

# Managing bullying in child care

by Dr Anne Kennedy

The topic of bullying is important to child care professionals and parents who want information to help them identify and respond to bullying and help to develop strategies to prevent it happening. Research has shown that child care professionals often feel unprepared to deal with the issue of bullying (Humphrey & Crisp, 2008).

All children are entitled to a safe and secure environment where differences are respected and adults are available to support them as they become more confident and socially responsible. While some conflict is a normal part of learning to engage cooperatively with others, a minority of children go beyond what is considered to be normal behaviour and engage in bullying. Bullying can be used by and aimed at individuals or groups of children.

## Why do children bully?

There are different reasons why children may use bullying behaviours such as humiliation, threats or aggression as a way to exert control or power over others. Bullying behaviour can occur when children:

- have experienced bullying themselves which can result in them wanting to hurt others
- have experienced permissive, cold or authoritarian parenting styles. When reasonable limits or rules are either not enforced or are harshly enforced, children can resist social rules or, alternatively, have no sense of how to self-regulate.
- get what they want as a result of aggression or harassing behaviour. When this type of behaviour is not challenged, it can become learned and repeated.
- are frustrated due to underdeveloped social skills and/or lack of experience in socialising with others
- live in highly competitive environments where winning is promoted at the cost of learning about losing graciously or the benefits of working collaboratively with others. This can increase the likelihood of a child using bullying to be the 'winner' at the expense of others' feelings or rights.

### This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1 - 1.3 and 3.2 - 3.4

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 2.3, 3.1, 4.2 and 5.3

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 2.1 and 4.2

## Types of bullying

Bullying is identified as a range of anti-social behaviours which are different from one-off events of aggression or conflict between individuals or groups. Different forms of bullying behaviour have been identified through research as being more prevalent in certain age and gender groups. Types of bullying behaviours include:

**Physical:** Using physical force such as punching or hitting. Younger children are more likely to use physical types of bullying than older children. Boys have been identified as being more likely than girls to use physical forms of bullying.

**Social isolation:** Exclusion behaviours such as not including a child in play or never selecting a particular child for team games. Spreading gossip or rumours is another form of social bullying usually used by older children.

**Verbal:** Name calling, which is typically used by younger children, or using words to threaten, tease, or to make racist or sexist insults, which is typically used by older children. Girls may use verbal forms of bullying more than boys.

**Cyber:** Using text messages or social networking internet sites such as Facebook or MySpace to bully others. This type of bullying is typically used by older children.

## Identifying bullying

If a child is displaying anti-social behaviours, it can be helpful to consider the following questions to determine if bullying or conflict is occurring:

**Intensity:** Is the behaviour mild, moderate or extreme, face-to-face or behind the victim's back?

**Duration:** Is the behaviour a one-off event, or is it occurring over time, regularly, or every day?

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**Intention:** Is the behaviour deliberate and intended to intimidate, frighten, hurt, humiliate or demonstrate power over an individual or group of children?

**Impact:** Is the impact on the victim mild, moderate or serious, short or long term?

### Prevention and response approaches

Develop zero tolerance policies for bullying in collaboration with service management, child care professionals, families and children. In outside school hours care programs these policies should reflect or be the same as the school's policy. If a number of schools feed into the outside school hours care program it is beneficial to consult with all of them to find out about their bullying related policies. Child care service policies need to include clear expectations of behaviour standards, as well as age appropriate consequences and behaviour guidance strategies for responding to bullying behaviour.

Teach children strategies to challenge bullying behaviour so that it doesn't become entrenched. Strategies include teaching children to use assertive behaviours such as saying "No", or "I don't like it when you do that" as well as knowing when to walk away from teasing, and knowing how to resolve conflict in appropriate ways. Using puppets with younger children and planning role plays for older children can provide specific learning experiences for children about assertiveness.

