

# learning links



Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 5

## Is it Teasing or Bullying?

### How do we know and what do we do about it?

**Bullying has been an important issue for parents of students at school for a very long time.**

There has been a shift from 'it's just what happens at school' to recognising the effect that bullying has on students, not just physically but also psychologically and on their overall development.

There have been various presentations of our research in the media of late and one of the things that has been highlighted is that in the past 10 years, despite the research, there's still a great need for a lot of things to be done in regard to bullying.

One of the shocking statistics from our research with several schools was that at least 60% of students still report being bullied at some point in their school lives. As many as 14% of students report being victimised on a weekly basis, so there's still a long way to go.

### Differentiating bullying and teasing

What I wanted to discuss today is something I've been particularly interested in – trying to differentiate bullying from other forms of social behaviours such as aggression and teasing.

The reason why this is important is because I think it forms the basis of trying to identify what it is that we're fighting against.

I believe that one of the biggest reasons why people tend to be indifferent about bullying is they confuse it with teasing. Most if not all people have been teased at some point in their life, so they may feel that teasing didn't do them any harm and this attitude lends itself to reducing the amount of enthusiasm to intervene in bullying.

The University of Western Sydney study looked at over 4,500 students in secondary schools in particular over a three-year period.

In that period, we collected 1.5 million points of data from each of the schools and we did that six times. We analysed the data on a longitudinal basis. In effect, we followed students as they went through school over a two-year period. During that period, we also implemented an intervention to reduce bullying and we are now looking at whether this intervention had any significant effects.

What we did, which I'm very excited about, was try and look at the real nature of bullying – what the kids themselves say bullying is and what they say are the consequences.

Let me start by getting the terminology right.

What is bullying and how is this differentiated from other forms of behaviour?

A Norwegian study began to look into the problem of bullying when over a period of 12 months there were close to six suicides in Norway directly linked to school bullying. They started a program to view the nature of bullying and try and understand what it is. They found that there are at least three particular factors that make certain behaviour bullying.

*Roberto Parada spoke at Learning Links' 2002 Annual General Meeting on the topic of Is it Teasing or Bullying?*

*Roberto is a School Psychologist for the Catholic Education Office in Parramatta. He has over seven years experience working with children and families and has clinical experience working with victims of bullying. He is also a doctoral candidate at the University of Western Sydney and is currently completing the largest project ever conducted on bullying in NSW schools.*

*Possibly most importantly, Roberto is a dad and has two young children. With his permission, we have reproduced his talk for those unable to attend on the night.*

**Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.**

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

**Early Childhood Services** for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

**School Age Services** for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

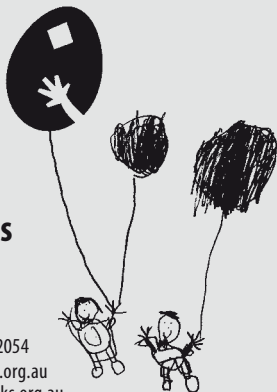
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Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

**Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Peshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.**



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First of all, there is an *imbalance of power*.

The imbalance of power isn't a huge kid who sits at the back of the Year 7 class who reached puberty quite early, it can be an imbalance of power brought about by the position of a person. It can be that they are a significant member of a popular group, more astute intellectually, have a quick wit or anything that gives them an advantage over another person and creates an imbalance of power.

Bullying is not just that a child has an imbalance of power – it is the fact that they use it to their advantage by bullying to get at another person.

What is it that they do wrong? They engage in a series of *behaviours that are carried out over an extended period of time* – the second factor. These behaviours are usually targeted at a particular individual or group and it is the very fact that they target the person or people repeatedly that differentiates bullying from other aggressive acts which may be a one off occurrence.

The third factor is what differentiates bullying from other forms of aggression – bullying is usually *occurring in a relationship*. A relationship needs two or more people and is over a period of time. Bullying tends to occur whenever these people are together and it generally damages in some way one or several of the members of that relationship.

## Types and social significance of bullying

The behaviours used in bullying are of particular interest.

We found three types of bullying:

1. social exclusion,
2. physical bullying and
3. verbal bullying.

It was previously thought that you could be a victim of just one of these types of bullying. What we found is that if you're being bullied in one of these forms, it is extremely likely that you're being bullied using all of them.

When we talk about bullying we talk about specific behaviours that are used by a 'bully' to a target person to socially isolate that person in some way.

We can better understand bullying if we look at the very specific social significance that it has.

Books that talk about bullying either omit teasing altogether or include it as part of bullying – one of the ways to get at somebody. What we found is that the origins of bullying are actually more complicated than that.

