

# Bullying

By Lauren Djakovac

**Every parent dreads the feeling of helplessness when they discover their child is being bullied. While the defence, 'kids will be kids' should never be an acceptable excuse, school-age bullying has always been an issue. Some research suggests one in six school children will report being bullied at some time. The media has been saturated with stories of late, after a number of reports revealed a more shocking extent to bullying than we had been told existed.**

## Types of Bullying

The 'traditional' forms of bullying continue in the school yard:

- Physical
- Verbal
- Emotional
- Sexual
- Racial

With the ceaseless development of new technologies, the very nature of bullying has also developed and given rise to 'covert bullying'. Covert bullying is less direct and can refer to perpetrators using mobile phones and the Internet (cyber bullying). Examples of covert bullying include; spreading rumours, sending hurtful text messages and emails and harassing their victims through social networking applications such as MySpace and Facebook.

Researchers conclude that covert bullying may result in more severe psychological, social and mental health problems than overt bullying. They also discovered that physical abuse is often much easier for parents and schools to detect and deal with. Covert bullying appears to be under-reported; the more schools focus on physical bullying, the greater the increase in covert bullying. Today, most schools have bullying policies and procedures in place, but

with increasing incidents, many are concerned that schools are light on implementing these measures.

## Data

The Federal Government commissioned two research projects to better understand the impact bullying has on Australian schools.

The first study 'The Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study', investigated the prevalence and impact of covert bullying in schools. It surveyed 7,000 children from 124 schools across the country. Data revealed:

- Cyber bullying is more common among secondary students, up to 20% of Year 9 students had experienced or participated in this behaviour.

Other important information:

- One in six students report being bullied in covert ways
- Two out of five students feel things stay the same or get worse after telling an adult they have been bullied
- Two-thirds of bullied children seek help from friends rather than parents

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Ages and gender of children being bullied:

- One in four children from Year 4 to Year 9 claim they are attacked regularly
- Bullying peaks in the final years of primary school with 32% targeted
- Year 8's are also major victims with 29% reporting attacks
- Covert bullying was slightly more common among girls, 18% of girls compared with 15% of boys.

Public Schools VS Private Schools:

- Students from public schools are more likely to indicate they are being bullied than students from non-government schools
- Cyber bullying is used more by students from non-government schools than from public schools.

Are victims becoming bullies:

- Almost half of all children in Year 9 are being bullied and are bullying others
- The percentage of students who had been bullied and who bullied others in covert ways increased from 21% in Year 4 to 47% in Year 9

- Many students don't report incidents of cyber bullying because they are scared their mobile phone or internet will be taken away from them
- More than half of students believe it's worse to hit another student than to send a nasty message.

The second study, 'Behind the Scenes: Insights into the Human Dimension of Covert Bullying' was conducted by the University of South Australia and Flinders University. This project explored real life experiences of individuals exposed to covert bullying. As part of the study, a website has been produced that presents the voices of students, parents, teachers and school staff with the aim to inform, support and assist school communities' understanding of covert and cyber bullying.

'The Advertiser' also recently conducted a bullying survey. Parents responded:

- Up to one in three said their child has been bullied and attempts to stop it were unsuccessful
- 41.3% admit their child has been a victim
- Almost one-third (29.2%) said their

child had been bullied and the school had not solved the problem

- 35.2% said they had faith the school would 'act decisively' against the problem
- More than half of primary and high school teachers surveyed believe students proven guilty of bullying should be suspended.

### Government Action

#### State Government

Updated information materials, such as 'Cyber Safety: Keeping Children Safe in a Connected World' are set to be distributed in July 2009. The new safety guide aims to inform of the danger of cyber crimes, personal safety and privacy.

