MINDMATTERS SPOTLIGHTS

BULLYING OVERVIEW

MindMatters

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Depression. Anxiety.

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What is bullying?

Bullying is hurtful, aggressive and repeated behaviour that aims to embarrass, threaten or intimidate. It can be carried out by an individual or group towards one or more persons and is a complex social problem, which can occur in environments such as schools.

Researchers agree that there are five key features of bullying behaviour:

- The bully intends to inflict harm or fear upon the target.

- Aggression towards the target occurs repeatedly.

- The target does not provoke bullying behaviour by using verbal or physical aggression.

- Bullying occurs in familiar social groups.

- The bully is more powerful (either in reality or perception) than their targets, who are usually not able to effectively resist.

From Greene (2000) (as cited in Griffin and Gross, 2004).

What bullying isn't

Behaviours that do not constitute bullying include:

- mutual arguments and disagreements (where there is no power imbalance)

- not liking someone or a single act of social rejection

- one-off acts of meanness or spite

- isolated incidents of aggression, intimidation or violence.

To effectively respond to bullying at a whole school level it is important that school staff have an agreed definition that is understood and applied consistently

Types of bullying behaviour

There are different types of bullying behaviours:

Face-to-face

Face-to-face bullying may include kicking, hitting and punching, or verbal acts such as threats, name-calling and insults. Face-to-face/direct bullying is usually more easily witnessed (Byers, Caltabiano, & Caltabiano, 2011).
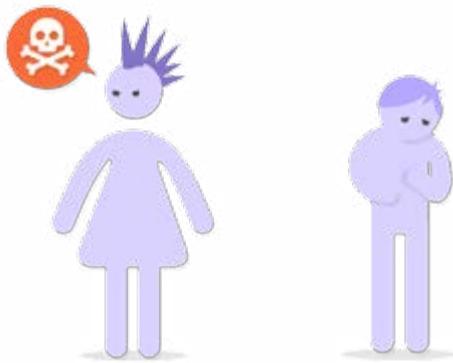
Covert

Covert bullying is more subtle, it is typically non-physical and occurs out of sight of others. Covert bullying includes hand gestures, threatening looks, whispering, excluding, blackmailing, spreading rumours, threatening, and stealing friends. Other behaviours may include damaging social relationships, playing practical jokes, breaking secrets, gossiping, criticising clothes and personalities, abusive notes, facial expressions, and turning your back on a person (**BullyingNoWay.gov.au**).

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, or online bullying, occurs through the use of technologies such as email, social networking websites, text messages, or instant messaging. Cyberbullying differs from offline bullying in that the perpetrators can more easily remain anonymous, content can reach a large audience, and material can be difficult to remove.
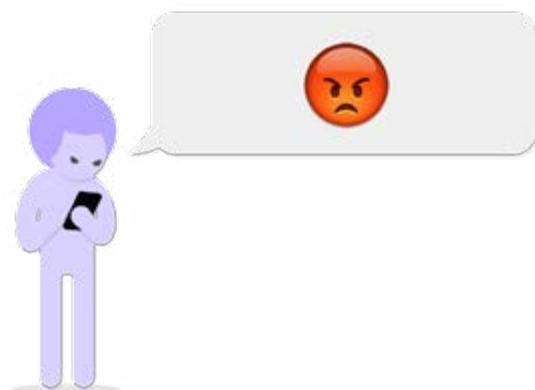
These different types of bullying can occur in combination and leave students to feel they have no safe space.

Bullying can have serious consequences

There are serious short-term and long term psychological and social consequences of bullying for both bullies and targets, including:

- feeling unsafe at school

- increased likelihood of depression and suicidal thoughts (especially students who are bullied)

- decreased self esteem

- lower levels of academic achievement

- negative attitudes towards school

- high levels of absenteeism

- alcohol and substance abuse. (Lodge & Feldman, 2007, as cited in Lodge, 2008).

Witnesses of bullying can have feelings of anger, fear, guilt and sadness. Seeing repeated bullying of their peers can result in negative effects similar to the victimised children themselves. (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning and the Social and Emotional Learning Research Group, 2009).

