



Bullying? No way!

Many of the children we see with significant emotional and behavioural problems tell us about experiences they have had that are consistent with what we define as bullying. Being repeatedly intentionally hurt or embarrassed by a peer who appears to be driven by a need for power, who may encourage others to band against them, threaten and exclude them. These experiences can be hurtful, stressful and so overwhelming that they can precipitate depression, anxiety and refusal to attend school.

Bullying is distinguished by its repetitive and purposefully harmful nature. It can be in the form of physical fighting or threats, name calling, social exclusion, spreading rumours and gossip. Increasingly common in this digital age, it can also include distributing hurtful or embarrassing messages or pictures. Bullying can take place in face-to-face encounters, via written notes, or through digital media such as text messages, social media, and websites.

Children who bully can be: ringleaders who organise a group of bullies and initiate the bullying; followers who join in the bullying once it is started; or reinforcers who do not actively join in, but reinforce more passively by watching and laughing or encouraging the bullying.

There is increasing concern about the adverse consequences of bullying. Most schools have prevention and intervention programs that rely not only on student and teacher engagement and education, but active support from parents who can appreciate the need for interventions to change behaviour in all students - the ringleaders, the followers, the reinforcers and the victims. The most successful school anti-bullying programs take a whole of school multifaceted approach.

Do you know what your child's school has in place?

All parents I speak to express concern that their child might be the victim of bullying; however most aren't sure of what they should do to assist their child. In Australia we have a national framework to support children, parents and educators. I encourage all parents to check out these resources, early, before they really need them! This provides a really helpful way to think about bullying and strategies to respond that will be helpful for children.

The resources I'm referring to can be found at www.bullyingnoway.gov.au. Click on the Parents and Carers button for a solid overview then have a good look around the site as it's full of great information and practical advice.

Whilst we are really concerned about victims of bullying, we often forget that children who bully are themselves vulnerable and at risk. Bullying is a behaviour that is often influenced by parenting and family environment and functioning. Children who are exposed to harsh and inconsistent parenting, high levels of family stress, or traumatic experiences are more likely to bully others. Children living in homes with violence between their parents are at much greater risk of being aggressive and bullying outside the home. These children need our help and compassion too.



Caroline Goossens

is a Child Psychiatrist, and has worked in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service for over 25 years. She and her team have collaborated with Perth Children's Hospital Foundation on the development of The Big Splash WA, and have written the content of The Big Splash WA Schools Program Resource Kits.