Bullying

What is bullying

Bullying is repeated behaviour that is intended to hurt, frighten, or exclude someone, and it usually involves a power imbalance. This power imbalance might be physical (being bigger or stronger), social (having more friends or influence), or psychological (knowing how to embarrass or intimidate someone). In primary and high school settings, bullying can be physical (hitting, pushing, damaging belongings), verbal (name-calling, threats, teasing meant to hurt), social (spreading rumours, deliberately leaving someone out), or online (sending cruel messages, sharing embarrassing images, or targeting someone in group chats). For example, repeatedly calling a student names every day, encouraging others not to sit with them, or posting humiliating comments about them online are all forms of bullying.

Not all unkind behaviour is bullying. Conflict between students such as a one off argument, a disagreement during a game, or a single rude comment followed by an apology is not bullying. Likewise, accidental harm or behaviour that stops once it is pointed out does not meet the definition. For example, two friends falling out and arguing, or a student making a thoughtless joke and then taking responsibility and changing their behaviour, are not bullying.

Understanding the difference helps parents and schools respond appropriately by addressing bullying firmly while also teaching children how to manage conflict, repair relationships, and build respectful interactions.

Prevalence of bullying

Research into bullying and disability adds important context for families. A systematic review of bullying and learning disabilities found that between 17% and 67% of students with additional learning needs were victims of bullying and between 10% and 30% had perpetrated bullying. Further research shows that learning difficulties alone are not the only factor involved. One large population study found: "Learning disorders are not a direct but rather an indirect childhood bullying risk factor, as their impact depends on psychiatric comorbidity with internalizing or externalizing disorders." (Weinreich, 2023).

This helps explain why children with learning differences who are also experiencing anxiety, low mood, or emotional stress may be at greater risk, and why addressing mental health alongside learning support is so important.

Learning differences and bullying

Children and young people with learning differences and disabilities are at higher risk of being bullied than their peers. This includes students with SLD, dyslexia, ADHD, autism, and related neurodevelopmental profiles. Because of the nature of these differences, these children and adolescents may find it more challenging to 'fit in' with a peer group and access appropriate communication and emotion regulation skills under pressure, all of which can culminate in increased risk of being targeted.

Social media can amplify anxiety through constant comparison, exclusion, cyberbullying, or the spill-over of peer conflict into school settings. Online incidents frequently have real-world consequences at school and should always be taken seriously. Research consistently shows that bullying acts as a multiplier for distress. When bullying occurs alongside learning differences, the risk of anxiety, school avoidance, and emotional harm increases.

Learning differences, communication differences and bullying

Many children with learning differences and disabilities also experience communication differences. These may include differences in expressing thoughts under pressure, understanding complex language, processing spoken information quickly, interpreting social cues, or explaining events clearly.

Communication differences can increase vulnerability when children are misunderstood by peers or adults, or when they find it harder to report bullying or distress early. Online environments can further increase risk, as tone and intent are easily misinterpreted.

Recognising communication differences as part of the broader context helps ensure your young person's experience is understood accurately, rather than being attributed to attitude or lack of effort. In some cases, support from allied health professionals, such as speech pathologists, may be helpful where communication differences are impacting wellbeing.

Protective factors

There are a number of protective factors which can reduce the risk and/or impact of bullying in children and young people with learning differences. Social belonging is one such critical protective factor. Students who have a positive peer group and good relationships with teachers are less likely to be targeted and cope better if they are. One study found that:"Perceived social integration completely mediates the association between the presence of learning disabilities and victimisation experiences."(Marini et al., 2023).

Having a school environment and culture which is welcoming. Inclusive and responsive is another protective factor. Schools which have positive behaviour support programs and awareness and response training for staff are more likely to meet the criteria for this protective factor.

Thirdly, schools which explicitly teach emotion regulation and communication skills provide an environment which lifts up all students, and can be particularly supportive for students with learning differences. Look for evidence-based programs and collaboration with allied health or other experts.

In practical terms, children are most vulnerable when they feel excluded or disconnected from peers. Feeling safe, included, and supported at school matters as much as academic adjustments

Working with the school

When a child is being bullied, parents can play a crucial role in working collaboratively with their school to ensure the behaviour is addressed promptly, safely and in line with relevant policy. The Victorian Department of Education's Bullying Prevention and Response policy requires all government schools to create safe and respectful learning environments and to address all forms of bullying, including cyberbullying. This policy emphasises that bullying prevention and response should be part of the school's culture and supported by clear procedures for reporting, investigating and responding to incidents of bullying.

A practical first step for parents is to document all incidents clearly and contemporaneously, including dates, times, descriptions of the behaviour, any communications from school or other students, and outcomes of conversations with the child. Good documentation provides an objective record that supports the school's investigation and helps monitor whether interventions are effective.

Effective communication with the school is also essential.

Parents should go through the usual channels at the school and request a meeting with the appropriate school staff. This might be the classroom teacher in a primary school, or the year level or house leader in high school. If needed, the assistant principal or principal can be requested to attend as well, so they can be involved in resolving the concerns and developing any support plans.

In these meetings, focusing on facts and desired outcomes (e.g., changes to supervision, behaviour support plans, or restorative strategies) supports constructive dialogue. Parents can refer to the Respectful Behaviours within the School Community policy, which outlines expectations for open, respectful and collaborative communication between families and school staff in the best interests of the child.

If parents feel the school's response is insufficient, there are formal escalation pathways available. After following the school's communication and complaints processes, parents can contact the Victorian Department of Education to raise their concerns under the department's incident/complaints handling procedures. Additionally, if the bullying involves discriminatory behaviour (e.g., based on disability, race, gender), parents may seek further advice from agencies such as the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.

In all communications, maintaining respectful engagement and a focus on the child's safety and wellbeing strengthens the partnership between home and school and helps ensure that the child's rights to a safe educational environment are upheld.

References

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