The long-term effects of bullying

In a study conducted in Finland 2,713 schoolboys aged eight years were identified by teachers and parents and the children themselves as being bullied at school. When these boys enrolled for compulsory national service 10 to 15 years later they completed a required psychiatric examination.

It was found that the bullied boys were more likely than those who were not bullied to have mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety; and on this basis, were three times more likely to be ineligible for admission to national service.

Studies have shown that children who are identified as bullies at school are much more likely than others to engage in delinquent and criminal behaviours as adults. (e.g. Ttofi, Farrington and Losel, 2012)

There are also links between bullying and suicidal ideation or suicide attempts. Cyberbullying was found to be more strongly related to suicidal ideation compared with traditional bullying (van Geel, Vedder & Tanilon, 2014).

For these reasons it is important to reduce bullying and support all affected by it - bullies, targets, and bystanders.

Unfortunately, bullying is common

Bullying is subject of ongoing worldwide research and is a high priority for communities and government. Here are some recent statistics:

- Approximately one in four Australian students are affected by bullying.

- Approximately one in seven young people have been cyberbullied, with research suggesting this number may be increasing.

- More than three quarters of students who were bullied online were also bullied offline.

- Peers are present as onlookers in most bullying interactions and play a central role in the bullying process.

- Bullying is the fourth most common reason young people seek help from children's help services.
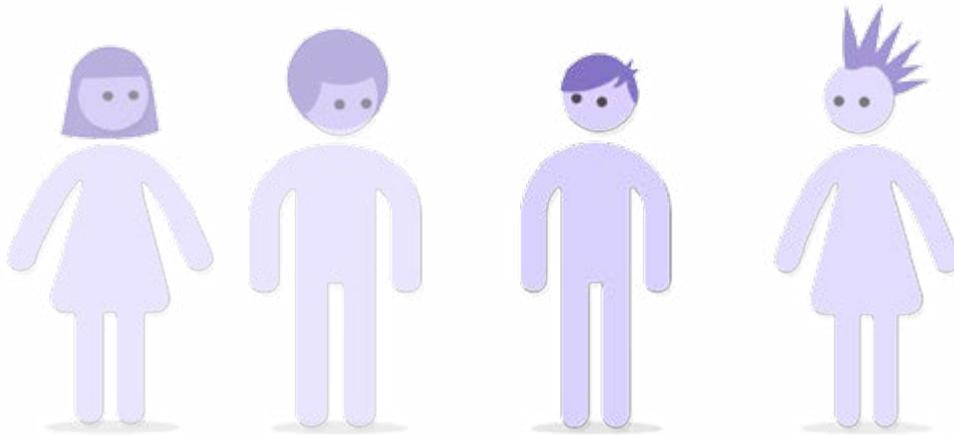
The bystander

Many students may witness traditional bullying and can either assist the bully or reinforce the bullying (around 26 per cent), do nothing or be outside the situation (24 per cent) or assist and reinforce the victim (17 per cent) (Spears, Keeley, Bates & Taddeo, 2014). This recognition changes the way in which bullying can be seen, from a relationship dynamic just between the bully and target to a more peer dynamic and social relationship issue.

Bullying is a significant concern for young people

Mission Australia's 2014 Youth Survey (including 13,600 young people aged 15 – 19 years) results reveal that issues of personal concern to young people are (with percentage rating the issue extremely or very concerned):

1. **Coping with stress: 41.6%**

2. **School or study problems: 40.8%**

3. **Body image: 30.4%**

4. **Depression: 21.3%**

5. **Family conflict 20%**

6. **Bullying/emotional abuse: 15.2%**

7. **Personal safety: 13.1%**

8. **Suicide: 12.2%**

9. **Discrimination: 11.2%**

10. **Drugs: 7.8%**

11. **Alcohol: 5.8%**

12. **Gambling: 3.5%**

More females (16.6 per cent) named bullying as an issue of concern than males (11.2 per cent). In comparison to other years, the national percentage of young people reporting bullying as a most important concern in 2014 (14.5 per cent) has grown from 10.9 per cent (2013) and 11 per cent (2012). Other issues named as concerns, such as equity and discrimination (21.3 per cent), mental health (18.3 per cent in 2014) and LGBT issues (6.2 per cent) may also include aspects of bullying.

