

Article 2 – Children’s Voices: The Right to be Heard

Children are often more astute than we give them credit for, and this is certainly true when it comes to bullying. Their voices can tell us some important things. In surveys done in Australia and the United Kingdom, students gave some interesting insights into their beliefs about bullying.

For example, when they were asked why they bullied other students, the answers were quite consistent no matter whether they were boys or girls, or what ages they were. 70% of young people justified their bullying behaviour by making excuses like ‘because they annoyed me’ or ‘to get even’. So, their voices indicate that they see the behaviour of others as an excuse for them to become bullies.

This is an interesting response because it is often reflected in adult behavior that young people observe. For example, it seems to be quite acceptable behavior as adults to interfere in the behavior of others and make comments about people we don’t know anything about. We regularly read newspaper articles from people who are overweight, as just one example, who have been subject to insults from complete strangers who believe they have the right to point out the deficiencies of others. If this is what our children hear and see, why wouldn’t we expect them to behave the same way?

Similarly, it is not unusual to see adults demanding their ‘rights’ on the road, or their right to be served, or their right to berate a waiter who has not served them quickly enough. Children see this and act on what they see.

Clearly, it is absolutely essential in overcoming bullying behaviour in our schools and in areas of children’s activities to make sure adults set the example they want young people to follow.

Other major reasons, young people say they bully others relate to peer pressure and power motives. Approximately 20% of young people say they bully because ‘others were doing it’. This is powerful knowledge for people who want to stop bullying.

We know that bystanders often do not intervene when they see bullying or they allow themselves to get involved by laughing at what the bully is doing and, perhaps, joining in the taunts. This is likely to be because they want to ‘belong’ to their peer group and fear that if they don’t go along with the group, they will be the next victims. Working with bystanders, who are not naturally the instigators of bullying so they feel strong enough to stand up against their peers is an important element of reducing bullying.

20% of young people include in the reasons they bully the very unpleasant motive, ‘because it is fun’, and 12% give as their motive, ‘because he or she is a wimp’.

These reasons point to the obvious importance of developing the skills of young people in interpersonal relationships to reduce bullying.

In relation to the victim, the major reasons why particular children are bullied appear to relate to the fact that they are ‘different’ in some way. Thus, children say they bully others who:

- are of a minority race, color, religion or culture
- resist pressure to behave in a particular way;
- display physical differences;
- are high achievers;
- are new to a school;
- have particular sexual orientations;
- are of a low socio-economic background; and
- have low self-esteem or lack personal power – especially since the child often lacks friends and therefore gets no support against the bully.

These reasons hold true in all nations, all age groups and whether male or female and point to the importance of teaching tolerance, of accepting difference and watching out for those who are most vulnerable. This is why, for example, all schools should have policies for integrating new students into schools so that they are protected at a time when the research tells us they are most vulnerable.

Children's voices also have some interesting things to say about adult attitudes to bullying. In a survey for a major study in the United Kingdom, young people said that although adults claimed bullying was serious, they often dismissed it as 'child's play' and when children reported it they were 'not listened to' or 'not believed'.

Although teachers said they were serious about forming relationships with students, students often perceived that teachers took complaints made by parents 'more seriously' than complaints by students. They also felt adults could not be trusted to maintain student confidentiality or protect students from retaliatory action.

This is a worrying finding, particularly in light of the fact that, according to the survey, approximately 50% of primary students and more than 66% of Year 8 students find it difficult to talk to a teacher about bullying, particularly if the teacher had handled a bullying incident ineffectively in the past.

Students say such things as:

"Verbal bullying isn't taken seriously by teachers, if you have some bruises, they might take some notice" (girl, Year 8);

"I don't think schools can do anything to help because there are not enough teachers. They are all supply teachers" (boy, Year 8);

"If you tell your tutor, they have to tell someone else, and then they tell someone else. It's like Chinese whispers" (boy, Year 8); and

"They can suspend them, but then they come back and it's even worse" (girl, Year 8).

Children also say they find it hard to talk to parents about bullying. They say they feel ashamed and embarrassed because it appears other students are rejecting them and they don't want their parents to know this. They also say they don't want to worry their parents. Some students also don't say anything because they fear their parents will over-react.

Sometimes young people want to talk about the bullying and be given advice on how to handle it **by themselves**, they don't want adults to interfere. If the child is not in physical danger and if they genuinely feel they can handle the situation, we are wise to give them the opportunity.

If, however, they are in danger or there are obvious signs they are not coping, then we **must** intervene.

This is particularly true if the bullying has been going on for a long time and the child has finally found the courage to tell someone. Reaching the point of confiding after many months of abuse is almost always a cry for help.

For most parents their children are the most important things in their lives. Listening to their voices is the least we can do.