If as parents we are able to understand where bullying occurs and why it occurs, we will be better able to counteract its effects and talk to our children about some of the strategies they need to use.

To do this let's go back to where there's a popular group at school. Let's call them the 'funky dressers'.

Every school has the 'funky dressers' group. They're the ones that it doesn't matter what the uniform code is, they manage to modify it in some way so that they are a bit different.

I'm thinking of the 'funky dressers' because they're the most benign of all the groups that can form in a school and most schools have them.

Funky dressers are a group because members have the shared value that dressing good is an important thing. The 'funky dressers' members draw a sense of power because of their popularity in the school. In turn this power feeds their justification of being an exclusive group and makes them feel good about themselves and belonging to the group.

A key aspect that we've been looking at in our research is 'self-concept' or how you feel about yourself.

One part of your self-concept is drawn from the crowds you hang around. If you're in a loser group, you tend to have a self-concept that reflects being a loser in some way. If you're in a 'funky dressers' or popular group and a lot of kids look up to you, then your self-concept or self-esteem will tend to be higher. It is likely that others believe that by joining that group, their own self-esteem will go up.

Schools have lots of groups and children make applications all the time to join these groups. (Adults also make applications all the time to join groups – in the job seeking process we do it more formally by sending our resume.)

The definition of a group (two or more people hanging around each other) implies that people not having similar values to those that are espoused by the group are excluded from the group (it's unlikely that the Liberal Party has many communists for example).

If just about anybody can join your group, it is less likely that the group will stay together and that it will be of high status. This is why most groups have very specific rules (explicit or implicit) as to whom can join them and actively or sometimes passively recruit those whom they like and exclude those who do not meet their criteria.

Kids don't hand in their resume, they hang around the group they want to join – we can call them 'applicants'. They make themselves known to the group in a way that says 'hey, how are you going, I want to hang around you, is that all right?'

The group in direct or indirect ways communicates to the applicant what it takes to be part of this group.

This is where I believe we begin to see the role of teasing.

### The role of teasing

Teasing is observed in all cultures. In just about every culture it has been shown that teasing serves a very special purpose in socialising people – letting them know in a non-hostile way that they're not doing the right thing according to the norms of whichever group they want to belong to.

For example, say you've got an inappropriate dresser. Every organisation has the person who comes into work in shorts and a t-shirt when it's 15 degrees outside. Workmates might tease them about their goosebumps in the hope that they will get the hint regarding the inappropriate dress.

This teasing is usually done in a tone which implies that if they conform to the expectations and dress a bit more appropriately, they will be a better member of the group. This is the role of teasing.

If you went to a person inappropriately dressed and said 'you are inappropriately dressed', you might get a lawsuit. If your tease is tactful and you give someone a hint, you are letting them make the decision to change and save face. They may still be able to join the group if they change their behaviour.

What you are actually trying to do with this teasing, is enhance this individual's possibility of membership. I believe this is the crucial difference between bullying and teasing. When you tease people and try to remind them of the norms of belonging to a group, you're not rejecting them, you're saying 'look, if you just change a couple of quirks, we'll let you in' or 'you'll be a more successful member of this group'. Ultimately you still want to enhance their social success – in many instances you may want to be their friend.

A person is left with the choice to conform. They may choose not to or they may not be able to bring about the necessary change if what is being asked of them is too hard or they do not agree with it. They may have decided to be an individual.

At some point this person will need to be rejected, as they may be perceived as not conforming to the ideals which give the group its identity. If they are not rejected the very thing that makes them a group is at risk and all that they believe they gain from being in that group is lost.

Remember that what this group is trying to achieve is maintaining its status and the self-esteem that it draws from that status – if they allow someone inappropriately dressed in the group, they lose their status.

As we get older we develop appropriate social skills to brush people off. Kids are learning these skills and we believe that one of the ways that they exclude others in order to enhance or protect their social status is to bully other students. Bullying may be one of the not so social ways of letting someone know that you do not want them around.

### Who is getting bullied?

When we began to ask students about picking on children with learning or other disabilities, one of the statistics we came across is that children in integrated schools with a disability are at no greater odds of being picked on than the average student in that school. In fact, some of the data suggests that they have less chance because kids develop 'untouchable' rules.

Does anyone admit to watching 'Malcolm in the Middle'? There's a boy in the show who is in a wheelchair and he's 'untouchable'. In one episode he was picked on and the whole school came down on the bullies and said 'no, that's out of bounds, you don't do that'. This doesn't mean that this is not an issue for students with disabilities, however, we should not assume that having a disability makes you an instant victim of a bully.