Providing and promoting a range of avenues for students to discuss and seek help for the issues concerning them is an important, practical way schools can support the mental health and wellbeing of their students.

There is no simple explanation for bullying

Bullying emerges from a complex interaction of social, personal and psychological circumstances. Bullies may feel disdain for their targets, find bullying others enjoyable, feel strong and in control when bullying others, and believe that bullying others will make them popular. (Cross, Shaw, Heam, Epstein, Monks, Lester & Thomas, 2009)

Bullying behaviour can occur because of distrust, fear, misunderstandings and lack of knowledge or jealousy. For example, students who are seen by their peers to be "different" in some way (for example, having additional needs, or coming from a different cultural background) are often more likely to be bullied at school.

Underdeveloped social and emotional skills may also lead to bullying behaviour. Students who have poor self-regulation and anger management skills are more likely to engage in bullying behaviour than students with better developed skills. (**BullyingNoWay.gov.au**).

Common myth 1: Bullying is just a normal part of growing up/character building.

The impact of bullying is now known to be significant on individuals and communities with the potential to have adverse effects on development and mental health and wellbeing. In addition, there are now a range of legal implications in relation to bullying and cyberbullying behaviour. School staff have responsibilities to keep students safe and to intervene to respond to bullying incidents which occur, some of which may have legal implications (see state and territory specific information about laws: **lawstuff.org.au**).

Good mental health and wellbeing helps bullies and their targets

The National Safe Schools Framework Resource Manual has researched the characteristics which feature in students who bully and are bullied.

Characteristics of students who are more likely to bully others include:

- Feel disconnected from school and dislike school.

- Demonstrate low levels of moral reasoning and high levels of egocentric reasoning.

- Believe that the use of aggression is an acceptable way to achieve their own goals.

- Show more emotional instability.

- Have reasonable levels of peer acceptance and social status but are more disliked than non-bullying peers.

- Associate with other aggressive and anti-social peers.

- Have high self esteem and an inflated view of themselves.

- Have lower levels of empathy than other students.

- Have poor impulse control and poor anger management skills.

- Feel less confident about using non-violent strategies to resolve conflict.

When students are supported to develop respectful peer and adult relationships, respect and embrace diversity, and understand their own feelings and needs as well as those of others, the risk of conflict and relationship problems escalating into bullying behaviour is reduced.

Common myth 2: Some kids have victim written all over them. They need to toughen up.

Attitudes which blame the target are unhelpful and dismiss the needs of both the student who is targeted and the student who is bullying. Messages that promote positive and healthy relationships and highlight the inappropriateness of bullying will enable students to raise concerns about bullying and ensure that staff become aware and can respond to stop it.

Any student can become the target of bullying for a multitude of reasons including being different in some way, being new to a school, when a relationship breaks up or because they pose a threat to the social status of a student who has a pattern of bullying others.

Research suggests that characteristics of students who are more likely to be bullied include those who:

- Feel disconnected from school and not like school.

- Lack quality friendships with peers and teachers at school.

- Display high levels of emotionality that indicates vulnerability and low levels of resilience.

- Are less well accepted by peers, avoid conflict and are socially withdrawn.

- Have low self-esteem.

- Are relatively non-assertive.

- Lack confidence and skills in effectively interacting with peers.

- Are less likely to have other young people come to their defence when they are bullied.

- Are different in some way.

You may notice students that have some of these characteristics in your day to day work. Keeping a closer eye out for signs of bullying for these students, supporting participation and inclusion in the classroom and developing student resilience are a few practical ways to assist these students.

How can students develop resilience?

