

Supporting the mental health of children who experience bullying

Case study – Olivia

Olivia is 12 years old and lives with her mother Anna, her father David, and her older sister Natasha. She is in Year 7. Olivia has a close relationship with her sister Natasha, who is 16 years old. Olivia's parents Anna and David are both supportive and have become increasingly concerned for Olivia over the last few months.

Olivia has been part of the Nippers (junior lifesaving) program since she was 5 years old. Olivia enjoys Nippers and excels within it. The group includes children who don't attend the same school as Olivia.

Most of Olivia's friends went to a different high school this year. One girl, Eliza, who Olivia knew from primary school but didn't spend a lot of time with, attends the same high school. At the beginning of the year, the two of them joined another group of girls. Olivia always felt on the outer of this new group. From the beginning they made occasional comments about Olivia's appearance. Eventually these comments became more frequent, and the group began excluding her more often. The girls would often giggle and look over at Olivia or hush to whispers when she came into the classroom. Over the holidays, the girls created a group chat on Instagram for the purpose of ganging up on Olivia. One of the girls posted a photo of Olivia taken without her knowledge. The photo was taken from an unflattering angle and had derogatory comments written over it. Further, a screen shot of the photo was taken and sent to more people in school via Snapchat. On return to school after the holidays, Olivia noticed others were laughing and talking about the photo.

Olivia's feelings of isolation and anxiety have increased significantly over the last few weeks. Her mood has been increasingly low. Olivia is refusing to go to school since attending the first week back after holidays and discovering the photo had been shared widely. She has been talking more about her appearance at home and is more conscious of her body. Olivia has started eating less and is thinking about dieting despite being quite slight in stature. Although her family know something is going on, due to her school refusal and change in mood, they are unaware of the extent of the bullying.

Olivia's mum takes her to the GP after noticing the decline in her mood along with her school refusal and eating less. The GP suggests a referral to a mental health professional for counselling.