

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

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NSW Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No.2
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RE: Inquiry into the bullying of children and young people

Thank you for providing the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University with the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee. The Centre aims to promote the participation, safety and well-being of children and young people by bringing together four important strands: an interdisciplinary approach; a focus on research, education and advocacy; an emphasis on cross-sectoral partnerships to promote evidence-based policy and practice; and the inclusion of children and young people in decision-making about matters that concern them.

We commend the NSW state government for initiating this Inquiry and hence publicly acknowledging the widespread and damaging effects of bullying on the lives of children and young people. There is now a well-established body of research, nationally and internationally, pointing to the negative impact of bullying and to the critical importance of evidence based policy and program initiatives that seek to reduce it ((see for example Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin & Patton, 2001; Lodge, 2008; Lodge & Feldman, 2007; Rigby, 1997, 2003). However, what remains less well known are children's views and experiences of bullying, their insights into the most effective ways to address bullying, and their perspectives on the initiatives taken by schools, communities and governments aimed at reducing bullying behaviours (Rigby, 2003).

The Centre's key recommendation to this Inquiry is that children and young people are invited to contribute to the work of the Committee and, more broadly, to the development and evaluation of effective and responsive policy, programs, services and initiatives that aim to reduce the bullying of children and young people.



Why should the Committee consult children and young people about bullying?

Bullying is a serious and widespread social issue. Findings from a large-scale Australian study of approximately 38,000 school-aged children suggest that, on average, bullying affects one in six young people (Rigby, 1997). Whilst much of this research focuses on bullying in schools (see for example Lodge, 2008), it also occurs in homes, through sport, in the community and, most recently, through widespread use of technologies such as the internet and mobile phones.

Much of the research has focused around questions of definition (what constitutes bullying), why it occurs, the effects and influences of bullying and what might be done about it. The available evidence suggests, for example, that bullying is fundamentally about power and its intent is to hurt, threaten or frighten someone. Whilst it is difficult to generalise, bullies are usually adept at targeting 'difference', drawing an audience and finding ways to justify or defend their physical or psychological bullying activities. Children who bully, and get away with it, are more likely to grow up to bully their partners and their own children. The most damaging impacts of bullying are in relation to self-esteem, self-confidence and sense of security. Hence, children who are the targets of persistent, long-term bullying can develop serious anxiety and depression related difficulties. Policy and program responses in schools generally aim to ensure both children and teachers understand that bullying is 'not OK' and to equip them with a range of skills and strategies to respond to bullying behaviours.

Given the impact and far reaching implications of bullying for children's well being, referred to above, it is critically important that policy and program responses align very closely with children's lived experience of being bullied, being bullies and/or being witnesses to bullying. *It is our submission, then, that children and young people should be closely consulted about what works, what doesn't, and why, since they are not only reliable and worthy commentators on their own lives but also deeply implicated in the project of reducing bullying and its effects.*

Taking children's voices to be the best source of knowledge about their lives is very much in keeping with the principle of evidence based policy and practice, and ensures that social policy continues to be relevant to their everyday lives. A growing body of research suggests that children's participation contributes to the well being of communities by making policy more sensitive to social needs, and therefore more likely to work (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Graham, 2004; Lister, 2008). As the Children's Rights and Protection Unit of the Canadian International Development Agency (2006, p.2) suggests:

"The active involvement of program beneficiaries leads to better development decisions, better development programs and more sustained results".



There is now a significant evidence base pointing to the benefits of consulting with children and young people. These benefits include:

- enabling the positive development of children's identity, competence, sense of responsibility and sense of belonging in the community
- enabling children to protect themselves
- better decisions, development programs and policy results
- broadening and deepening how we practice democracy and citizenship

The available research suggests that in addition to improved *outcomes* for children and young people, the *process* of consultation itself can contribute to the increased respect, recognition, empowerment and consciousness raising that is so central to their identity formation (Neale, 2004). In other words, children attribute a great deal of importance to being recognized and acknowledged as individuals with opinions and feelings of their own and as agents capable of contributing to decisions made in their everyday lives (Cashmore, 2003). When children are included as participants in initiatives such as the current Inquiry, they see themselves as being important and legitimate players in addressing the complex issue of bullying in their schools, families and communities.

