

INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Organisation: Australian Institute of Family Studies
Name: Professor Alan Hayes
Position: Director
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NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 Inquiry into the bullying of children and young people

Submission from the Australian Institute of Family Studies

Authorised by:

Professor Alan Hayes, Director

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The Australian Institute of Family Studies is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 Inquiry into the bullying of children and young people.

Although bullying of children and young people has not been the sole focus of any specific research projects conducted by the Institute, there is a range of studies and other sources of relevant information to which we wish to draw the Committee's attention.

The research we describe emphasises the impact of bullying on families, and the role that families can play in both preventing and responding to bullying of children and young people.

Data from the Australian Temperament Project

The Australian Temperament Project (ATP) is a longitudinal community study that is currently hosted at the Institute. The ATP has followed the development of more than 2,000 Victorian children from infancy onwards (for more information on the study, see: www.aifs.gov.au/atp). Research evidence from the ATP highlights the seemingly widespread nature of bullying behaviour in Australia.

The adolescents participating in this study were asked a series of questions during their early secondary school years (ages 12-14 years) about how they were getting along with their peers. While adolescents generally felt positive about their peer relationships, about one-in-four reported that they had been the victim of bullying, with 5% to 6% reporting that bullying was quite a serious problem for them. The experience of bullying was more common among males than females (Prior, Sanson, Smart, & Oberklaid, 2000).

More recently, when the young people in the study were 23-24 years of age, they were asked to reflect back on their experiences of being bullied, or of bullying others, when they were growing up¹. Almost half of the 1,001 young people surveyed (45%) indicated that they had *been bullied* at least once by a school mate(s). Of those who had been bullied, almost all (95%) had been bullied more than once, and over a third (36%) had experienced bullying 'many times'. The most common form of bullying experienced was verbal abuse or insults (87%), although isolation or exclusion was also common (51%). Ten percent had experienced physical bullying. Young men were somewhat more likely than young women to have been bullied (49% compared with 43%).

The young adults were also asked about whether they had *engaged in any bullying behaviour*. About a quarter of the young people (26%) reported that they had bullied a peer. This behaviour had generally occurred more than once, with 69% reporting that they had engaged in bullying 'a few times' and 12%

¹ These findings are unpublished.

had bullied others 'many times'. Once again, the most common form of bullying reported was verbal abuse or insults (79%), although many reported having isolated or excluded a school mate/s (41%) and about one-in-six had engaged in physical bullying (17%). Young men were much more likely than young women to have been perpetrators of bullying behaviour (39% compared with 17%).

Looking at the sub-group who had *engaged in bullying*, 70% had also been a *victim* of bullying. In contrast, when looking at the sub-group who had *been bullied*, the majority (60%) had not engaged in bullying behaviour.

Work is currently underway at the Institute to look at the risk factors for, and consequences of, bullying using the ATP dataset.

Families and school-based bullying

The Institute operates the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (www.aifs.gov.au/afrc), which is an information and advisory unit focused on the enhancement of family relationships across the lifespan. One of the publications produced by the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse last year was a briefing paper entitled "Working with families concerned with school-based bullying" (Lodge, 2008). In the paper, Dr Lodge outlined some of the key issues around school-based bullying, with a focus on what families can do – and in particular, what agencies and therapists who work with families can do to assist them. In the following paragraphs, we provide a brief overview of these issues.

School bullying is a particular form of aggressive behaviour that typically involves a power imbalance and deliberate acts of harm, which may be physical, emotional and/or psychological. Longitudinal studies highlight bullying as a significant factor in lowered health and wellbeing, including physical and somatic symptoms, anxiety, social dysfunction and depression, school failure and substance use. Both boys and girls can be victims and/or bullies, with boys tending to bully in ways that are more physical and girls in ways that are more emotional or indirect.

More recently, with the growth of technology, cyber-bullying has increased, and both boys and girls are involved. Cyber-bullying involves destructive images or text posted on the Internet via personal websites or blogs, email messages, discussion groups, message boards, SMS or MMS. Cyber-bullying needs to be taken seriously, as victims can experience great suffering that can interfere with their social and emotional development.

