

## Working with families to prevent bullying

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### Key messages

- Bullying is a prominent problem with serious impacts on child wellbeing. A community-wide response is required to protect children.
- Social connections play a key role in protecting children from bullying and its impacts.
- Parents and practitioners can support children's interpersonal wellbeing by increasing their social connections.
- We recommend that practitioners raise the issue of bullying with parents of children from a young age, especially because children under age 12 typically receive less attention around bullying.
- Practitioners can play an important role in empowering parents to be involved in their child's social world and to seek support when needed.

### A note on terminology

In this resource we use the term 'parent' to refer to anyone playing a significant caring role in a child's life, and acknowledge that this could include biological parents, grandparents, other relatives, adoptive parents, adults in blended families, kinship carers and many other roles.

### What is bullying?

Bullying is defined as repeated behaviour that causes harm to another person in the context of a real or perceived power imbalance (Nansel et al., 2001). This power imbalance could be based on physical intimidation or social status. Some bullying behaviours are overt and more readily observable, such as physical violence, while others are more subtle, such as excluding another child from activities. Bullying can occur in person, or remotely via technology which is referred to as cyberbullying.



Note that while this definition is commonly agreed upon, in practice human interactions are complex and exist within rich contexts. It can be difficult to clearly determine whether any given behaviour or pattern of behaviour constitutes bullying and attempting to do so may be ultimately unproductive (Mishna, 2004; O'Brien, 2019).

### Impacts of bullying

Bullying is recognised as a major cause of poor mental health across the lifespan. It can contribute to significant psychological and physical issues in children, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders and suicidal behaviour (see Box 2).

The impacts of bullying can last a lifetime and have been found to persist for many adults even decades later (see Box 3). Approximately 15–30% of children in Australia report having experienced bullying during the past 12 months (Jadambaa et al., 2019).

Children who engage in bullying behaviour are also at risk of poor mental health outcomes. Katsaras et al (2018) found that children who engage in bullying others were 2.5 times as likely to experience suicidal ideation. Children who both experience and engage in bullying behaviour are likely to fare worst of all, being at 3.5 times the risk of suicidal ideation.

## Box 2: Impact of being bullied during childhood

Children who experience school bullying are more than twice as likely as other children to experience each of the following:

- Depression
- Generalised Anxiety Disorder
- specific phobias
- specific psychiatric symptoms
- psychotic symptoms
- Borderline Personality Disorder
- binge eating
- suicide attempts.

Sources: Katsaras et al. (2018), Moore et al. (2017)

## Box 3: Lifetime impact of bullying involvement

Children who experience school bullying are more than twice as likely as other children to experience each of the following:

- Of lifetime anxiety disorders in Australia, 9.57% are estimated to be attributable to experiencing bullying behaviour.
- Children and young people who experience bullying during the school years (ages 8–18 years) are 1.74 times as likely to develop Depression.
- Of lifetime depressive disorders in Australia, 13.13% are estimated to be attributable to experiencing bullying behaviour.
- Of lifetime intentional self-harm behaviours in Australia, 15.34% are estimated to be attributable to experiencing bullying behaviour.
- Children and young people experiencing bullying behaviour are twice as likely to develop later psychotic symptoms than those who have not experienced bullying.

Sources: Cunningham et al. (2016), Jadambaa et al. (2021), Ttofi et al. (2011)

Bullying is a serious health concern. It is increasingly recognised that bullying is not 'just a normal part of growing up'; however, this view does persist, even amongst health practitioners (Hutson et al., 2019). The severity of its impact means that all who work in the child wellbeing space must consider their role in addressing bullying.

## Current responses to bullying

Most recommended bullying responses are currently focused in schools. The 'gold standard' for bullying interventions involves building awareness of the issue by holding regular classes for all students on increasing empathy while encouraging supportive, pro-social behaviours towards peers (Bradshaw, 2015). This is usually combined with procedures to address instances of bullying, such as: 'shared concern', where children who engage in bullying behaviours are confronted with the impact of their behaviour on the child who is experiencing the bullying; or mutual problem-solving approaches where the two (or more) children involved are brought together to discuss any issues in their relationship and what they will do to improve things.

Evidence shows that when effectively implemented these approaches can reduce bullying impact significantly. Unfortunately, 72% of children report that they wouldn't raise a bullying concern with their teacher, and of those who have done so, only 27.8% report that this helped the situation (Cross et al., 2009). It may be that the gold standard school-based intervention is difficult to effectively implement because of the intensive resources required to deliver regular classroom-based sessions for all students throughout the school – or that a number of children are still falling through the gaps.

