

INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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**NEW SOUTH WALES LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE 2**

INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

SUBMISSION FROM BARNARDOS AUSTRALIA

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Barnardos would like to respond to the Inquiry by highlighting the issues of bullying for children in the out of home care system and those children whose families may be experiencing family problems and require the support of a child welfare agency. These children may be either subject to bullying or become bullies themselves because of their family circumstances. They have a high level of need that requires ongoing support.

The nature, level and impact of bullying: Children affected by abuse and neglect being bullied

Three university-based research projects have been conducted into the extent of poor peer relations, including bullying, amongst children using Barnardos Australia's welfare programs:

- In relation to children in long-term out of home care (foster care), research by Associate Professor Elizabeth Fernandez (University of New South Wales) undertaken in Barnardos Find-a-Family program suggested 27% of young people in the welfare program experienced bullying or rejection by peers (evidence Sydney 2000, Education of Children in Out of Home Care Inquiry).
- In relation to families using Barnardos family support services, a study was undertaken of 51 families (Fernandez 2007). In this study, 7.8% of families came to our services complaining of their children's problems at school (including bullying).

Assessment undertaken using the North Carolina Family Assessment Schedule showed that for the 109 children who participated in this study, relationship with peers was a moderate or severe problem for 13% of children when they began using our services. After six months of services 9% of children reported these difficulties.

- Research on internet use of young people in care and family support services did not identify incidents of bullying on-line. However, the incidence of home computer ownership was low, with only one-third of service users at this time having access to the internet at home (Tregeagle 2007). We note that incidents of cyber bullying reported in other research is not high (Maher 2008).

Barnardos believes that the problem of bullying for children with 'different' family backgrounds can be profound.

Factors contributing to bullying

Being in foster care, having a history of abuse or having noticeably different physical characteristics can leave children vulnerable to bullying. A recent example from our foster care program illustrates the complex problems that some children have to endure:

'D' is a 16 year old young woman of Fijian Indian/Pakistani background who has been using Barnardos Find-a-Family program for the last four years. She has a horrendous history of sexual abuse over a long period of time by her father and uncle. She disclosed this information to her foster brother who was at the same school as her. Unfortunately this information was not kept confidential and young people at school began taunting 'D' and asking her "What's it like to have sex with your Dad?". The school did not directly address this with the other pupils partly on 'D's request. 'D' did receive a lot of support via the school counselor.

Since this incident 'D's foster care placement broke down. She was placed with a single female carer and changed schools. 'D' confided in 'friends' about past history of abuse and unfortunately suffered further taunting. The school offered 'D' a great deal of support especially being able to study from home. She changed placements again and was able to do her Year 10 exams in a different school.

Many families using our support programs must deal with issues of 'difference'. This example is from an inner Sydney support service:

Throughout 2008 a client came to the office very upset about her 12 year old autistic son. He was overweight and there were issues relating to his personal hygiene. When the worker spoke to the mother about the problem she said that her son was being bullied by another child in their neighbourhood and that she didn't know what to do about it. The bullying included threats of violence. The worker spoke to the 12 year old to discuss with him what was going on.

The worker contacted a Youth Liaison officer to ask for advice on what they could do. The officer advised them to report the matter to the police and let the police handle the situation as the threats that were being made were serious. The worker supported the family throughout the situation and the matter was dealt with through court. The child involved with the threats had an AVO put on him and has not bullied the 12 year old since.

The reason for bullying of family support clients is not clear from existing research. Barnardos notes research that indicates that bullying is not associated with poverty and disadvantage in Australia (Redmond, G. 'Children's Perspectives on economic disadvantage: a review of the literature' SPRC Discussion Paper 149, 2008). However, this is in contrast to overseas studies:

This however, was not apparent in the Australian study (Taylor and Fraser 2003) where children reported being bullied for a number of reasons, but not the result of their poverty (Redmond, 2008, p. 12).

The Taylor and Fraser study also notes the exclusion of children by other children when they were from non-English speaking backgrounds. Barnardos Australia is also aware of growing professional interest in Aspergers Syndrome and the high rate of bullying amongst that group. Recent research shows that the incidence of bullying is up to four times higher with children with Aspergers Syndrome (Attwood, 2007 p. 98 quoting a study by Little, 2002).

Prevention and early intervention for children who have experienced abuse and neglect

Barnardos believes that intensive casework support services are needed for children in foster care or families needing support services in order to stop bullying behaviour. Service funding in family support and out of home care services (Department of Community Services' grants programs) must ensure that placement or family situations do not lead to bullying.

Bullying by children and young people coming into our out of home care services is a significant problem. Many of these children have experienced abuse in their own families and subsequently experienced disruptive foster care placement breakdowns. The level of social disruption experienced by children in foster care and adolescent homelessness programs can mean that they are angry, have disrupted schooling and poor socialisation skills. Osborn, Delfabbro and Barber (2007) state:

The children currently experiencing the highest levels of placement instability have high levels of psychosocial dysfunction, with the vast majority requiring therapeutic support for abnormal levels of conduct disorder and problems with peer relations ... Conduct problems ranged from physical aggression towards others, problems with emotional regulation ... (p. 856).

Prevention of bullying must include review and attention to reasons why particular groups of children bully others.

We point to the importance of the New South Wales Government implementing the recommendations of the Wood Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in New South Wales (2008), particularly recommendations on the need to contract out Out of Home Care services and enhance standards of care for children.

We would also draw your attention to prevention earlier in the breakdown of a family and the need for families who need support services to have access to intensive support services. The recommendations of the Wood Inquiry would also go some way to ensuring that this occurs in New South Wales.

Co-ordination and co-operation between relevant government agencies to address bullying

Bullying incidents take many hours of social workers' time to counsel and to liaise with school staff in order to prevent future episodes of bullying. We note initiatives in the United Kingdom such as Teachernet which tackle bullying in schools generally. However, we are concerned to ensure that children with very seriously disrupted backgrounds have adequate time with family support workers to get to know the family and undertake that co-ordination of services potentially available to the family.

We are unable to provide evidence-based information for effective anti-bullying approaches (Term of Reference 5) beyond that available to the Inquiry. We do not have direct experience of approaches to address bullying in overseas jurisdictions (Term of Reference 6).

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