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Bullying among young children

A guide for parents





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The recollection described on page 2 is from Mellor, A. 1993, 'Bullying and how to fight it'. The Scottish Council for Research in Education, Glasgow, page 4.

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See also:

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Foreword

Bullying in schools is an area of considerable concern to the community and the Australian Government.

Most work on this issue relates to older children — very little has been done in relation to children aged 4-8 years. However, research indicates that the early years of life are a crucial time for the development of an individual's health and wellbeing.

This means we must learn how to address problem behaviours such as bullying as early in a young person's life as possible, to reduce the risk of long-term damage.

A child who has been the victim of bullying can experience problems with their physical and psychological health, educational attainment and social development.

Of equal concern, a child who bullies another child is at risk of becoming involved in criminal or anti-social behaviour later in life.

As many as one child in six in Australia is bullied by another child or group of children on a weekly basis — an alarming statistic given the possible consequences.

It is important that teachers, carers and parents recognise bullying behaviours and work together to help children who bully and children who are bullied learn to live and play together in a healthy, positive way.

The Australian Government is committed to helping children get off to the best start possible, and is developing a National Agenda for Early Childhood to support this goal. The Government has also provided national leadership in producing the 'National Safe Schools Framework' with the support of the States and Territories. The Framework provides an agreed national approach to help schools and their communities address issues of bullying, harassment, violence and child abuse and neglect. It emphasises the importance of parents and teachers working together to create safer, more supportive learning environments. The Government has committed \$4.5 million to fund specific teacher professional development, school grants and resources in support of the Framework.

Bullying is a significant issue and resources to address it are a very practical and important place to begin. Every child deserves to grow up in a safe, healthy, well-balanced and supportive environment. We are all responsible for ensuring this happens.

The National Crime Prevention Program has funded this information booklet and another for teachers, as well as a 30-minute video featuring early childhood educators and parents who have had to deal with bullying among young children, to help you handle bullying among the children in your care.



Chris Ellison

Minister for Justice and Customs

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In every setting where children come together, whether it is school, preschool, kindergarten or childcare, bullying can be observed. It has always been so. The difference is that these days we are seeing that for some children bullying is a serious problem that needs to be addressed not only by teachers and carers but by the whole community. Parents of young children have an especially important part to play.

In Australia, on average one child in six is bullied by another child or a group of children on a weekly basis. Sometimes the bullying is not very severe and may consist mainly of mild teasing and non-inclusion in some activities. Some children take it in their stride and are not unduly bothered. But if the bullying goes on, as it sometimes does, for months and even years, then even the most resilient children may become miserable, angry and hate being at preschool or school. On occasions children are assaulted by a stronger child or by groups of children, or utterly excluded, and this can be profoundly upsetting.

It is of deep concern to many parents when children are treated badly by their peers and become depressed, sometimes ill or even suicidal.

There is also concern about children who bully others.

Among children who bully, some are very unhappy. Unless someone helps, the risk is that they may grow up to do further harm to others as well as themselves.

This booklet is intended to help parents who are worried because their child is being bullied or because their child is bullying others.

The booklet also seeks to encourage every parent to help make their child's school or centre a happier and safer place.

Many children experience bullying behaviour at an early age. Even at preschools and kindergartens bullying can be observed. Here, for example, is a description of one incident from among hundreds recorded by a research psychologist at preschools in Australia.

'Jim (a preschool boy) goes over to the corner where Sal is playing with a group of girls on a pile of pillows. He growls at them, puts his face very close to theirs and grimaces. They scream and grab the pillows around them. Jim tells them to share the pillows. He then lies down on the pillows and the girls say "we had them first". Jim does not respond and the girls move away, going back only to retrieve their shoes. Jim then moves from the pillows and gets a piece of string. He grabs Sybi and puts the string around her neck, pulling it around her neck. Sybi cries. A member of staff comes over and tells him to play with Ian. He turns to Sybi and says "cry baby". Jim then goes over to Melanie and, while smiling, pulls her hair.'

Such bullying behaviour must be stopped not only for the sake of Sybi and Melanie and all other children who find themselves in similar positions, but also for the good of children like Jim.

People often have sad memories of being bullied when they were children at school, as in this recollection:

"When I was at primary school I got picked on non-stop for two years. No-one talked to me. I hadn't done anything to get blamed for and I still don't know the reason I got picked on. I wasn't any wealthier or poorer or from a different race. I used to cry myself to sleep every night. I was miserable ... I'd hate to think this was happening to anyone else."

Parents of children who attend preschools, kindergartens and primary schools need to work closely with teachers to help recognise and address problems of bullying behaviour as soon as they arise – and before it is too late.