Additionally, practitioners outside the school environment may be left wondering how they can contribute to addressing bullying when they are not embedded in the school system. These practitioners may observe the negative impacts of bullying on children they work with but lack methods of providing direct support, instead relying on referrals to schools to address the issue, or to mental health professionals to help the child cope with ongoing bullying.

While the bulk of incidents occur in the school environment, bullying shouldn't be seen as exclusive to these settings. Forty-five per cent of students report having experienced bullying somewhere other than school; 38% reported experiencing bullying at home; and 32% experienced bullying on the way to or from school (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2020). With increased access to and use of technology, such as mobile phones and social media, children are at even greater risk

of bullying outside the context and reach of school; cyberbullying can occur anywhere and at any time (National Centre Against Bullying, n.d.).

## Focus of this resource

This resource describes how practitioners from a range of fields who are employed outside the school system can help protect children from bullying. Approaches include raising parents' awareness of bullying as an issue and looking at how building social connections can help.

Importantly, these approaches can be applied early in a child's life, within the 0–12 year range. This age group is often neglected in research and program delivery, representing a missed opportunity (Condon et al., 2019).

This resource is focused on bullying prevention. While all children, including those currently experiencing bullying behaviour, can benefit from increased attention to their social relationships, children who are currently experiencing bullying will require additional supports, which are beyond the scope of this resource. Suitable supports involve intervention from adults to address the behaviour itself and one-to-one therapeutic intervention that responds to the effects of bullying behaviour.



## Recommended practices

### Raising the issue of bullying early

Increasingly, there are calls from health experts to inform parents about bullying early in their child's life (McClowry et al., 2017; Stephens et al., 2018) for several reasons:

- it draws attention to the problem so that parents are ready to take action should they need to
- parents are empowered to recognise and respond to bullying issues should they arise; and
- it encourages parents to help their children build healthy relationships, and use positive parenting practices to reduce the risk of their child experiencing or engaging in bullying behaviour.

There is currently no established process for precisely how and when you should raise bullying with parents. Some researchers recommend that this should occur before the child starts school (Stephens et al., 2018). In most cases the advice and support offered to parents of 0 to 12-year-olds aims to prepare parents to respond in the future, even if there are no current bullying issues to address.

Depending on the circumstances of the engagement with the family, it may help to raise the subject of bullying within a broader discussion about the child's interpersonal wellbeing. For example:

- Ask about connections with other adults:
  - Do they see other relatives, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles?
  - Are they forming bonds with them?
- Explore how the child is around other children:
  - How do they play with other children?
  - Do they have friends outside the family?
  - Are they happy to engage with other children or are they avoidant?
  - How are the child's social skills?
  - Are they able to understand and relate to others?

Note that with young children, these discussions should happen with an understanding of typical development for the child's age. It may be helpful to provide parents with some information about what socialising looks like at their child's age. Detailed information on social and other child development milestones is available from the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA): [www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-02/DevelopmentalMilestonesEYLFandNQS.pdf](http://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-02/DevelopmentalMilestonesEYLFandNQS.pdf)



Then lead parents into a discussion about issues that can arise in relationships, and specifically bullying. It is important you explain that bullying is:

- very common, with 15–30% of children experiencing bullying behaviour in a 12-month period (Jadambaa et al., 2019); and
- serious in its impact, with potential lifelong repercussions for wellbeing.

It is important to note that bullying is harmful to both the child experiencing the behaviour and the child engaging in the behaviour, so parents should be concerned about signs of either of these from their child.

There are some common warning signs to look out for, which parents should be informed of, while noting that unfortunately:

- many children who are involved in bullying will not show these signs; and
- many children say that they would be unlikely to report bullying.

### Warning signs of bullying behaviour

- Unexplainable injuries
- Damaged or missing property
- Somatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches, feeling 'sick' in general)
- Changes in eating habits, skipping lunch at school
- Increased sleeping problems, including nightmares
- Changes in academic performance
- Avoiding school or complaining about going to school
- Avoiding social situations, sudden changes in friendships
- Mental health issues including depressed mood, anxiety, low self-esteem
- Self-destructive behaviours such as self-harm or running away from home

*(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2021)*

### Support parents to build children's social connections

When working to prevent bullying in children, the strongest protective factor can be having a network of healthy relationships.

Studies that have periodically measured children and young people's wellbeing consistently found that having good relationships with family and a close group of friends can interrupt the path from bullying involvement to poor outcomes (Hodges et al., 1999; Ttofi et al., 2011). On the other hand, children who are socially isolated, have low social skills and lack parental involvement suffer most from the impacts of bullying. These children are also more likely than well-connected children to experience bullying behaviour, further increasing their vulnerability.