Implement experiences for children that will help them to develop social skills such as knowing how to 'read' other people's feelings, facial expressions or body language and how to join other children in play and to make and sustain friendships. Children's literature can be a good starting place for discussions about the importance of these social skills and to reinforce these concepts with children.

Work with children and families to promote socially responsive environments in which empathy and respect for others, taking responsibility for your actions and understanding how your actions affect others are modelled, encouraged and taught. For example, it is important for young children to experience child care professionals showing understanding and assisting children to learn socially responsive behaviours such as how to take turns, share toys or show concern when someone is hurt or upset. Older children's growing awareness of what is fair or unfair is supported by adults' actions and

### Effects and signs of bullying

There are many signs of bullying with immediate effects which can become long term and very serious if the bullying is not stopped.

**Emotional:** feelings of hurt, bewilderment, anger, unhappiness or anxiousness which can lead to serious levels of depression or mood swings.

**Social:** not feeling a part of the group or not wanting to go to child care or school; unable to tell adults about what is happening; upset because belongings are missing or damaged. Over time, children lose trust in adults as protectors, withdraw from peer groups or friends and may refuse to go to care or school.

**Physical:** crying, nightmares or bed wetting or there may be signs of physical abuse such as bruises or scratches. These immediate effects can lead to more serious and persistent problems such as sleep or eating disorders.

**Cognitive:** unable to concentrate on learning or other activities, losing interest in hobbies or sport and regression in learning which could lead to failing at school.

words. For example, a child care professional may work with two children who are engaged in a conflict over sharing toy cars by saying: "Jon says it is unfair that you have taken all the cars Ned. What do you think would be the fair thing to do? [child responds] That sounds fair, and I will look for some more cars for both of you."

Teach children about their right to be safe and to tell an adult when they don't feel safe. These rights are promoted when children are listened to with respect, their concerns are taken seriously and action is taken. Children may express their concerns in drawings or paintings or in their play as well as through conversations.

Challenge behaviour that is disrespectful or unfair. This involves intervening to ask children questions such as:

- Why do you think they behaved that way?
- How have your words or actions affected the other child?
- How might you feel if a child or adult spoke or acted in this way toward you?
- What will you do now or in the future if the same thing happens?



Adapt questions and responses to the age of the children. For example, younger children might not be able to verbalise how the victim felt and may need adult support to know what they might do now or in the future: "Mina feels sad because you took her special teddy. She would like her teddy back and then we will find another teddy just for you."

Ensure that supervision indoors and outdoors supports children to know that there is always a trusted adult available who will either act to defend them, or who can help children resolve conflicts peacefully and fairly. Encourage children to actively seek help from an adult when they see another child being bullied.

Work with older children and their families to set clear expectations related to the ethical use of digital technologies if these are used by children in the service. For example, children may help to decide on some simple rules about texting or e-mailing. For example, 'All messages are to show respect for others'. Child care professionals can develop their own confidence in addressing bullying issues by seeking relevant professional

development opportunities and regularly discussing this matter in staff and/or carer meetings.

It is important to be honest with families when bullying is identified and to work together to find ethical ways to respond to both the child who is bullying and the child who is being bullied. Acknowledge parent concerns and their right to advocate on behalf of their child. It is also essential to protect individuals' rights to privacy by not revealing a child or family's personal details to other families or to people outside the service.

### Conclusion

Bullying is a deliberate behaviour. It requires deliberate responses and actions by child care professionals working together with children, families and others to prevent the behaviour and to promote positive ways to live harmoniously with others ■

### References and further reading

- Humphrey, G., & Crisp, B. (2008). Bullying affects us too: Parental responses to bullying at kindergarten. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 33(1), 45 - 48.
- Slee, P., & Wotherspoon, A. (2008). Young children and bullying. *Every Child*, 14(3), 22 - 23.

### Useful websites

- Stop Bullying Now!: [www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/kids/](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/kids/)
- School Age Notes: [www.schoolagenotes.com/](http://www.schoolagenotes.com/)