Children who bully are more likely to come from families where parenting is both "authoritarian" and inconsistent. (According to Diana Baumrind, who developed a typology of parenting, *authoritarian parents* are highly demanding and directive, but not responsive.²) The pattern of bullying may continue into later life and has been linked to domestic violence and a greater likelihood of criminal convictions and aggressive behaviour in general.

Support from family, the nature of family dynamics and the ability to appropriately resolve conflict in the family are crucial factors in determining a young person's involvement in bully-victim situations. Encouraging responsive and responsible authoritative parenting will reduce the risk that young people are involved in school bullying problems, but also increase their ability to handle problems that may arise. (*Authoritative parents* are both demanding and responsive – setting clear standards, monitoring children's behaviour, but using disciplinary methods that are supportive, rather than punitive.) Interactions with siblings are also important, as these interactions can influence relationship styles. Parents may inadvertently support bullying by not intervening when siblings fight.

² See: <http://www.thehealth.com/Practitioner/ceduc/parentingstyles.html#Baumrind91>

Lodge (2008) reviewed some of the strategies that parents can use to identify bullying and its antecedents early on, in order to intervene early, and to provide support. Use of active listening skills by parents may help children and young people open up about bullying problems. General conversations about schools and friends may help to encourage conversation. Interactive questions can include:

- What is lunchtime like at school?
- Who do you sit with, what do you do and what do you talk about?
- Have you ever heard kids at your school call each other names?
- Do they ever bully by hitting or pushing?
- What usually happens? What do other kids do?
- Do you ever feel lonely, get called names, left out of activities, been hit or pushed, etc? Let's talk about how you feel and what you do when this happens.
- What can I do to help?

Young people do not always respond well to persistent questioning; therefore it may be better for them to talk to someone they trust who is not related. Thus, school personnel (i.e., a school guidance officer, trusted teacher, or other positive adult role model) can play an important role in not only preventing, but intervening early and providing support to young people who are at risk, or already experiencing bullying behaviour from peers.

In terms of cyber-bullying, parents can help to monitor online activities by:

- keeping home computers in easily viewable places, such as a family room or kitchen;
- talking regularly with their child about online activities;
- talking specifically about cyber-bullying and encouraging young people to tell if she or he is a victim;
- outlining expectations for responsible online behaviour and the consequences for inappropriate behaviour; and
- helping young people develop skills that would enable them to identify the need to leave online situations.

Effects of bullying on the wider family

Although the impact of bullying on children and young people in the short term (e.g., anxiety, low self-esteem, and other psychological/behavioural disorders) and in the long-term (e.g., affecting school performance, school completion, and later psychological adjustment in adulthood), little consideration has been given to the impact of bullying on other members of the family. A recent exploratory study in Australia highlighted that parents of children who are bullied may "feel angry, powerless and guilty about their inability to protect their child..." and to question "the adequacy to perform the parental role" (Humphrey & Crisp, 2008). The authors also went on to describe how the siblings and partners of the participants in their study also experienced stress. They raise important topics for further research and action, including:

- awareness of kinder (pre-school) staff about bullying;
- understanding and addressing parents' feelings of isolation, and lack of ability to 'advocate' for their child; and
- provision of supports for the whole family.

Bullying and child protection issues

The Institute operates the National Child Protection Clearinghouse (www.aifs.gov.au/nch), which collects, produces and distributes information and resources, conducts research, and offers specialist advice on the latest developments in child abuse prevention, child protection and associated violence. We have examined some of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse's resources to highlight the connection between bullying and other forms of parental child maltreatment.

Specific connections between child abuse/neglect and bullying have rarely been examined in Australia. In relation to perpetrators of bullying, there is no single path that will lead a child into bullying others; however, several risk factors can be identified that may increase the likelihood of bullying behaviour. Although experiences of child abuse or neglect by a caregiver in the family home is considered a key risk factor for bullying behaviour, other risk factors include race or religious differences and other prejudices.