Consistent with the above rationale, we respectfully suggest that an important task for the Committee is to generate the meaningful and ongoing involvement of children and young people throughout the course of this Inquiry. We suggest that this might include: involving children and young people early and in an ongoing way, developing joint guidelines with children and young people about the purpose of their participation and what will and will not happen as a result of their participation, ensuring the Committee's processes are as child friendly and focused as possible within the legislative structures which the Committee must operate, supporting children with relevant and appropriate information and resources and ensuring feedback is provided at the completion of their involvement.

To this end, the Committee may wish to consider future engagement with members of our Centre's youth consultative committee, *Young People Big Voice (YPBV)*, who have indicated their willingness to support the work of the Inquiry. This is a group of 8 young people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, aged 13-19 years, who work closely with our Centre in advising on projects and issues of importance to them.

In an initial consultation with YPBV regarding the focus of the current Inquiry, we learned their views revealed the following kinds of insights:

Bullying happens for a range of different reasons. Poor relationships at home for the bully is a big



cause. But so is jealousy, grudges, and even sometimes because of an attraction. The Tall Poppy Syndrome is commonly associated with the concept of jealousy within bullying and how the result of abuse is aimed to bring some sort of self-gratification to the bully. The main cause however would be difference, humans when grown up develop feelings of fear, dislike and hatred towards people who are different because they don't understand them e.g. Arabs and Americans. Children are the same in that when they notice difference they express primal instincts of fear which thus lead to expressions of aggression.

Bullying happens for many reasons. Often the bully is insecure and is being bullied themselves. Also, bullying in schools is extremely frequent, and one of the reasons is that teachers often do nothing to prevent or stop it from happening. Whether they don't recognize it, don't see it or just don't care can differ. The "programs" set up in schools have been, in my experience, utterly useless, and often make the bullying worse. Sometimes you have to wonder if the teachers actually give a damn. I suppose regardless of how kids are feeling, they'll still get paid, and for many, that is the motivation (some teachers even admit this!)

Children who are bullied have less confidence, are less likely to pursue opportunities. They become more shy and self-conscious, with less personality. In schools: bullying discipline is uncommon and ineffective. In my opinion, isolation from the classroom and the victim is the best discipline.

Bullying is very bad for kids as they don't understand most of the time why it is happening and so cannot do anything about it by themselves. It can turn children off school thus impacting their ability to learn vital skills. It can also change their attitudes to people of certain stereotypes because they were the ones to bully them. Bullying's biggest effect is its ability to lower the self-esteem of the recipient thus decreasing their confidence to take part in learning experiences.

There is no one "best way" to tackle bullying. Rather, it is a multitude of strategies that may assist in stopping it. I think education is huge; students should be educated at school as to what to do when you see bullying happen. For me, often I don't have the strength to stand up to a bully/ies when they're picking on someone, and I ALWAYS regret it later. Bullying makes me furious, but what's even worse is that I don't feel I have the confidence to stand up for other kids, work colleagues etc.

Also, bullying at work is difficult, especially when it involves management. If management is bullying you, and management are supposed to be the ones you report it to, you're effectively stuffed. For young people, it's even harder because it's difficult to distinguish between bullying and punishment. Personally, I'm so scared of one of the bosses at my work that when she attempted to speak with me the other day, I literally screamed and jumped just when she said my name because I thought I was in trouble. This woman puts the fear of God into everyone, and we all walk on eggshells.

Often bullying is so common it's almost unnoticeable. Especially when homophobic tags are thrown around (people calling each other "gay", "fag" etc.) sometimes people don't even realise they're doing it because it's so commonplace. If just after one day I had a dollar for all the times I hear these comments, I wouldn't bother having a part-time job.

A major issue that school children face is bullying on the school bus. In my experiences, a gang of "cool", generally older private school children, gang up on a particular person. These school buses are generally crowded, so the bus driver is unaware of what's going on. If the driver does realise, they use ineffective methods such as yelling, not solving any problems. Incidents of bullying are very common on school buses. School buses need a second driver or school teacher controlling behaviour on buses.



The above views from members of our YPBV group provide some indication of the potential children and young people have to usefully inform the Committee's terms of reference.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. We wish you well in this important endeavour. For further information about this submission, or the work our Centre, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

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