MindMatters Component 2 modules explore student skills for resilience, looking at how school staff can build the capacity of young people to respond to the stressors in their lives, and how you can create a context in which students can support their own mental health.
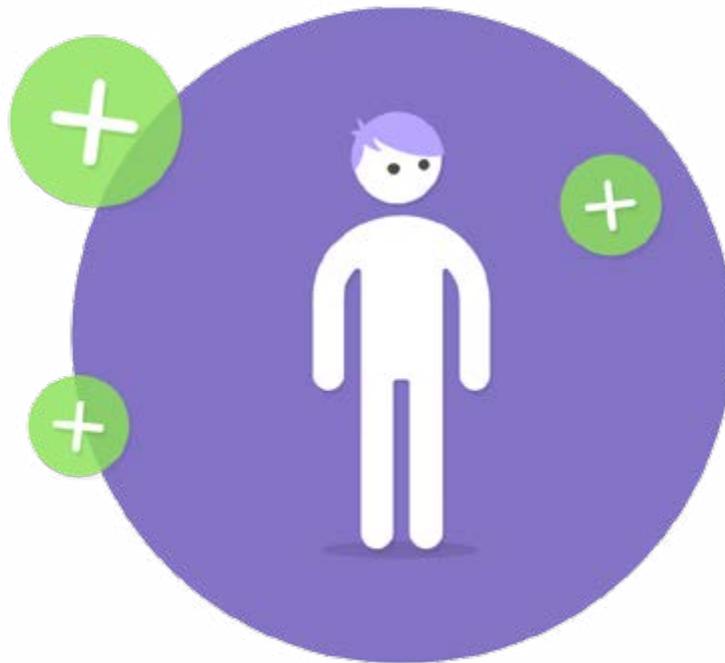
Some populations are at greater risk

Although bullying is harmful to everyone, there are some young people in certain populations who are more likely to be at risk of bullying in Australia.

These include:

Young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. These students are often targets of bullying and cyberbullying because of stereotyping related to their cultural, religious, linguistic or racial background.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. A number of factors including discrimination, socio-economic disadvantage, and cultural differences contribute to higher rates of both bullying and cyberbullying for this group of young people.

Same-gender attracted, intersex and gender diverse young people. Levels of bullying of young people who identify as LGBT are as high as 65 per cent. Other evidence suggests that intersex young people may also experience higher levels of bullying; however more research needs to be done here.

People with disabilities. Young people with disabilities are more likely to be the targets of bullying. Recent research shows that 62 per cent of students identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder reported they were bullied once a week or more often.

Family background is a factor

Students who frequently bully others are more likely to come from family backgrounds with a combination of some of the following characteristics:

- Parents are not supportive.

- Parents have a history of having bullied others when they are at school.

- The child has witnessed domestic partner abuse on the part of the parent.

- The child spends less time than similar aged children under the supervision of their parents.

- The child has been maltreated by family members.

- The child has high levels of disagreement with his or her parents.

- The parents are permissive towards aggressive behaviour.

However, many students who frequently or persistently bully others do not come from families with these characteristics and their parents are surprised, disappointed and angry when they find out that their child has been involved in bullying others.

The kind of family characteristics which make it less likely that children will bully others are those that are characterised by family harmony, non-authoritarian parenting, a reasonable level of parental supervision, parental disapproval for aggression and bullying behaviour and a high level of positive involvement between parents and their children (National Safe Schools Framework Resource Manual, 2011).

Common myth 3: There's nothing the school can do – it comes from home.

Parents have a significant role in influencing their children and modelling positive behaviours. However, schools also play a key role in influencing and modelling, particularly in setting expectations in the school environment. Schools can teach social and emotional skills and can promote healthy relationships which can counter negative messages from outside the school. These approaches can also be shared with families as the school can play a role in helping parents understand the risks associated with bullying and what they can do to help prevent it.

Students who are bullied are also more likely to come from family backgrounds in which there is parental conflict and disharmony, and the parents tend to be restrictive, over-protective, controlling and over-involved with their children. However, many students who are bullied do not come from families with these characteristics.