In experiencing abuse or neglect in the family home, studies have shown that children are much more likely to develop behavioural problems and cognitive delays, yet research into whether such problems have a relationships with bullying are rare. The studies that are available highlight that children who have been maltreated are much more likely to be either perpetrators and/or victims of bullying than non-maltreated children. For example, Shields and Cicchetti (2001) examined the likelihood of bullying on a sample of 169 maltreated children and 98 non-maltreated children. They found that bullying was much more prevalent among children who experienced physical or sexual abuse. Research studies have identified that children who witness or experience physical violence in the home are more likely to imitate the behaviour in other environments. A US study by Dussich and Maekoya (2007) found that there are significant relationships between physical child harm and three types of bullying: (a) offending; (b) being victimised; and (c) both offending and being victimised. Shields and Cicchetti also found that maltreatment placed children at greater risk for victimisation, highlighting that child maltreatment by caregivers could severely affect a child's ability to relate to their peers. Although the limited research literature identifies a key link between experiences of child maltreatment and bullying, it cannot be assumed that all perpetrators have been victims of child abuse or neglect.

Bullying and schools

Teachers and bullying behaviour. In one of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse Issues Papers, Tomison and Tucci (1997) provided the following discussion about teachers and use of emotionally abusive behaviour:

“A particular form of systems abuse that is not frequently mentioned in the literature is emotional abuse within educational settings. A number of studies have indicated that a proportion of teachers commonly use emotional abuse in conjunction with other punitive disciplining practices as a means of exerting control (Hart, Germain & Brassard 1987; Briggs & Hawkins 1996).

“While physical punishment has been banned in most educational settings, emotional abuse often passes without comment (Briggs & Hawkins 1996). Briggs and Hawkins (1996), in their book *Child Protection: A Guide for Teachers and Child Care Professionals*, cite studies by Krugman and Krugman (1984) and Hyman (1985), which found that teachers emotionally abused children by: overly restricting access to toilets for very young children; threatening to tell parents of a child's misbehaviour or unsatisfactory work; rejecting the child or their work; verbally abusing children; harassing, or allowing other children to harass children; labeling children as 'uneducable', 'dumb' or 'stupid'; screaming at children till they cried; and providing a 'continuous

experience of failure by setting ... tasks that are inappropriate for their stages of development' (Briggs & Hawkins 1996, p.37).

“Briggs and Hawkins describe other 'emotionally abusive' actions recorded in the two studies: pinching, shaking and pulling children by the ears; using fear-inducing techniques to control children; and tipping or pulling chairs out from under seated children. Such behaviours would seem to be more appropriately labeled as physically abusive, indicating yet again the difficulties experienced in developing clear definitions of emotionally abusive acts.

“Finally, Briggs and Hawkins (1996) highlight as emotionally abusive the failure of teachers to deal with allegations or suspicions of child maltreatment, along with the experience of bullying by peers.”

In another Australian study, Healy (2005) argued that bullying behaviour can be equated on many levels with other forms of child abuse. However, she noted that teachers often do not interpret behaviours between peers as either abusive or bullying. Instead, they are often framed as “mutually aggressive interactions between peers”. The consequence of viewing behaviours in this way is that victims are likely to feel unprotected and unsupported.

Schools and sexual assault

Issues around school-based bullying are closely related to sexual assault, particularly when the assault is a verbal one, or where sexual harassment is occurring – often from peers. The Institute also operates the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (www.aifs.gov.au/acssa). One of the recent publications from the Centre was focused on sexual assault and schools (Quadara, 2008). School students who have experienced sexual violence are often reluctant to go to the police, but usually disclose their experiences to friends or family. According to Quadara (2008), 14% of girls aged between 12 and 20 have been sexually assaulted along with 3% of boys – the vast majority by people known to the students.