We haven't been able to find anything to indicate a certain type of child is more likely to be bullied. We do know that if you're a boy, you bully more and you get picked on more than if you're a girl.

Girls bully differently, and the difference is the opposite of what is commonly known. Boys socially exclude and spread rumours more than girls. We did find that in the older age groups belonging to a group becomes more important for boys because they tolerate more things. For girls, being more exclusive becomes more important as they get older. We think if we sample the older groups, we will see that girls will begin to use exclusion and verbal bullying more and boys will begin to use it less.

One of the other things that often happens is that when a person is excluded from a group, other applicants appear. There are always students who want to migrate in the structure.

When someone new wants to join a group and knows that another person has just been excluded, they often bully the excluded person to gain social capital with the group they want to join.

We also found that when a person has been bullied, they have also learnt that one way to get into a group is to bully someone else.

This is one of our key findings – in some students being bullied makes you more likely to bully, rather than be more sympathetic to others because they know what bullying feels like.

In fact, there was a crossover of about 30% of students who were both bullies and victims simultaneously. This data was previously hidden, because kids were categorised as either a bully or a victim, not both.



We could see kids jumping from being bullied (victims) to bullying others and not being victimised. It's likely that they were bullied by a higher-ranking person and they were bullying lower ranking people. On adjustment measures some of the people who fared worst were those who were both bullies and victims.

Pure victims usually find a group – either a victim group or some group that gives them comfort. Those students who both bully and are victims tend not to find a group.

We believe this one aspect is why we have so much bullying. In the transition period to adulthood, many students are learning what works to get status and what works in brushing other people off.

One of the things that came across very clearly is that children have a lot of defending skills but no brushing off skills.

Even though there is an implied aspect in the curricula that says we should all be friends, everyone knows that can't be possible – not because we can't all be civil to each other, but because when we're getting our self-identity we differentiate ourselves from others. We compare ourselves with people whom we think we want to be like and exclude ourselves from people that we don't want to be like.

### Managing bullying in schools

In order to better manage bullying, we're proposing that schools try to manage rather than prevent bullying using befriending or tolerance programs.

Children are often given messages that it is considered bad if someone doesn't want to be with someone else when this is in reality what happens every day to everyone.

Inadvertently we're teaching that *not* belonging to a group is bad. Sometimes quite openly, we pass on the message that if people reject you, it is really bad and you need social skills' lessons, assertiveness training or maybe counselling because people don't want to be your friend.

On the other hand, at other times we espouse individuality and tell people that you've got to be an individual and not worry about what other people say.

A child may be fine and love playing with their computer or chess – it might be the parents who have the problem.

I know parents often have very genuine concerns, but sometimes the concerns override the reality of the situation.

Sometimes a child doesn't want to belong to a group at school and it is the parents who imagine them as a social outcast.

Our research has shown us that schools need tolerance programs where children learn to be civil to one another rather than being friends with everybody.

When you say to a child you've got to be another child's friend, the child thinks you're saying they have to be a best friend and this includes things like sleepovers, get-togethers and 'hanging' around each other at school.

A strategy that may be used with your child is to talk about the continuum of friendship – from being nice to each other and tolerant to being best friends.

If you ask children who their best friends are, they are likely to say other children who like the same things and have similar interests. They don't want to be friends with children who don't like the same things. This is a good point in which to explain that they must still learn to be nice or pleasant to people.

I have used this technique with amazing results.

When the children realised they didn't have to be best friends with everyone, that it was O.K. just to be nice, a number of students then began to actually befriend kids who had different interests and had been bullied in the past.

Because they no longer had to be their best friend, they could talk to them. So, what happens when you start talking to them? Hey they're not that bad after all.

When we look at teasing, it is a combination of all the aggressive acts that we talked about but the intention is to bond. You're trying to get the person to come on board and just change some things.

Bullying is exactly the same behaviour, but it is not affectionate and the goal is not to bond – the message is that the bully wants the other person to go away.

The spectrum of this type of behaviour starts at benign teasing and moves through the spectrum in intensity to bullying when you want to reject the other person.

### Why do children bully?

When we asked children why they bullied, among the top reasons were:

1. for fun – they think it's funny,
2. to make friends, and
3. because other people expected them to.

Many students themselves confuse bullying with teasing. Children think they are exactly the same.

Kids who have been bullied before were more likely to think that a benign tease was in fact bullying.

### What should we do about bullying?

Prevention is the key.

I think it's important to talk to kids about befriending skills. Explain how to make friends and join others in a group, breaking it into nice even steps.

Issues such as when you're in a group, you don't come in and take over a group – that's not good joining. Learning to listen and take turns – basic things about being nice to others.

