

## **INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

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The Hon Robyn Parker MLC  
Committee Chair  
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2  
NSW Legislative Council  
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Dear Committee Chair,

**Re: Inquiry into bullying of children and young people**

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) is the NSW peak body representing agencies providing direct services to children and young people, and their families. In 2008, ACWA celebrated 50 years of social advocacy.

The pivotal points in ACWA's submission are:

- Action should be taken to eliminate bullying in all forms.
- Cyber-bullying is a growing concern with little research currently on hand on the best way to protect children.
- Approaches and interventions need to accommodate the different contributing factors as well as the different systems that an individual is engaged.
- Each child ultimately has individual differences and hence will require a response that addresses the needs of that child.
- Non-government agencies need to be involved in a partnership with government inter-departmental teams when formulating approaches to bullying.
- Strategies for reducing bullying need to address: vulnerabilities of children with disabilities, and children that are not involved in direct schooling
- Strategies need to have enough scope to address bullying that occurs outside the school environment, and bullying from other authorities.

Should you require further information, please contact Lo-Shu Wen, Policy Officer, on 02 9281 8822 or email [loshu@acwa.asn.au](mailto:loshu@acwa.asn.au).

Yours sincerely,

Sylvia Ghaly  
Manager of Policy and Membership

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## **Executive Summary**

Childhood and adolescence are important developmental and formative stages for individuals and ultimately shapes a person's adulthood. During these stages of development it is important that there is adequate care and nurturing in order for the child to develop and meet their potential. Everyone should have the opportunity to flourish without ridicule or intimidation from others.

It is acknowledged that "bullying and harassment are pervasive problems in schools" (Lodge, 2008). There are a range of factors to consider in the cause and impact of bullying. If left unchecked, bullying can have lifelong detrimental effects to health and wellbeing, for example injuries from physical harm, mental health issues, or social isolation. This ultimately has associated costs to the community.

There are a number of approaches to bullying, broadly divided into the problem solving approach, and rules-and-sanctions intervention. There is no conclusive research on which approach is more effective. Overall, approaches should be flexible to match the situation, bullying behaviour, and the needs of those involved.

## **Terms of Reference**

### **1. The nature, level and impact of bullying among school age children and young people under the age of 18, including apprentices and trainees**

According to Rigby (2002), bullying involves the perpetration of hurtful behaviour (physical, verbal or relational). This action is regarded as unjustified, typically repeated, and experienced by the target of the aggression as oppressive. Rigby (1999) adds that there is an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim, with the perpetrator deriving enjoyment from the bullying.

When bullying is mentioned, most immediately think of bullying in a school context. The Kids Help Line (2000) have as part of their definition of bullying that it occurs: "at school or in transit between school and home". However, bullying is not just limited to the school yard. It is pervasive throughout many aspects of daily life and for all ages, examples of this include: bullying in the workplace, and acts of road rage. This Inquiry, is concerned with bullying for children and young people under the age of 18.

In 1997, research conducted by Rigby (cited in Lodge, 2008) indicated "school bullying affects one in six young people." At school, boys are more likely to initiate bullying than girls, and boys are also more likely to bully girls, than vice versa (Olweus, 1993; Smith & Sharp, 1994 cited in Rigby (2003). Bullying is prevalent in both Primary and Secondary school. Perhaps surprisingly, it has also been reported that "bullying is prevalent in Australian kindergartens" (Rigby, 2002). However, Rigby (2002) explains that there is a reluctance to describe their behaviour as bullying. Bullying is commonly physical in Primary School and more often verbal and indirect through social manipulation in Secondary School (Rigby, 1999).

With the growth of new innovations and methods of communication, it is reasonable to deduce that the reach and impact of bullying has increased. For example, victims can potentially face humiliation on a much greater scale, through mediums such as the Internet. The rise of this 'cyber-bullying' is attributed "primarily to increased adolescent access to the internet and mobile phones, facilitated by the anonymity provided by the internet." (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2007)

Lodge (2008) proposes that acts of bullying include: "physically threatening behaviour such as punching; verbal and relational forms of aggression such as name-calling and social exclusion; and, more recently with the growth of technology, online social cruelty or electronic bullying."

The impact of bullying on the victim depends on a range of factors. These factors may include, but are not limited to:

- the severity and frequency of the bullying
- the victim's resilience and their ability to respond
- other people's perspectives
- the supports and protective systems available

Bullying can have a significant impact on a child, resulting in: social breakdown, psychological scarring, physical violence, or loss of life. Lodge (2008) adds that bullying is "a significant causal factor in lowered health and wellbeing."