What exactly is bullying?

Parents need to be clear about what bullying is – and what it is not.

It is **not** about children of roughly the same strength or power arguing or quarrelling or getting into the odd fight about something.

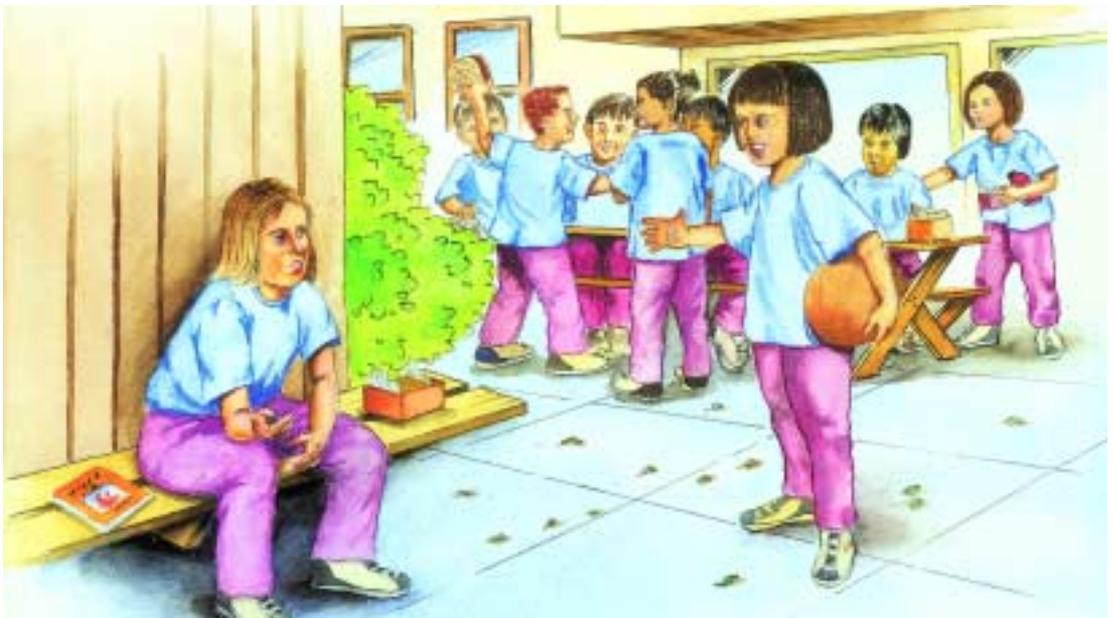
Bullying occurs when somebody who is less powerful than another person or a group is deliberately and (typically) repeatedly hurt without in any way deserving that treatment.

The children doing the bullying enjoy what they are doing and the victim is unable to avoid being bullied.

These are some of the ways a child may be bullied by peers at school:

- A child may be **physically** bullied by being continually struck or pushed around by another person or group.
- There may be **repeated threats** of what is going to happen next.
- **Property** may frequently be taken away or damaged.
- The bullying may be **verbal**, as in unpleasant name-calling and constant ridicule.
- A child may be bullied **indirectly** as happens when someone is excluded from an activity without reason or nasty rumours are spread about her or him.

Bullying may be carried out in any or all of these ways.



Identifying bullying

It commonly **begins** when a child is 'picked on' by another child or by a group of children, is unable to resist and lacks the support of others.

It will **continue** if the children doing the bullying have little or no sympathy for the child they are hurting, and especially if they are getting some pleasure out of what they are doing – and if nobody stops them.

It takes place mostly **outside** the centre or school building at free play, recess or lunchtime. It may also happen on the way to or from the school or centre, and especially on the school bus if there is not adequate supervision.

Bullying may sometimes occur **in the classroom**. Here it is usually of a more subtle, non-physical kind, such as cruel teasing, making faces at someone or repeatedly making unkind and sarcastic comments.

Identifying bullying is sometimes not easy.

Carers or teachers are often not present when it happens, and children are often reluctant to tell anyone.

Bullying needs to be brought out into the open. Parents should encourage children who are being bullied to tell and get help from people they can trust.

Children watching bullying

Bullying usually takes place when other children are present. What do these bystanders do?

- Commonly they simply **stand there and watch**. This may lead the bullies to think that nobody objects to what they are doing.
- Sometimes **they positively encourage the bully or bullies**, either by cheering them on, or in some cases joining in and ridiculing the victim.
- In a minority of cases someone may **object** by calling out to say it is unfair and should be stopped.
- Very occasionally, a child may go off and **tell** a teacher or carer what's happening.

If bystanders acted to discourage bullying when it occurred, much of the bullying would stop.

