Behind bullying behaviours

There are many reasons why children engage in bullying behaviour. Dr Lyn O'Grady, Community Psychologist and Parent Educator, speaks about the risk factors in the life of a bully and some intervention strategies for engaging their families.

An international study (Mullis, Martin, & Foy, 2008) found that Australian schools had one of the highest rates of bullying in the world. Why might this be?

It's important to remember that it can be difficult to compare rates of complex behaviours like bullying across countries. Having said that, we need to recognise that bullying is a problem in Australia. It's also concerning that our many efforts to reduce it over several decades now haven't really been that successful, particularly as new ways of bullying emerge, such as cyberbullying. This means we need to keep looking at ways to, firstly, understand bullying better and, secondly, to develop a range of interventions and responses that take into account the particular context in which it occurs.

One way to understand bullying can be as a social phenomenon, which occurs within a social context. In recent years, we have begun to understand the role of bystanders as witnesses who may encourage the bullying, or could be harnessed to intervene and stop it. We also now know that witnessing bullying can be distressing, so helping bystanders to feel empowered to do something about it is vital.

What are the main risk factors and difficulties we can associate with children who bully?

This is an area that we still have debates about. The complexity of bullying behaviours in various circumstances makes it really difficult to understand. There are a range of theories, including bullying as something that's learnt, ideas about power imbalances, and even genetic links to violence. In many cases, when a child finds that bullying works for them, they are more likely to continue to do it. In my view, children can turn to bullying when they:

- experience difficulties with their social, emotional or communication skills and are trying to get their needs met from family or community
- decide to fight back in response to being bullied themselves, particularly if they feel that nothing else is working for them
- gain a sense of control and reward from bullying, which enhances their self-esteem and perceived social standing (this is particularly the case when children have limited capacity for empathy and tolerance of others)
- have an emerging mental health disorder, such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Conduct Disorder (in which case bullying is part of a bigger issue)

What is the best way to work with the parents of a child who is bullying?

The reaction of parents to their child’s bullying will vary and this will determine how best to respond. In the best-case scenario, parents are surprised and upset by their child’s conduct and are keen for it to stop. Professionals can work with parents by, initially, helping them understand the behaviour and then to then to have conversations with their child. Parents can be encouraged to listen actively to the child’s
point of view to try to get a sense of what their experience is, how they see their actions, and how the actions meet their needs. When bullying is more entrenched, parents may need to prepare their child for some changes and have them identify the pros and cons of learning new ways to cope. This isn’t always straightforward, as children may see the problem behaviours as being pretty effective, but professionals can support these discussions.

Next, we would engage with the child and their parents to develop new, safe and effective ways to respond to bullying. It is important that parents send strong messages to their child about the types of behaviours that are not appropriate, but they also need to help their child feel that their needs can be met in safe ways. Often, children learn best in social situations with prompting, modelling and support from adults when problems arise, so it is always best if parents implement consistent strategies in the home. This process can be a lot for parents, so it’s always best if there are professionals involved to provide families with lots of support in managing this hard work.

What is the best way to engage with parents who are not concerned with their child’s bullying behaviour?

Sometimes, parents are not open to seeing the concerns of bullying or may disagree that the behaviour is, in fact, bullying. In these cases, it is our job to help them to understand the impact their child is having on others, as well as the damage it causes their child’s development and friendships. This can be difficult for parents to hear and it can take time for them to respond to concerns. It’s often confronting if they believe their parenting or family way of communicating is coming into question, and potentially upsetting if they are required to reflect upon their own behaviour-modelling at home.

It can help to remember that previous generations considered bullying to be a normal, even character-building, part of life. Part of the work with these parents is getting them to appreciate the changes in society towards less tolerance of violence and bullying. It may be effective to engage them in conversations about the expectations of others, including schools and community members, as well as the legal consequences as children get older. This is enormously delicate and sensitive and, generally, takes time for parents to reflect upon and modify their own attitudes and behaviours.

What protective factors are most effective and should be developed in the life of a bully?

As indicated earlier, we are still learning about the most effective responses to bullying. Tailoring responses to particular contexts seems to be important, as is incorporating preventative work with quick responses to deal with bullying when it occurs. Overall, a child who bullies (or is at risk of bullying) will benefit from:

- learning empathy and being taught to notice and think about others and how they are feeling (probably the most important aspect of this work)
- receiving strong, consistent messages that bullying is not okay
- developing their universal social and emotional skills (with more targeted, intensive responses for children needing extra support)
- developing their problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills (so long as the child is showing some empathy)
- learning to be accepting and tolerant of others, and inclusive of those who may be different to them
- receiving strong messages about the importance of positive relationships and getting along with others
- knowing how to respond to bullying, including which adults to tell
- having responsive adults around them who listen and act when they share concerns about bullying.
See Dr Lyn O’Grady in the KidsMatter bullying video resource for primary schools.