful you are."*