The potential negative impacts of bullying are not limited to the victim. Should the behaviours not be adequately addressed, the perpetrators are "more likely to drop out of school, use drugs and alcohol, as well as engage in subsequent delinquent and criminal behaviour." (Farrington, 1993 cited in Morrison, 2002)

It is important to emphasise that all forms of bullying are equally undesirable and strategies should be devised for all levels of bullying in order to prevent it from occurring or to diffuse incidents before they escalate. If left unaddressed, there are flow-on consequences for society, "for it is society that supports those in the justice and health care systems." (Morrison, 2002)

## **2. Factors contributing to bullying**

The Kids Help Line (2004) reports that the children who contact them for support and advice on being bullied, identify the following reasons for their victimisation:

- ethnicity
- resistance to pressure to behave in a certain way
- physical differences
- high achievement
- being new
- sexual orientation
- socio-economic background

Morrison (2002) broadly categorises the factors into individual differences, family and school. The feedback that ACWA has received from its members that provide Out-of-Home Care services reflect the difficulty children and young people face to try and 'fit in'. Children in Out-of-Home Care present with the stigma of a fractured childhood and family unit, and low self esteem; making it difficult for them to obtain a sense of belonging. The lack of belonging makes them vulnerable to bullies or to become bullies themselves.

There is an interplay that occurs between the different causal factors. Morrison (2002) states that, "what is lacking is a solid framework for understanding the relationship between these different risk factors, to help focus the development of effective interventions." It is therefore critical to be mindful of and treat each case individually, having unique determining factors. The responses need to be appropriately matched to the causal factors present. Ideally they should be holistic and have its base within the social systems that the person is linked in with.

### **3. Prevention and early intervention approaches to address bullying, including 'cyber-bullying'**

Rigby (2002) in his meta-evaluation of methods and approaches to reduce bullying found that, "the likelihood of success appears to be greater when programmes are implemented with younger students attending kindergartens and primary school". ACWA supports intervention at the early stages of issue, as it prevents the issue from becoming larger if left unaddressed. ACWA would be in support of appropriate awareness-raising and social skills development with young primary students so that bullying behaviour can be curbed before it is problematic and destructive.

The question of how to address 'cyber-bullying' is difficult. Lodge (2008) explains, "research into this new permutation of bullying is still in its infancy". ACWA believe that efforts should be placed in strengthening the family unit. Through a process of empowerment and awareness-raising, families will be better equipped to identify, discuss and resolve occurrences of 'cyber-bullying'. Lodge (2008) believes that, "adults have an important part to play in supervising the activities of young people when using these technologies."

As bullying is likely to have different causal factors, the prevention and early intervention approaches need to be thought out carefully. Such approaches may need to think beyond the school environment, and also focus on other social contexts that a child engages in and consider what aspects in those environments give lead to bullying behaviour.

### **4. Co-ordination and co-operation between relevant government agencies to address bullying**

ACWA agrees that there should be co-ordination and co-operation between relevant government agencies. This would enable the expertise of the different agencies to be shared. These partnerships will enable better planning of approaches to address bullying. It will assist to prevent duplication, and facilitate the design of a comprehensive system that will be able to address bullying at different levels. Rigby (2002) asserts that, "bullying behaviour between children in schools and centres can be reduced significantly by well-planned intervention programmes."

The co-ordination and co-operation process should be extended to non-government agencies. ACWA's members are engaged with the day-to-day delivery of services to children and young people, and their families. Within the sector there are skills, knowledge, and experience that would promote a mutually enriching partnership that would help address bullying.

Lodge (2008) suggests that, "family relationships practitioners can play an important part in managing bullying concerns with affected families by offering a collaborative approach to the school-based bullying problem." The full collaborative approach, referred to by Lodge, can be achieved by involving the non-government sector who are engaged with families and delivering services to them. The non-government agencies are able to provide a unique service pathway for families enabling the creation of a relationship where trust and rapport can be established.

### **5. The evidence-base for effective anti-bullying approaches**

ACWA supports evidence-based practice. The practice should be based on robust and tested frameworks. A study of these approaches should examine whether those approaches have been subjected to a thorough evaluation that ensures efficacy.

Rigby (2002) explains that there has "been comparatively little research undertaken to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of anti-bullying initiatives in Australian schools, especially among younger students attending pre-school and early primary school." This may have progressed over the last 6 years.