In some circumstances there are risks involved in intervening when someone is being bullied.

With the help of parents and teachers children can learn when it is safe to intervene and how they can do so.



While it can sometimes be dangerous to rush in to restrain children who are attacking someone, a child can often do constructive things to counter the bullying and its effects on some children, such as:

- **Expressing disapproval** by refusing to be amused at what is happening; even walking away is better than just standing there.
- **Informing adults** when an incident of bullying occurs. It is not 'dobbing' to tell a teacher or carer. Children who are being bullied need to be helped by adults.
- Helping to **resolve conflicts** between children when they arise. Conflicts can sometimes lead to bullying. Some schools now teach children conflict resolution skills. Encourage children to apply what they have learnt.
- Offering **comfort and support afterwards** to a child who has been bullied.

The child who is victimised

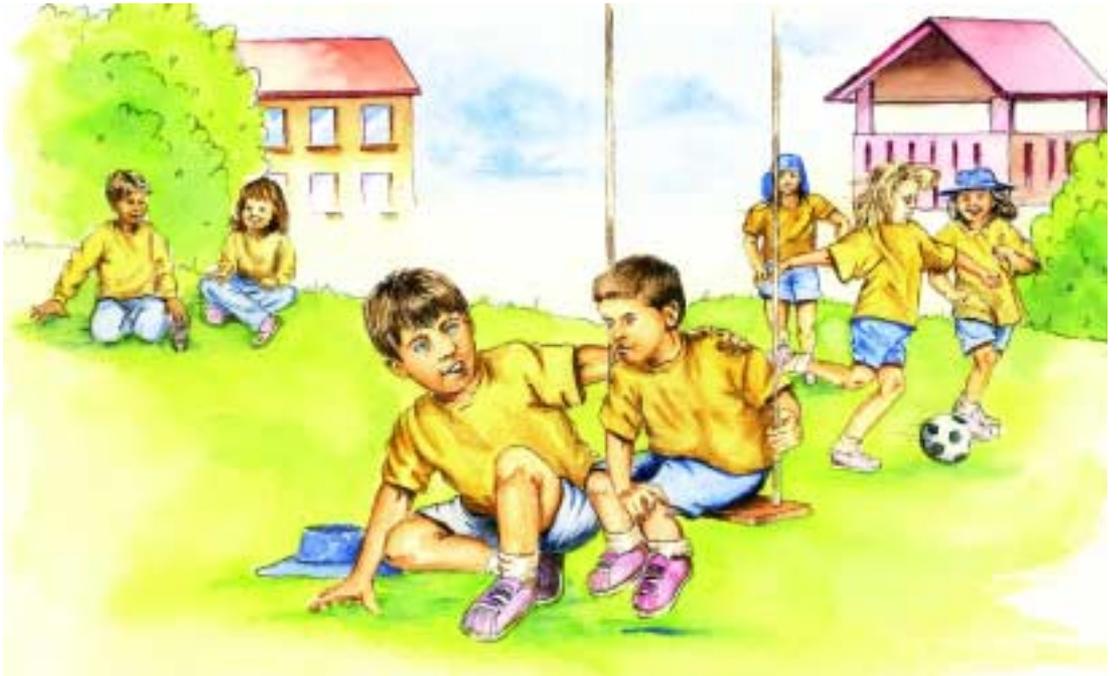
Any child can become a victim. Unfortunately the child who is victimised often thinks it is because there is something wrong or unacceptable about himself or herself. **And this is not so.**

It is true that some children are more likely to be bullied than others. Often they are quiet, sensitive children who easily become anxious and find it hard to defend themselves. Sometimes they belong to a group against which there is strong prejudice, for example, a minority ethnic group. Or they may be different from most other children in appearance or interest.

If the bullying is severe and prolonged and the targeted child is unable to overcome the problem or get help, the following can happen:

- The child may lose confidence and self-esteem.
- He or she may lose friends and become isolated.
- The child may become seriously depressed, disturbed or ill.
- The child may refuse to go to preschool or school.
- School work may suffer.
- The child may seek revenge and (in extreme cases) may use a weapon to get even.
- For years to come the child may distrust others and find it impossible to make friends.

Such a child needs support and help, especially from parents.



How parents can help the bullied child

Parents can help by being observant and noticing changes in mood and behaviour. For instance, a child may cry more easily, become irritable or experience difficulty sleeping. Younger children may find it difficult to explain what is wrong. Talking it over with a child's teacher or carer may lead to a better understanding of what is happening.

Simply listening sympathetically helps. Such support can reduce the pain and misery. It never helps to say it's the child's problem and that he or she must simply stand up to the bullies, whatever the situation. Sometimes this course of action is impractical, especially if a group is involved.