The abuse of young people by people in authority has been the focus of public concern. However, sexual assault *between* young people at parties and in dating relationships is often still not acknowledged. Technology (such as mobile phones, digital imaging and the Internet) are also contributing to situations difficult to define as assault by law. Within schools, peer-to-peer sexual assaults may go unacknowledged, as the assault has taken place outside school grounds or is interpreted as being part of the “rough and tumble of high school life.” While only about 15% of sexual assaults are reported to police, around two-thirds of victims tell someone in their informal support network, with older teenagers aged between 14 and 17 more likely to tell someone (Quadara, 2008).

Young people may not disclose what has happened because they know the perpetrator, fear they will not be believed, that they may be blamed, or because they worry about the impact of this on others and are unsure about how to negotiate safe sexual relationships. Quadara (2008) noted that students benefit from the opportunity to speak to someone of their own gender, to have support from the school counsellor, to be informed of their rights, and be advised of their options for support. School staff who are told about an assault need to support the young person; provide a safe, private environment; and let the young person take their time and tell them as much or as little as they feel comfortable. Then they should be referred to the right services, argued Quadara. Clear disclosure about sexual assault and sexualised bullying tends to be the exception rather than the rule; therefore, schools have an important role to play as key sites of prevention.

Schools and homophobia. Another often-cited source of school-based bullying is homophobic violence and abuse. Higgins, King and Witthaus (2001) found that not only are schools a common site for sexuality-based harassment and bullying, but that schools can be part of the solution. They report on an innovative educational intervention that results in reduction of homophobic attitudes among middle-high school-aged young people.

Conclusion

In this submission, we have drawn attention to some data held at the Institute about bullying (the ATP), reviews we have conducted about the role of families in supporting young people affected by bullying, and the relationship between bullying and child maltreatment. The research shows that although bullying is a frequent occurrence, there are strategies that families can adopt to reduce the likelihood of it occurring (particularly in relation to monitoring of online activities), and strategies for families and schools to better support children and young people who may be experiencing bullying.

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Australian Institute of Family Studies. Accessed 12 March 2009:
<http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/issues/issues8/issues8.html>

Additional Resources and extended bibliography

A bibliography of resources and articles about bullying of children is available on the National Child Protection Clearinghouse website at: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/bib/bully.html>

Information on the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) is available at:
http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/national_safe_schools_framework.htm

A number of useful links (particularly about the relationships between child protection issues and bullying can be found on the National Child Protection Clearinghouse website): <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/links/links.html>

1. Australian resource links

Bullying in Schools, <http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/>. The Bullying in Schools is a site, which provides information on available resources concerned with bullying in schools in Australia. The purpose of these pages is to provide information that will help people to understand more about bullying in schools and how it can be stopped. It is of special interest to educators, children and parents.

2. International links

New Zealand campaign "No Bully", <http://www.nobully.org.nz/kids.htm>, 'No Bully' Website is part of the Telecom/Police STOP BULLYING Campaign in New Zealand. The site provides information about support services in the community and ways that adults can help kids to deal with bullying.

We also draw the Committee's attention to the following Australian studies:

Briggs, F., & Hawkins, R. M. F. (1996). *Child protection: A guide for teachers and child care professionals*. St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin.

Morrison, B. (2002). *Bullying and victimisation in schools: a restorative justice approach*. Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Criminology.

Rigby, K. (2002). *New perspectives on bullying*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
<http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/perbookabout.htm>

Rigby, K. (2002). *A meta-evaluation of methods and approaches to reducing bullying in pre-schools and in early primary school in Australia*, Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Canberra.
<http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/meta.pdf>

Rigby, K., & Thomas, E. B. (2003). *How schools counter bullying: policies and procedures in selected Australian schools*. Geelong: The Professional Reading Guide. <http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/counterbook.html>

Rigby, K. (2003). *Bullying among young children: A guide for parents*. Canberra: Australian Government Attorney General's Department. <http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying/bullying-among-young-children.htm>

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Submission prepared by: Dr Daryl Higgins, General Manager (Research), with assistance from Suzanne Vassallo, Elly Robinson, Alister Lamont, Dr Jodie Lodge, Dr Antonia Quadara and Briony Horsfall.