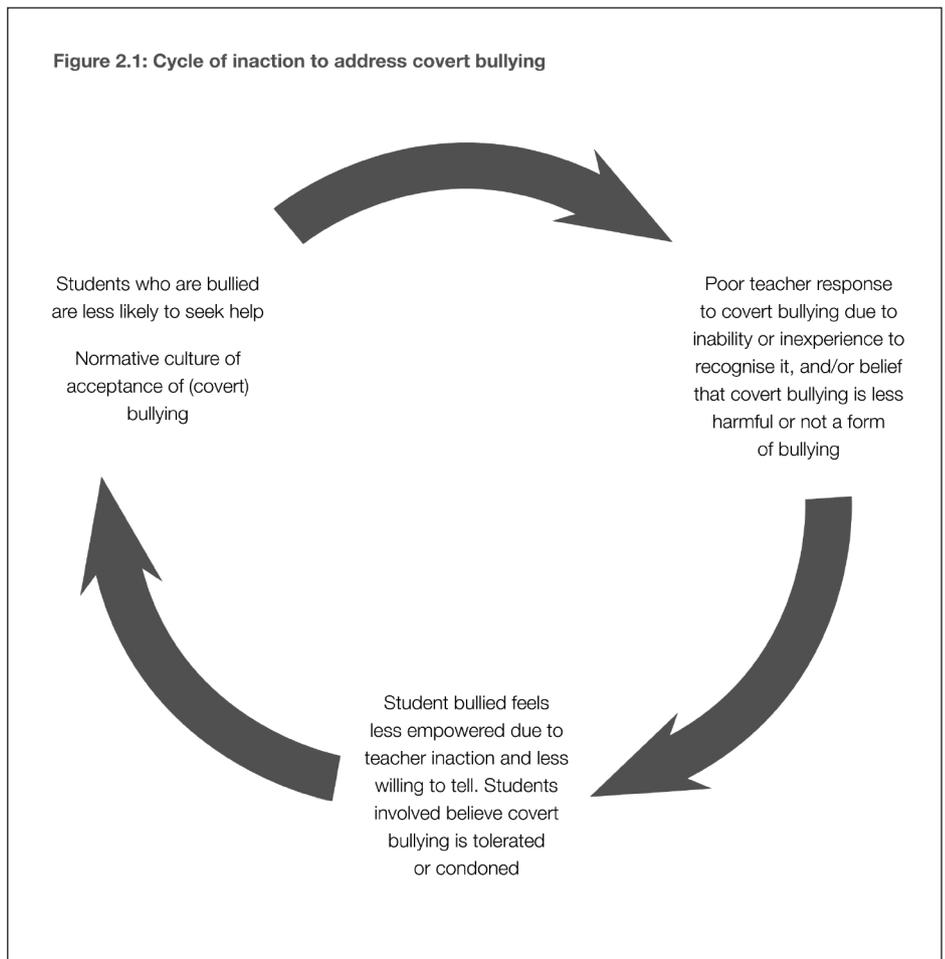
DECS says an anti-bullying policy is required at public schools. In response to the increase in cyber bullying, DECS has advised schools that principals will have the power to suspend or exclude students who are harassing others beyond school hours and boundaries. Principals will also now be able to confiscate students' mobile phones and hand them over to police as evidence.

Experts have recommended the introduction of a cyber safety school curriculum in primary schools across Australia within a year.

#### Federal Government

A new Youth Advisory Group made up of 305 young Australians will inform the Government on online issues such as cyber bullying. The Government intends to fund safe school initiatives to address bullying and violence. A review of the 2003 National Safe Schools Framework is due to be completed by the end of May 2010.

Figure 2.1: Cycle of inaction to address covert bullying



#### What the experts think...

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Children's charity 'The Alannah and Madeline Foundation' and experts from 'The National Coalition Against Bullying' are producing a cyber safe program for a trial of 26 schools in SA, Victoria, NSW and WA. 'The Cyber Safety and Wellbeing Initiative' will extend to 100 schools by March next year, but schools would have to meet specific criteria to be classified as a cyber-safe school. 'The National Coalition Against Bullying' has also called for a dedicated cyber safety unit within the SA police service.

#### For Parents

A new technology called "My Mobile Watchdog" is being publicised as a possible tool for parents to assist with their child's cyber-safety. To be launched in August, at \$12 a month, it will give parents a chance to view any text messages, emails, pictures, videos and calls made to and from a child's mobile phone. However, the child is notified every time they power the device that they are being monitored. Aimed at parents of children aged between eight and sixteen years old, parents can use the technology by subscribing and setting up a list of approved numbers. When any calls come through that are not an approved number, or if somebody sends an inappropriate message, they will instantly be issued an alert. ■