Based on his analysis of programs, locally and internationally, designed to reduce bullying, Rigby (2002) stated that, "in the absence of interventions, bullying tends to increase." This suggests that anti-bullying approaches appear to have a positive effect, however, more research needs to be conducted to distill the properties of a program in order to identify which aspects are achieving the results.

ACWA believes that the design of interventions should be carefully undertaken. A good design requires clear definitions of: the terms of reference, the objective, the practice model, and a good evaluation of the outcomes. Different types of bullying have different types of triggers and the design needs to be able to accommodate this and intervene appropriately. Approaches should not be simply lifted from one setting and transplanted to another setting in the hope that it will work as effectively as in its origins. The desired outcomes need to be appropriately matched to the setting. Cultural differences across all levels need to be accounted for when considering external programs.

Rigby (2003) concludes that "no single view is sufficiently comprehensive in providing a definitive answer as to what is "best practice". Therefore, in applying anti-bullying policies and procedures, schools should consider the strengths and limitations of each suggested approach and the appropriateness of its application to particular bully/ victim problems."

## **6. Approaches to address bullying in Australian and overseas jurisdictions**

The literature indicates that there are two broad approaches in addressing bullying:

### **i) Problem Solving Approach**

Interventions that fall into this category include: 'No Blame Approach' (Maines & Robinson, 1992 cited in Lodge, 2008), the Method of Shared Concern (Pikas, 2002 cited in Lodge, 2008), and Restorative Justice Method (Morrison, 2007 cited in Lodge, 2008).

Lodge (2008) explains that these "approaches aim to foster more socially responsible relationships and behaviours by encouraging those involved to take others' perspectives into account."

### **ii) Rules and Sanctions Interventions**

The best known of which is: Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus, 1991 cited in Lodge, 2008).

Morrison (2002) describes rules and sanctions interventions as valuing accountability, whilst the problem solving approach values compassion.

The evidence is not conclusive on which approach is the most effective. Stevens et al. (2000, cited in Lodge, 2008) argue that the problem solving approach is more effective for older children "with a capacity for independent critical thinking and displays of emotional sensitivity." Rigby (2002) in his research found that "it is currently unclear from research which approaches to reducing bullying, for example, a so-called 'no-blame approach' or one emphasising rules and the use of negative sanctions, are likely to be more effective."

ACWA believes these findings reflect the need to be flexible with interventions. Agencies, such as schools, should not be forced into a 'one size fits all' approach when addressing bullying. The situation, and the needs of all parties should be considered carefully when determining what is the next best course of action. Rigby (2002) supports a similarly flexible approach, he states: "possibly each may be applied, depending upon particular circumstances."

ACWA advocates that interventions aim to maintain links between the children and their support networks, on the understanding that it is these networks on which the children will draw on to support them in their redress of the bullying behaviour. These networks may include the school, their family, or other significant relationships. Lodge (2008) states, that "support received from within the family environment is a crucial factor in determining a young person's involvement in bully-victim situations."

#### **7. Any other relevant matter.**

ACWA would like to draw the Committee's attention briefly to the following matters for consideration:

- Children and Young People with a disability
- Children and Young People not engaged in the education system

Whilst not mentioned in the main body of our submission, ACWA would like to convey our concern for those children with a physical and/or intellectual disability. These children are particularly vulnerable to bullying and as a result of their disability may be restricted in their ability to achieve recourse. Particular care needs to be made to accommodate this client group's needs and vulnerabilities.

ACWA would like to raise concern about those young people and children not participating in the education system. We understand that schools are considered a microcosm of society, contributing to the reason why it is considered a focal point for these issues. However, there are children not engaged in the education system who similarly experience bullying or who are bullies. An approach would only be as effective as its ability to include the whole client group.

In cases where a child or young person is excluded from face-to-face participation in the education system or excluded altogether, this is conceivably due to risk issues with their behaviour. On occasions this risk behaviour may be a symptom of a disability. Alternatively, the child's behaviours may have manifested to the point where they pose a risk to themselves or others in the school environment. Approaches to reducing bullying need to be able to assist and support these situations.

The experience of being bullied is not confined to schools. Bullying occurs in youth centres, parks, shopping centres and other spaces; and it is not limited to peer-to-peer bullying. Children and young people would consider that they are bullied by: the Police, their parents, and other people of authority. Strategies that address bullying need to be transferable to other facets of the child's life. This strategies need to be able to withstand situations outside the school environment where there are no teachers or other adults providing supervision or safety.

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