



Supporting the mental health of children who engage in bullying behaviour

Case study – Sam

Sam is 12 years old and lives with his mother, Emma and step-father, James. Emma is currently pregnant and works full-time. Sam does not see his biological father. He has a good relationship with his step-father. However, when Emma announced she was pregnant, Sam was less than enthusiastic, and started to spend more time in his room. James thought he just needed time to adjust to the news.

Soon after this, James's son from a previous marriage, Nathan, came to live with the family to undertake a plumbing apprenticeship. Nathan is 17 years old and had been living interstate with his mother.

Sam was excited about Nathan coming into the family and sought out his company as much as he could (and Nathan would allow). They developed a good early relationship, and often did activities together, like going to the movies. Emma and James were pleased that Nathan had taken his younger step-brother under his wing and was being a mentor to him.

James expected Nathan to help around the house, and the older boy soon realized that Sam wasn't doing as much helping as he thought he should. So, Nathan started encouraging Sam to do more around the house, especially now that a new baby was coming. Sam tried to please Nathan and 'do the right thing', but it soon became apparent to Sam that whatever he did to impress Nathan was not going to be enough.

It was also clear that his mother and step-father approved of the way that Nathan was pushing Sam to be more helpful and to 'grow up'. So, even when Sam felt that Nathan was being unfair, or pushing him too hard, he didn't speak up because he didn't want to cause trouble for his Mum – something that Nathan often reinforced to Sam ("You've got to be a man now, help out, not be a whiny little boy.")

Nathan also continued to be an exciting big step-brother, alongside the pressure for Sam to 'lift his game'. He liked to take Sam on adventures. These started out as innocuous but started to get a little more 'exciting'. They also took on an element of danger or risk, such as climbing walls to get into stately homes, or tagging places with spray paint. Nathan even encouraged Sam to steal a small item from a shop because ("Every kid has to have at least one shop-lifting experience.") It was sometime after Nathan came into the family that Sam's behaviour started to worsen at school.

Sam was always a confident, sporty boy, with lots of friends. Recently, he has been verbally bullying and harassing one of the quieter and shy boys in his class, making fun of him in front of his friends, and generally making him feel 'small' and 'inadequate'. Sam's quick wit soon proved to be very entertaining, so he ramped up his attacks on the quiet, shy boy, and soaked up the laughs and the positive reinforcement he received from his friends.

This behaviour soon spread to his attitude towards teachers and school, and he began talking back to teachers, often to get a laugh. As a result, Sam has found himself suspended from school at least once or twice a week.

Emma first consulted her GP about her concerns about Sam and his school suspensions. She often has to pick Sam up from school if he is suspended, and her work is becoming less flexible and tolerant about the time off. Emma is worried about how Sam's behaviour is impacting him socially and academically. She was especially embarrassed when it was reported to her that Sam had been verbally bullying another boy in class. She is also worried about the change in family dynamic once the baby is born and how much support she will be able to provide Sam with a newborn. Emma started confronting Sam about the bullying and the school behaviour, and James and Nathan also joined in to berate him about his behaviour.

One night at the dinner table, as the conversation turned to Sam and his behaviour at school and at home, Sam threw his plate across the room where it smashed a glass cabinet. He ran out of the house and didn't return for several hours. This caused Emma to have some safety concerns around managing Sam's behaviour at home, and how to navigate this once the baby is born.

It is within the context of all these concerns, including the safety concerns, that Emma consulted the GP again, who referred her to an NGO family counselling service. Emma is hoping the counsellor service will give Sam strategies to stop his bullying at school and improve his behaviour at home. She is also hoping to receive strategies on how she can better manage his behaviour at home. The school is also seeking strategies on how to better support him at school.