The kind of family circumstances that make it less likely that children will be bullied are those that are characterised by significant parental involvement with their children and good communication between the child and his or her parents. (National Safe Schools Framework Resource Manual, 2011).
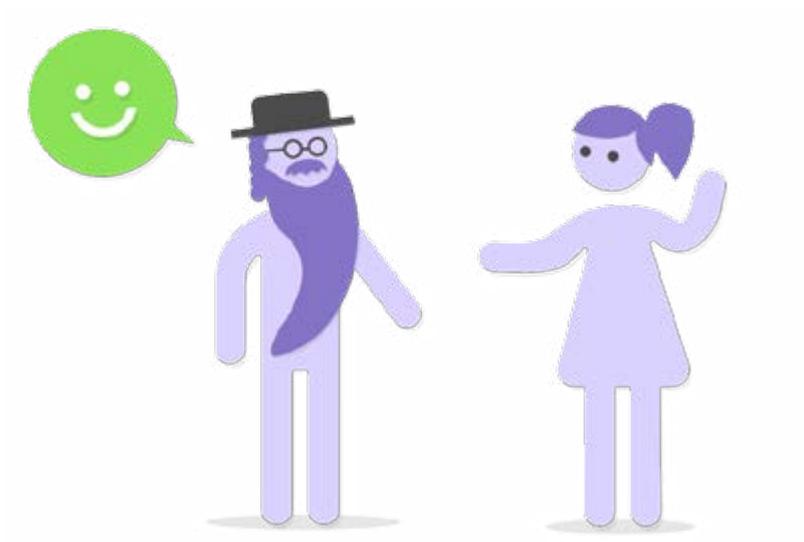
How can schools work productively with parents to tackle issues of bullying?

MindMatters Component 3 modules look outward from the school itself to the wider community of parents, carers and families, exploring topics like Communicating with parents and Sharing concerns with parents.

Teachers can play an active role in preventing bullying

School staff have a duty of care to ensure the safety of their students, and need to be sufficiently skilled and confident in preventing and responding to bullying. It is beneficial staff be aware of those students most at risk of bullying, including same-gender attracted, intersex and gender diverse young people, students with disabilities, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Common myth 4: There's no bullying at our school.

When schools do not have processes which enable students to raise bullying or a culture where bullying behaviours appear normal might think that they have no bullying. Data in relation to bullying amongst young people would suggest that bullying occurs in school environments and therefore schools need to be vigilant in monitoring for bullying and ensuring that people affected can speak up.

Recognising the effects of bullying

Much bullying behaviour occurs out of sight of adults; however you, as a staff member, are well placed to notice behaviour changes in a student they know which may indicate the effects of bullying. These could include:

- Change in student's demeanour/engagement/attendance.

- Change in friendships which seems to leave one or more students unhappy.

- Negative interactions between students.

- Negative comments made about another student.

- Ignoring/exclusion of students.

- Student avoiding certain parts of the school yard, coming or leaving school late or very early.

- Student seems tired or day-dreamy.

- Student seems anxious, particularly around some students.

- Student appears dishevelled, with torn or bloodied clothing.

- Student has injuries such as bruises or cuts.

These signs may indicate bullying and you should:

- Ask the student, privately, if they would like to have a conversation, let the student know about the teachers' observations and ask if there are any concerns they have at school or home.

- Discuss their observation with the pastoral care/student wellbeing/other teaching staff member to share concerns and what they have observed. Bullying could be one possible issue.

In the case that the student is a target of bullying, the staff member should act quickly and follow the school's policies and procedures relating to bullying. Ideally these policies will include multiple intervention models, such as support groups or restorative practices.

What should you do if you are concerned about the mental health of a student?

MindMatters component 4 modules can help staff recognise the early signs of mental health difficulties, which could result from bullying. The referral process and pathways will assist staff in knowing how to respond quickly and seek support if they require it.

Reactive approaches to bullying

If a teacher witnesses bullying behaviour, or is informed about an incident of bullying, there are more ways to intervene beyond simple disciplinary action. Ken Rigby has identified six methods for responding to incidents of bullying in schools (Rigby, K , 2010). These methods have been extensively researched and practised and are available as a **downloadable PDF.**

Responses shown not to be effective in responding to bullying at school:

- **Short-term 'solutions' alone**, like punishing the student doing the bullying, do not improve the relationships and social factors which allow the bullying to happen. Although the bullying may stop in the short-term, unless these factors are addressed, it is very likely to reoccur or become covert (hidden).

- **Punishment (such as suspensions)** as the only intervention is not effective in preventing bullying. Interventions need to be matched to the particular circumstance of the bullying. No single approach to bullying is appropriate or effective in all circumstances or for all people.

- **Responses which disempower students.** If the school's response to bullying further disempowers students who have been bullied or fosters a negative school culture, this can make the situation worse.