Nor does it help the child to be over-protective, for example, by saying: 'Never mind. I will look after you. You don't have to go to school'.

Here are some suggestions for talking with the child and trying to understand the situation from the child's point of view:

- Find out what has been happening and how the child has been reacting and feeling.
- Suggest to the child things to do when he or she is picked on. Sometimes by acting

assertively or not over-reacting, the bullying can be stopped. It is always much better if children, with a bit of good advice, can do something to help themselves.

- Explore with the child what leads up to the bullying. Very occasionally a child may be provoking others by annoying or irritating them, and can learn not to do so.
- Sometimes it is wise to discuss with the child what places it might be best to avoid, and, on occasions, whom to stay close to in threatening situations.
- Make a realistic assessment of the seriousness of the bullying and plan accordingly.

It is serious if the child is being assaulted, is afraid to go to school, kindergarten or the child care centre, is continually emotionally upset, can't sleep, can't concentrate, or is complaining of feeling sick or ill. In these cases, it is necessary to contact the place the child attends and seek help.

It is wise to resist any urge to sort out the problem directly with those who are doing the bullying. This usually makes matters worse.



Children who bully are generally unconcerned about the people they hurt. Indeed they may enjoy hurting those they victimise. However, individual children may bully for different reasons, and it is useful for parents to know, if at all possible, **why** they are doing it.

Those who bully in a group often think they are just **having fun**. They do not seem fully aware of the hurt they are personally responsible for inflicting, because they are just going along with the group.

Some children who bully **feel hurt** themselves, sometimes because of unkind treatment in the home, and seek to take it out on somebody whom they can bully.

In some cases, children bully because they are trying to **get even** with somebody. It could be a person who used to be a friend against whom they now have a grudge.

A child may bully because he or she believes that members of some groups or types deserve to be treated badly, because of their race or ethnicity, their interests or their appearance. Such **prejudice** is at the root of much bullying.

Some children may bully because they get **admired** for bossing people around - and it makes them feel good, and safe from being bullied themselves.

Sometimes (but not always) they are **impulsive** children who find it hard to control their anger. They may lack the social skills to get on with people, although some are clever and manipulative.

Among children who bully there are some who are very unhappy. Often they have not learned to be cooperative and responsible individuals.

Knowing why a child bullies never excuses the bullying behaviour, but it can sometimes help parents know how best to change the way the child behaves.

How parents can help the child who bullies

The child's bullying behaviour at school may come as a surprise to parents because the child may not bully at home. Parents of children who bully others should think carefully about why their child does so.

The possible reasons on the previous page may provide useful clues.

Parents should not assume that they are to blame for their child's misbehaviour, especially as the child gets older. But at the same time, they should ask whether they ever model bullying behaviour themselves, and whether the child is copying this behaviour.

Consider whether the child who bullies feels very frustrated in the home and wants to hurt others as a consequence.

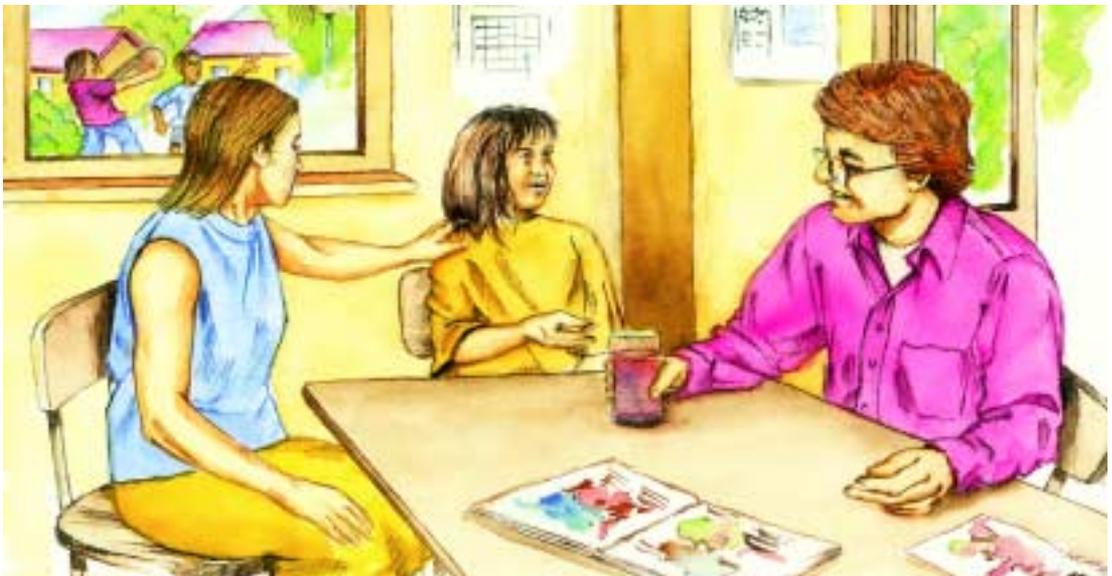
Children who feel loved and not over-controlled at home are less likely to bully others.