Your children's likelihood of coming across drugs or a paedophile is much, much less than being bullied at school.

I'm sure that you've talked to your children about both these things.

Your children have one chance in four that they will be bullied and most parents never talk to their kids about it.

Tell your children about bullies and what they do. Tell them it's got nothing to do with your child, it's all about the bully.

How many parents have had that conversation with their kids? None of us – I haven't as yet.

Ask your school what they do about bullying.

Do they use a well-known method? Do they use restorative justice? You need to know what your school is doing about this and how effective have they been.

The reason why I'm telling you this is because there's study after study that shows that the key factors in your child's schooling experience are their peers and teachers. It's about how they feel when they're at school, not how many computers or golf courses the school has.

If every morning when you get up, you think 'crap, I've got to go to school today' it's very unlikely that you'll get good marks – no matter how many computers and how many violins you've got in there.

One of the things we found was children's attachment to school and school support correlated with the levels of bullying. Basically, if a child felt poor attachment to school and poor support from school, they were more likely to bully other students (or be bullied) and more likely to find school unsafe.

So, ask these questions of your child's school. What is your bullying policy? How do you celebrate your students?

How do they make their kids feel good? Do they give them stamps? Do they give them little stars? Do they have certificates? Do they have celebrations?

I worked with one school where every student in the class, it doesn't matter what they did the day before, brings in their things from home and they celebrate them at least once. They put their poster up, they print pictures up and they celebrate this and that about the student's life. At the end of the week at assembly they come in and they pin all the posters up from each class and they say these are the students we've celebrated this week and they give them a big clap.

### **What if your child is being bullied at school?**

If your child is being bullied at school, you must notify the school.

Our research in fact shows that your school may not even know. It's not because they're covering it up. It's not because they don't want to know. It's because when we ask students, they first tell their close friends and then their parents.

Telling the school came in number three. You may in fact be a bit upset when you call the school and they say they didn't know.

It's true, they may not know. Prevention of bullying falls under duty of care with schools, so they have a right to know.

Once it gets really bad, many children will say 'please don't tell anyone, I'm going to get bullied even more'. You owe it to both your child and school to do something about it and the place to start is with the schools.

What you need to find out is the bullying management processes of the school. Ring up, make an appointment. You're much better off to befriend the school and work with them and get across the message that this is something that you're interested in.

How do you desensitise your child if they've been bullied before?

This is something psychologists and social workers would do with victims of bullying. First they would ensure the child knows it wasn't their fault.

Then they'd discuss the degrees of bullying – what is the worst and what is the least offensive way of being bullied and explain these.

You may be surprised, even though it's the 21st century I've found the worst thing a girl can be called is a slut. If it's a boy, it's gay.

Start with that exposure and say 'what's so bad about it'.

Examine what do they say to themselves while they're being called these things? What's their self-talk?

A lot of parents are scared of asking their kids what they talk to themselves about. Some people realise that all of us talk to ourselves. We call it thinking!

Ask your child what they say to themselves if they are called these things. Get them to challenge their own negative self-talk or if they say they are no good.

I believe Macquarie University is trialing role-plays in which they get the worst thing that the kid thinks they could be bullied by and they expose them to it.

They then see that it's O.K. and they are not going to die and the nature of the universe stays the same if they are called something bad. Their anxiety goes down.

When anxiety subsides, their brain starts working better and sometimes they come up with really good comebacks.

The best story from one of the children I was working with was they said they had a big smile on their face and stayed there and ignored it and the anxiety went down. The bully started to scream and caught the attention of the teacher who at that stage was able to intervene.

If your child is being physically bullied, never suggest that they ignore it. They and you should seek immediate action from a school. Do not leave the interview with the school with a 'we'll handle it'. Either ask for their policy or suggest a time when you can meet again to obtain in writing a plan to deal with the bullying. In other words walk out of the school with a concrete plan of action.

If your child is having difficulties with bullying, we use what we call *Self Improvement Agreements* rather than *Behaviour Contracts* with bullies and with targets and we get them to state the behaviours.

Sometimes the bullying gets to the point where your child is becoming extremely aggressive and they either enjoy the aggressiveness or have become depressed.

A report by Northern Sydney Area Health identified that over 20% of emergency admissions as a cause of self-harm into their casualty section were related to influences at school. Bullying when it gets to the extreme can actually harm quite significantly.

Don't just dismiss it once you've worked through some strategies. See if your child is still having difficulties. They could be so depressed that they haven't taken on board what you've said – that's extremely important. If you feel that is the case then you need to see a qualified person to deal with that.



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