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Bullying in Schools: The Issues

Bullying has been referred to as the 'hidden curriculum' in our schools. In some schools it is a tradition. It is endemic within our society, in all environments and at all levels, and is as old as man.

So you may ask - If bullying is as old as man, why are we making such an issue of it now? Well, we now know, through research, the effects bullying can have, both long and short-term, on our children. These consequences include loss of self-esteem and confidence, depression, difficulty in maintaining satisfactory interpersonal relationships, poor performance - both at school and in the workplace. Cases of bullying-related teenage suicides are reported in the media.

Research tells us that one in four of our children is affected by bullying - either as victim or bully. We now know that schools can make a difference to these statistics and our aim must be to make our schools happier and safer places for our students

WHAT IS BULLYING?

What is bullying?

"It is the repeated oppression of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons." - Professor Ken Rigby

Exactly what actions can we classify as bullying? These can be physical, verbal or psychological.

- **Physical bullying** includes hitting, kicking, rude gestures, extortion, pushing and shoving, taking or damaging belongings - ie. any form of physical behaviour which hurts others or their property.
- **Verbal bullying** includes name calling, insulting, repeated teasing, racist remarks, threatening, sexual harassment and any other form of verbal behaviour designed to hurt another.
- **Psychological bullying** includes spreading nasty rumours, excluding someone from the group and isolating someone by preventing others from befriending them.

Bullying is based on threat and fear. Once a pattern is set up, the bully has to do very little to produce fear in the victim - often a look is sufficient. And the victim then finds it almost impossible to break this cycle.

ELEMENTS OF BULLYING

According to Professor Ken Rigby of the University of South Australia, bullying contains seven elements:

- An initial desire to hurt - The bully wishes to inflict pain on the victim.
- The bully acts on this desire - ie. some form of bullying is perpetrated.
- This action is hurtful.
- There is an imbalance of power - the bully is stronger and more powerful than the victim, either physically or psychologically.
- There is no justification for such action - ie. the victim has done nothing to deserve such treatment.

Preventative Measures for Schools

There are many options available to schools to help them reduce bullying. There are some schools who fear that if they include an anti-bullying program in their curriculum, it may be viewed by parents as an admission that they have lots of bullying within their school. In fact, the opposite has proven to be the case. Schools which already have a program operating are attracting more students because parents want their children to be educated in such a caring, safe environment.

POLICY

First of all, schools need to look at formulating an anti-bullying policy. This is a vital step in any program and, even if this is the only action they take, it will effectively reduce the amount of bullying within the school. Remember, 'Awareness breaks the cycle of violence.' Simply by openly discussing bullying and showing that the school is prepared to take action to deal with it, there will be an immediate impact. By introducing a policy, the school is informing everyone - the students, teachers, parents and the community - that they care about the wellbeing of their students and are doing what they can to ensure that they feel safe at school.