Similar patterns can be found in children who engage in bullying, with many being rejected by their peers and having poor relationships at home.

This means that we should pay more attention to how children build healthy relationships and provide support for them to do so.

### How children learn to build social connections

Most children learn to socialise and build connections by doing – by being immersed in social situations. However, there are differences in how much children are exposed to a variety of social situations, and the qualities of those situations. For example, some children attend childcare settings such as day care and kindergarten in their preschool years, whereas others stay home with their families. Similarly, some children have a warm, supportive relationship with their primary caregiver(s), whereas others are less close and positive.

Where children don't get the chance to socialise, discuss opportunities to broaden their social world with their parents. Note that having connections to a variety of social contexts, or a diverse set of relationships, can be protective factors when things go wrong – including bullying. Consider suggesting more interaction with family friends, sports teams and community groups.

It may help parents to understand that social connections are not only helpful in protecting their children from bullying, but also in building resilience more generally. Research has found that children with strong connections to supportive family and friends show better coping skills and mental health in the face of many difficulties that they may experience throughout life (Nangle et al., 2003).

Parents should also be aware that their own relationship with their child sets the foundation for social development. Children who have secure, close and warm relationships with their parents are better able to explore their social world with confidence and form new connections (Groh et al., 2014).

### Practice point #1: Children with additional needs

Children with additional needs may require extra support to build healthy social connections. Keep in mind that all children benefit from strong connections to others, even those who show a lack of interest or experience high anxiety in social situations.

It may take extra time and effort for parents and supporting practitioners to understand the socialising needs and preferences of their unique child. You can help parents along this journey by prompting them to observe how their child is around others and how they respond to different forms of support.

Remember to practice within the limits of your expertise and to seek input from disability experts where relevant.

Further information is available from the following resources: *Child-centred and communication-focused practice with children with disability*: [www.learning.emergingminds.com.au/course/child-centred-comm-focused-practice-with-children-with-disability](http://www.learning.emergingminds.com.au/course/child-centred-comm-focused-practice-with-children-with-disability)

*Child-centred and family-focused practice with children with disability*: [www.learning.emergingminds.com.au/course/child-centred-and-family-focused-practice-with-children-with-disability](http://www.learning.emergingminds.com.au/course/child-centred-and-family-focused-practice-with-children-with-disability)

### Empower parents to get involved in their child's social world

For many reasons, parents are not always in touch with what's happening for their child socially. This could be due to cultural norms, a lack of time, a lack of interest, being unaware that this is relevant to their parenting, or other reasons.

You can help children by informing and encouraging parents to build awareness of their child's social world. This will enable parents to support the child to socialise and build strong connections with others throughout their childhood and into adult life.

There are several effective actions you can take to empower parents:

- Build awareness. Parents may not recognise that being involved in their child's socialisation is important and relevant to their role.
- Encourage parents of children who are verbal to have regular conversations with children about their experiences, with an emphasis on experiences with other people. Refer to Practice Point #2 following for further information.
- Encourage parents to increase communication with their child overall. This is generally good for child development and wellbeing, and makes it easier to communicate about problems like bullying should they arise. This includes spending enough time with their children and 'checking in' regularly.
- Encourage parents to be involved in their child's digital activities, especially social media use. Digital socialising often goes overlooked and unsupervised, which presents significant challenges for bullying prevention. With older children, parents can have discussions with their child about balancing their need for privacy with their online safety.

Unfortunately, research shows that many children say they would not tell a significant adult if they were experiencing bullying. It is important that parents understand this tendency and are reasonably aware of what's going on in their child's social world, while being on the lookout for signs that their child might be involved in bullying.



## Practice point #2: Getting children and young people talking

While it can be helpful for practitioners and parents to talk to young people about their social experiences in general, and bullying in particular, it's often easier said than done. Don't assume that a child will open up about their experiences just because they've been asked – especially negative experiences. Parents may benefit from guidance on strategies to communicate with their child.

Further information is available from the Raising Children website:

*Communicating well with babies and children* – tips: [www.raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/connecting-communicating/communicating-communicating-well-with-children](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/connecting-communicating/communicating-communicating-well-with-children)

*Communicating and relationships – pre-teens and teenagers:* [www.raisingchildren.net.au/teens/communicating-relationships/communicating/teen-communicating-relationships](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/teens/communicating-relationships/communicating/teen-communicating-relationships)

## Practice point #3: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL is a topic that has gained increasing attention in Australian schools over the last two decades (Collie et al., 2017). It relates to the personal awareness and development of individuals, and the social environment created in the school, with an emphasis on empathy and mutual respect.