- **Anti-bullying programs without complementary resilience building programs.** Anti-bullying programs that target bullying specifically have been found to make bullying increase – possibly because they teach students what bullying is and the language of bullying.
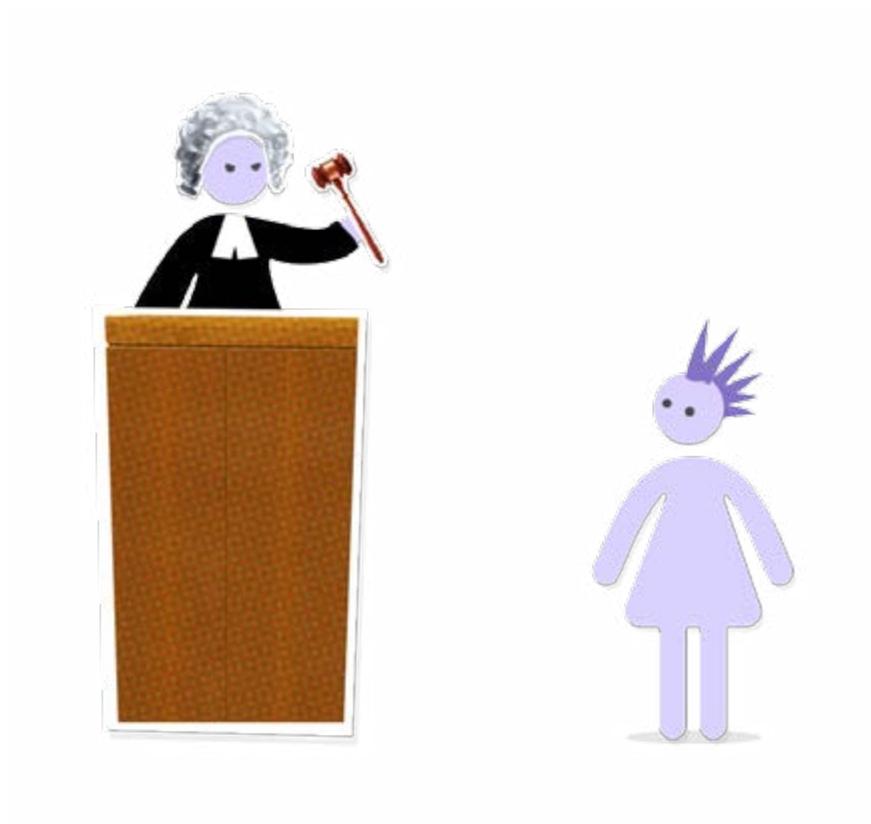
Bullying outside of the school

Students may be involved in bullying behaviours outside the school that become obvious from their behaviours at school. If outside incidents have an impact at the school, they need to be dealt with using the school's policy (It is likely that schools are still developing the most effective way to respond to incidents of cyberbullying). Ask "what effect is this bullying behaviour having on the student/s concerned and what do we need to do in response?" This might mean including parents or others involved.

Additional resources for school staff

There are many resources which have been developed for school staff to help them understand bullying and their role in stopping it. A number of key resources are listed at the end of this document and are a great starting point for further exploration.

Ken Rigby's websites, books and articles would be useful reading for staff to gain further information about bullying, the impact and appropriate responses from school staff. (**kenrigby.net**)

Whole school strategies can help prevent bullying

Whole school strategies that send anti-bullying messages, teach social and emotional skills, and promote healthy and positive relationships across the whole school community will go a long way to preventing bullying. Lower levels of bullying and higher levels of student wellbeing are highly likely when the following circumstances are in place in a school:

- Most students feel connected to their school.

- Students have sound levels of social and emotional skills.

- There are strong school norms against bullying aggression.

- Students perceive that the school has clear support and disciplinary structures in place.

- Students perceive that teachers in the school actively care about and promote student wellbeing and student welfare, and that the environment of their school is positive, welcoming, cooperative and fair.

- The classroom teacher uses effective behaviour management.

- Teachers promote cooperation.

- The culture of the school is positive, caring, respectful and supportive. This includes positive relationships between peers, and positive student relationships with teachers.

The relationships and social behaviour of adults in the school community can have a significant influence on students who are continuing to develop relationship skills. When teachers model positive, respectful and inclusive behaviours, students are more likely to act in these ways. In contrast, when teachers use classroom management techniques that rely on dominance and submission, students who are already predisposed to bullying others may feel that their behaviour is acceptable (National Safe Schools Framework, 2011).

