

Submission
No 2

INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Bullying of children and young people.

Submission by : Michael Sobb

Currently, I am a Special Religious Educator which means I regularly take classes of both primary and secondary students for lessons. This has given me the opportunity over a period of years to perceive the behaviour of students towards each other on both an individual and a group basis.

My educational background includes a Science Degree in Pure Mathematics and Applied Psychology, various computer courses as well as courses relevant for the eight State Government Departments in which I have been employed.

During periods of my working life, I have been in contact with young people through my involvement in vocational counselling, counselling young people committed to an institution by the children's court, teaching at TAFE and volunteer homework group tutoring.

While I have rarely witnessed overt serious bullying, I am aware of an insidious attitude and behaviour pattern which is a prelude to such bullying and which is prevalent and appears to be an accepted form of behaviour even by those who do not indulge in it.

This behaviour has several characteristics. It is generally directed at an individual but frequently not the same individual. There is a triggering spontaneity about this bullying in that an incident of some type occurs and the individual then becomes the butt of the bullying on a particular occasion. Alternatively, there is a continuing issue or characteristic of the victim which provides an opportunity for this type of bullying to be seized upon on many occasions.

This bullying can take the form of derogatory comments, shouting, poking fun, raucous laughter, name calling, rhetorical questions, referring to personal issues, mocking, exclusion, physical aspects, all aimed at embarrassing the individual. In essence, it is an attempt to provide entertainment by belittling the individual and putting the instigator in the lime light. The perpetrators may see it as innocent fun but it does adversely affect the individual and reinforces an unhealthy form of behaviour, the condoning of which can accelerate the acceptance of more serious bullying and the subsequent targeting of the same individual.

Since there is an element of entertainment perceived by others who participate and/or observe this behaviour, it is not considered in the general notion of bullying.

However, since it has its roots in highlighting such things as a weakness, a physical or personality characteristic, lack of sporting ability, a naivety, a lack of sophistication, a

misunderstanding, a mistake, an ignorance or a failure on the part of the individual, it does represent an undesirable form of bullying. On occasions when I have remonstrated with a student for adopting this behaviour, they have been surprised that I have spoken seriously about the issue since they see it as a customary and acceptable type of behaviour.

This behaviour has been verging on serious when it has been directed by some male students at female students in the class. Some of the comments were so grossly offensive eg. Referring to a girl's menstrual periods, that I intervened promptly and indicated it was a serious issue and such behaviour was insulting and would not be tolerated by me and should not be tolerated by the female students. Again, it appeared this was normal behaviour and the female students were expected to accept it.

Generally, it is not a one on one situation although this bullying may be carried out by one person on the individual, it is done while there is an audience and some of those in the audience may make a contribution also. This makes it all the more hurtful for the individual as it becomes a public humiliation.

Even though these may be isolated and less serious events, they can have undesirable consequences for the individual and the adverse affect may last for some time. Additionally, they lessen the sensitivity and awareness of people to the harm that is caused by what they may consider is just a bit of fun. This then can make the step-up to serious bullying much easier.

An effective approach to such a problem is to confront it immediately and firmly as it occurs and call a halt to all current activity. This stops the behaviour and attracts attention. Once this attention is apparent, the instigator can be directly addressed. It can be pointed out that this is bullying, it is designed to be hurtful, it shows a lack of maturity and self confidence since bullies try to obtain their status and popularity by trying to put other people down. Finally it should be indicated that it is a serious issue and it will not be accepted under any circumstances. The group should be told that supporting and laughing at such hurtful episodes is not acceptable.

There may be occasions when it is felt necessary for the perpetrator to be directed to apologise to the individual and this then reinforces the idea that bullying does not make you number one.

Occasionally, those involved in the bullying try to argue the reality of the situation gives them the right to act accordingly since they are just responding to the particular circumstances. Such a rationale should not be accepted and they should be informed promptly that deliberately being hurtful towards another person is wrong and is a coward's way of trying to demonstrate a non-existent superiority, possibly to cover an inferiority.

The problem can also be addressed by encouraging young people to recognise that they are showing a level of maturity and responsibility when they are prepared to support a victim and confront such behaviour amongst their peers.

The tolerant attitude towards bullying is reinforced by incidents and activities which are popular, provide entertainment and which often meet the alleged criteria of attacking the tall poppies, or attacking authority figures, or political figures. This has now been

extended to attacking the general public and showing the results on television as entertainment. The greater the naivety of the target group, the more aggressive and prolonged is the bullying entertainment.

It thrives on the varying levels of innocence, naturalness, credulousness and gullibility of individuals. Additional props are used to enhance the desired result. This can include selecting relevant clothes, tools and officious language. I believe this tolerance is demonstrated by the fact that when I have commented adversely on some of the behaviour of the television group "The Chasers", I am attacked even though I am specifying not only the bullying element in their actions but also the risk and harm associated with it. Because it is entertaining, the viewers who are removed from its effects, do not look past this entertainment aspect to the other aspects.

The primary aim of bullying is to put a person at a disadvantage and to "show them up" in the eyes of others since such an action is believed to enhance the status and acceptance of the bully. It is intended to cause an anticipated reaction but the reaction may be radically different for different people. Therefore, bullying and bullies fall into the area of personality issues. Those who then participate in or enjoy being entertained by observing bullying activities also have such issues. We are appalled when someone teases an animal, but we are prepared to tolerate the teasing of a person to the extent that we no longer recognise when it has progressed to bullying.

The excuse "We didn't mean anything by it" is untruthful since they were always meaning to obtain a certain reaction. The excuses, "We were joking, we were only having fun" confirm what I have attempted to address in this submission, namely the fact that bullying is a gratifying activity for the bully and the spectators. It highlights an insensitive nature, a lack of awareness of individual differences and an element of inferiority.

The problem is compounded further when one risks being ridiculed etc if one attempts to step in and redress the bullying, especially if it is a popular and allegedly entertaining instance.

Unless and until action is taken to address the toleration and condoning of bullying at the level of entertainment and alleged teasing, then this foundation will remain as the impetus for the serious bullying. There is likely to be a hue and cry if some currently acceptable activities were addressed, but, like drink driving, something which was tolerated can be undesirable and requires action to alter that acceptance.

Possible action includes a review of what is considered entertainment in the various media to examine the bullying elements which may be present, any instances of bullying should simultaneously not only address the bullying but also the bullies themselves and where necessary, those who perceive it as entertaining. An emphasis on showing that it is in fact the bullies who are singling themselves out for not being part of the homogenous community and not their victims. Ironically, the bullies are trying to draw attention to themselves by drawing attention to their victim; this is their problem.

The preventative and remedial suggestions included in this submission are applicable to

The bully

The actual bullying behaviour

The participants

Those being entertained by the bullying

Those who condone or tolerate low level bullying as harmless entertainment

Those who can be encouraged to intervene in bullying situations