The principles of SEL overlap with efforts to protect children from bullying and improve their overall social context. You may wish to familiarise yourself with the SEL approach and language to enhance your work with children.

Further information is available from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority ([www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/personal-and-social-capability](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/personal-and-social-capability)) and CASEL ([www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org))

## Talk to children directly about their social experiences

It may be helpful to talk to children directly about their experiences, including any negative experiences they've had with other children and/or adults. This discussion will provide an opportunity for you to understand the child's social world, their relevant strengths and vulnerabilities, and to explore their understanding of bullying.

In some cases, it may be beneficial to speak with a child or young person without a parent present. Some children and young people may be reluctant to bring up social issues in front of a parent, for a variety of reasons, such as:

- embarrassment
- not wanting the parent to worry; and
- being wary of an unhelpful response from the parent, such as approaching children involved in bullying directly (Arseneault, 2018; Dale et al., 2014).

When considering this option, discuss your reasons with the parent and the child or young person, and obtain consent first.

Because bullying can be associated with feelings of embarrassment and shame for all children involved it may be helpful to begin with open-ended questions about their experiences and anything that's recently changed for them. This can then lead into direct questions about bullying. This discussion should include whether they understand what it is, and whether they have seen or heard anything like it.

Note that research shows children generally have difficulty accurately identifying the differences between bullying and other kinds of social issues such as arguments or falling out amongst friends (Mishna, 2004). Instead of trying to ask about bullying directly, aim to get a general understanding of the quality the child or young person's relationships, and any issues or things they would like to change.



## Teach children about help-seeking

The reasons why many children report that they would be unlikely to raise a concern about bullying with responsible adults (Cross et al., 2009) are unknown at present. However, you can play an important role in supporting children and young people by:

- informing them how to raise a concern about bullying
- explaining what will happen if they do raise a concern; and
- encouraging them to act on concerns as they arise.

Introduce help-seeking by including it in an open, free-flowing discussion about their social experiences and the difficulties that can arise. Although children and young people may not understand how help-seeking is relevant to them if they are not currently experiencing bullying behaviour, its prevalence and impact means that every child needs to know how to seek help.

Encourage children to think about a range of adults with whom they could raise bullying concerns (or other social issues), such as a parent, school teacher, or with you as a practitioner involved in their care. Reassure the child or young person that adults take bullying seriously and that there is help available. Let the child know that they don't need to put up with bullying and that they have a right to feel safe at all times.



## Practice point #4: Counselling children who experience bullying behaviour

Counselling can be helpful for children who experience bullying behaviour. It should focus on the child or young person's coping mechanisms and self-image.

Counselling needs to be provided by trained practitioners with sufficient time to address the issue thoroughly.

It is also essential that counselling should not be the only support offered. Make it clear to the child who is experiencing bullying behaviour that they can expect the situation to be addressed. Help them understand that it is not their responsibility to cope with bullying – responsible adults must take action to protect them from harm.

## Conversation points

This section includes suggestions for key phrases you might use to address topics related to the prevention of bullying.

### Raising the topic of social connections

- “And how’s Reuben going socially?”
- “Tell me about how Leena is around others.”
- “Relationships are a really important part of a child’s development. Could you tell me about some of these? Who is Michael close to?”
- “Have you noticed Mika forming any friendships yet? Does she show any preferences for playing with a particular child, or children?”
- “What sort of things does Noah most like to do with you? How about with other people?”
- “Do you have a sense of what’s going on for Niamh socially? Does she have friends? What are they like?”

### Raising the issue of bullying

- “As Santo grows and develops and makes new friends, one thing to be aware of is the issue of bullying. Unfortunately, it’s quite common, so it’s worth keeping an eye out for it.”
- “Have there been any issues in Samantha’s friendship group or with other children at school?”

- “How familiar are you with bullying? Do you know what to look out for?”
- “Bullying is something that I know comes up a lot for children at Dom’s age. Do you know much about bullying?”
- “I just want to take a moment to check in with you about the topic of bullying. It’s a challenge that comes up for many children and it can be quite problematic when it does, so I want to make sure you’re well informed.”
- “Bullying is something that we need to take seriously. If you get the sense that Elle’s involved in bullying, it’s important to do something about it. We shouldn’t leave it up to the young people to sort out.”
- “There are some warning signs to look out for. They’re available on this website. Let’s just go over them together now. However, remember that these aren’t always present so it’s important to stay in touch with what’s going on for Feng socially.”