How is your school is doing?

The MindMatters survey tool provides action team leaders with the means to survey staff and students to better understand the mental health and well-being environment of the school.
mindmatters.edu.au/tools-resources/surveys

The National Safe Schools Framework Resource Manual, following a review of international literature, lists a range of features of school approaches, strategies and components which are likely to be the most effective in preventing and reducing bullying:

- A universal whole school approach of long duration that takes a multi-faceted approach rather than focusing on one single component.

- An increased awareness of bullying in the school community through assemblies, focus days and student-owned plans and activities.

- A whole-school detailed policy that addresses bullying.

- Effective classroom management and classroom rules.

- The promotion of a positive school environment that provides safety, security and support for students and promotes positive relationships and student wellbeing.

- Effective methods of behaviour management that are consistently used, are non-hostile and non-punitive.

- Encouragement and skill development for all students (and especially bystanders) to respond negatively to bullying behaviour and support students who are bullied:

    - **social skill development within teaching and learning activities (e.g. through the use of co-operative learning).**

    - **enhancement of the school physical environment and its supervision.**

    - **teacher professional development and classroom curriculum units that address bullying and related issues (e.g. values education).**

    - **counselling for individual students and collaboration with other appropriate professionals.**

    - **school conferences or assemblies that raise awareness of the problem.**

   - **parent partnerships and education.**

A whole school approach can help prevent bullying

MindMatters Component 1 modules look at promoting a positive school culture that will encourage inclusion, respectful relationships and valuing diversity, which in turn may lead to awareness of the inappropriateness of bullying.

Active classroom and yard supervision is crucial to catch incidents at early stages, respond to inappropriate or disrespectful language or behaviour and to send clear messages to students about expectations. The school's physical environment is also important in terms of the places where students feel more or less safe. Bullying in secondary schools is more likely to occur in the corridor or in the class and during competitive or aggressive activities. (National Safe Schools Framework Resource Manual, 2011). Anti-bullying initiatives need to take this into account when developing strategies.

Common myth 5: There's nothing the school can do to stop bullying – it's part of human nature.

Schools are expected to prevent and respond to bullying. Treating it as normal human behaviour dismisses the impact of bullying on individuals and leaves those affected unsupported.
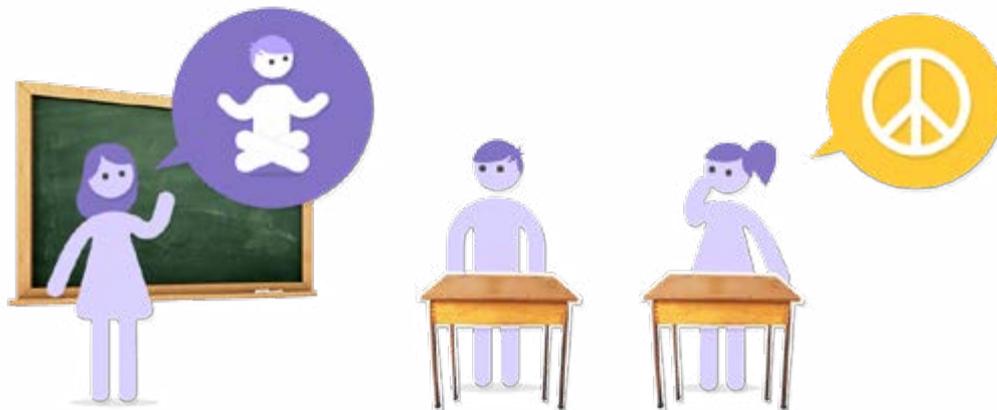
Start by reviewing your policies and procedures

Reviewing your current policies and practices will help you determine what's working and what's not. What you learn will help develop and improve your school's policies and procedures on bullying.

Download 'Making it happen' to get started

MindMatters can help

Bullying is best tackled at a whole school level. MindMatters' whole school approach to building a positive school community strengthens your anti-bullying efforts and provides a framework in which specific anti-bullying strategies can fit.

START MINDMATTERS IN YOUR SCHOOL TODAY

MindMatters is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools developed by *beyondblue* with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health.

See more MindMatters resources at **www.mindmatters.edu.au**

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