When children start preschool or school they experience new pressures from peers and sometimes respond by trying to dominate whoever they can by bullying them.

Whatever the reason, even if the child thinks it is 'just fun', parents should firmly disapprove and insist that the bullying stop.

Often parents of children who bully are asked by teachers to help improve the situation. It is tempting to be defensive or to offer excuses. It is better to **focus on the bullying behaviour** that needs to change, not only for the good of the child but also for the good of others.

Rather than abuse or threaten a child who engages in bullying, parents may quietly share their concern for what has been happening to the victim and firmly insist that it must not happen again.



Working with teachers is often necessary when a child becomes involved in bullying behaviour.

Parents of children who have been bullied by their peers **have a right** to seek help. Teachers **have a responsibility** to do what they can to help.

Parents of bullied children should be as clear as possible about when, where and how their child was bullied, how the child responded and how he or she was affected.

It is a common (and understandable) mistake for parents to get angry and accuse the school or centre of negligence. This often makes matters worse. Parents, however, have a right to a sympathetic hearing.

Parents and teachers need to cooperate to solve bully/victim problems.

When they meet parents, the school or preschool representative should focus on what is to be done to stop the bullying. Often action is needed **by both parties**.

A few children who are bullied may actually provoke such treatment and should be helped to avoid doing so. Many more children, however, have done **nothing** to bring on the bullying.

The school should be prepared to take decisive action by confronting the bullying behaviour, and involving the parents of children who bully.

Parents can often avail themselves of opportunities to attend meetings and be on school councils, and put forward their ideas on bullying.

Parents can ask that a sensible and **widely supported policy** to stop bullying be developed.

For its good name and for fair and efficient responding to bullying, a school or centre needs such a policy – and parents should insist upon it.



Background reading

There is an increasing number of books available that are helpful to parents who are concerned about the problem of bullying in schools.

These include:

Berne, S. 1996, 'Bully-proof your child', Lothian, Melbourne.

Field, E. M. 1999, 'Bully busting', Finch, Lane Cove, Sydney.

Griffiths, C. 1997, 'What can you do about bullying? A guide for parents', Meerlinga Young Children's Foundation, East Perth.

National Crime Prevention, 2002. 'A meta evaluation of methods and approaches to reducing bullying in pre-schools and early primary school in Australia'. National Crime Prevention, Australian Government Attorney- General's Department, Canberra.

Olweus, D. 1993, 'Bullying at school: what we know and what we can do', Blackwell, Cambridge, MA.

Rigby, K. 1996, 'Bullying in schools – and what to do about it', ACER, Melbourne.

Rigby, K. 2001, 'Stop the Bullying. A handbook for schools', ACER, Melbourne.

Romain, T. 1997, 'Bullies are a pain in the brain', Free Spirit Publishing Co., Minneapolis.

Stones, R. 1993, 'Don't pick on me', Pembroke, Markham, ON.

Sullivan, K. 2000 'The anti-bullying handbook', Oxford University Press, New York.

Zarzour, K. 1999, 'The schoolyard bully', Harper Collins, Toronto.

Other resources on bullying in schools

Websites

These websites include practical advice about bullying at school for parents and families:

<http://www.bullyingnoway.com.au>

<http://www.curriculum.edu.au/mctyapdf/natsafeschools>

<http://www.bullying.org/help.html>

<http://www.kidshelp.com.au/INF07/linksforparents.htm>

<http://www.nobully.org.nz/advicep.htm>

<http://www.lfcc.on.ca/bully.htm>

<http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/family/nf309.htm>

<http://www.scre.ac.uk/bully/bother.html>

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying/>

<http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/>

<http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au/pegs/29.pdf>

Counselling resources

Children can receive professional counselling on bullying problems from Kids Help Line.

The free-call number is 1800 551 800.

A Parent Help Line is available in:

ACT on (02) 6205 8800;

NSW on 13 20 55;

Queensland on 1300 301 300;

SA on 1300 364 100;

Tasmania on 1800 808 178;

Victoria on 13 22 89; and

WA on 1800 654 432.

A Crisis Line, for family and children issues, is available in the Northern Territory on (08) 8981 9277.