### Increasing social connections

- “One of the best protections against bullying a child can have is strong connections to family and friends.”
- “Fortunately, Masie’s much less likely to be impacted by bullying if she has one or more close friends.”

- “Why don’t we see if we can think of some ways to help Omar spend more time with other children? Making friends is a great way to build up a child’s wellbeing and resilience, plus it helps protect them from bullying.”
- “I can see why you’re concerned about Isa not having any friends. Generally, children and young people make friends best by spending time interacting with other children. Do you have any ideas about activities or groups we could get her involved in?”
- “You mentioned you’ve noticed some concerns in how Chima plays with his cousins when he sees them. I know a lot of children learn how to behave around others in places like kindergarten – do you think that could be helpful for him?”
- “Hmm, that’s interesting that Anne complains that no one likes her at school. Perhaps the school can help her get involved in some group activities – I recall she’s really into art...?”

### Empowering parents to get involved in their child’s social world

- “It’s important to stay in touch with what’s going on in Abdullah’s social world. I know some parents aren’t sure if this is appropriate or necessary, but it really is fine to ask regularly about his friends and classmates, and any issues he might have noticed.”
- “What kind of conversations do you have with Camilla? Do you ever talk about her friends, or what the other children at school are like?”
- “The drive home from school can be a great time to check in about what happened that day, including with other children.”
- “If you’re not too sure about what’s going on with Daniel, a good place to start is just to increase communication generally. This is important for his overall wellbeing, and can also give you opportunities to learn about anything that’s concerning him.”
- “Just talking regularly about how things are going is one of the best things you can do, even if she doesn’t want to say much.”
- “Is Tommaso on social media? Have you discussed rules with him about what he does on there? Is there a way you can supervise or get a sense of any issues that might happen there?”
- “I know at this age many children want privacy and might not want you looking at what they do online, but you’re absolutely within your rights to set rules about being able to see what she’s doing. It’s best to sit down together and have a talk with her about how this will work.”



## How to raise concerns

- “Suppose Dario did experience bullying at some point – would you know what to do about it?”
- “How confident would you feel about taking action to support Mia if she was being bullied?”
- “If Robert was experiencing bullying at school, how would you approach the school about it? What would you expect them to do?”
- “Don’t be embarrassed about asking the school to do something – it’s an essential part of their job.”
- “Sometimes it can be hard to tell what’s really going on between young people. It’s OK if you can’t tell whether something’s actually bullying – it’s enough that there’s a concern there, so you should take action anyway.”
- “Bullying can occur in a range of settings, not just at school. If there are adults supervising those settings, they’re expected to take bullying seriously.”
- “If you’re not happy with a responsible adult’s response to a bullying concern, there are often ways you can escalate it – such as approaching the school principal directly.”
- “Remember you can always seek professional help if you become concerned about bullying. I’d be happy to check in about it in the future.”

## Talking to children directly

- “[To parent:] Maria, sometimes young people find it easier to talk about any social problems without their parent present. How would you feel about that? [To child:] And Cynthia, how would you feel about that?”
- “Tell me about your friends. What are their names? What do you like to do together?”
- “Do you ever have problems with other kids?”
- “How is school [or other social setting] going? Is there anything that’s worrying you about it?”
- “You mentioned an older boy says mean things to you. How often does that happen?”
- “Do you know about bullying? Have you seen or heard something like that?”
- “If you were upset about something, would your friends support you?”
- “How do you feel about the teachers at school? Do they care about you?”
- “If something was bothering you at school [or in another setting], who would you tell? What would you say to them?”

### Further resources

For more on bullying, refer to the following Emerging Minds resources:

*Understanding childhood bullying and mental health* online course: [www.emergingminds.com.au/online-course/understanding-childhood-bullying-and-mental-health](http://www.emergingminds.com.au/online-course/understanding-childhood-bullying-and-mental-health)

*Exploring bullying in context: Children’s relationships, friendships and social functioning* practice paper: [www.emergingminds.com.au/resources/exploring-bullying-in-context-childrens-relationships-friendships-and-social-functioning](http://www.emergingminds.com.au/resources/exploring-bullying-in-context-childrens-relationships-friendships-and-social-functioning)

*Supporting families to navigate school responses to bullying* practice paper: [www.emergingminds.com.au/resources/supporting-families-to-navigate-school-responses-to-bullying](http://www.emergingminds.com.au/resources/supporting-families-to-navigate-school-responses-to-bullying)



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